CHAPTER SIX

Moving to a New Plateau

When service-learning offerings moved service into the academic fabric of the school, Phyllis Machledt was faced with the tasks of nurturing the fledgling service-learning courses, defining and augmenting the volunteer efforts of the community, and serving as a liaison between the University and Greater Bridgeport’s schools and social service providers. On the service-learning side, attracting faculty to offer more discipline-related courses, while at the same time working to ensure that the University weighed community service appropriately for tenure and promotion, remained priorities; with regard to volunteerism at the school, the director assumed responsibility for coordinating the efforts of student clubs, organizations, and athletic teams. Then, to promote and expand the school’s involvement in the lives of the poor, the director set up her office as a clearing-house, taking in-coming calls for assistance from local social service providers, alerting appropriate on-campus volunteers to respond to those needs, arranging travel to and from the sites, and often joining in with and overseeing the students’ on-site work.

With firm backing from the administration (including the President, the Vice President and Provost, the Vice President for Mission and Planning, and the Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs), several service initiatives inaugurated in the mid-1990s brought the concept of community service to a new plateau at Sacred Heart University, ensuring that the school’s connection
with the poor, started in the 1960s with its earliest community outreach programs, would remain a centerpiece of its day-to-day volunteer efforts and a central focus of its educational mission.

**Operation Bridgeport**

“Whenever you rub elbows with the poor you grow,” said Msgr. Joseph Potter, the pastor of St. Charles Church on the East Side of Bridgeport, speaking to the first University delegates to participate in Operation Bridgeport. “God is present to the poor in a special way,” added Sr. Ann Moles, the director of Outreach Programs for the parish. “In fact,” she said, “the only people who can teach us to live are the poor. And how do we see the grace of the poor? We have to walk with them.”

Walking with the poor was why several faculty and staff members—including the University President—convened in September 1995 at the St. Charles Urban Center to participate in the first Operation Bridgeport weekend. We were there to listen to the people’s stories, take time out to reflect on personal missions and on the stated mission of the University, and build bridges between the University and the East Side by trying to figure out how to assist in the rebirth of that community. “What is most important to me about Operation Bridgeport,” said Cernera, “is that it gives expression to a fundamental aspect of the University’s mission—to understand and be responsive to the needs of the Bridgeport community.”

A *Connecticut Post* article reported, “Uppermost on the operational agenda was defining ways in which the university’s resources—primarily a small army of 250 student volunteers who participate in service programs as part of their studies—could best be put to use in Bridgeport. To find out, educators went straight to the experts—the residents themselves. . . . Their purpose was to listen and learn.” Dodge, quoted in the same article, said, “We know we can’t replicate in a weekend what it’s like living in fear and lacking the basics, like food and shelter.” But, she added, “We are trying to have a sense of what the University can do.”

Perhaps Robert Sigmon, the director of Learning Design Initiatives in Raleigh, North Carolina, articulated best what
educators needed to do. “I now often suggest to service-learning and community service educators,” said Sigmon, “that we slow down, even curtail some of our direct service work, and examine what we are doing, by going into communities and organizations to ‘sit down, be quiet, and pay attention.”’ Then, he continued, “we can enter into mutually-fulfilling arrangements where we can be learners and teachers, servers and served.”5 As Fr. Brackley already had pointed out to our delegations visiting the University of Central America: we didn’t need to fly all the way to El Salvador to have our hearts broken by the stories of the poor; we could encounter that reality in our own backyard. Operation Bridgeport would serve as a test for Brackley’s thesis, and at the same time we hoped it would identify several new service options.

Bertsch, one of the founders of Operation Bridgeport, reflected on the motivation for entering into a dialogue with the Park City community when she noted the need to build “into the life of the University the fact that the community would remain a partner in our lives.” It was necessary, in her mind, to make that commitment concrete, visible, and lasting. She asked, “How can we do that if we do not see, and we do not listen, and we do not hear the people in the neighborhood that we wish to work with?” She recalled the first Operation Bridgeport weekend in these words:

We lived there for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and listened and learned and met the people from the neighborhood. We met the people from Luis Muñoz Marín School, met the wonderful children who go to school there and the teachers. We went to the Caroline House and saw what those sisters were doing with the mothers and children of immigrants who come to this country. And we went to Alpha Home and met the people at Merton House, and talked to the police, and listened about economic development, and brought in the neighbors of St. Charles and listened to them. They told us about who they were, what their neighborhood was like, how they lived there, and how they had grown up there. And probably the most special feature of the entire thing is that we asked a group of our students, who lived in the
MOVING TO A NEW PLATEAU / 87

East Side of Bridgeport, to take the risk to trust us that we really wanted to learn from them because we knew they had things to teach us. We asked about five of them to come and be our teachers and guides.

Bertsch concluded her reminiscence by saying, “We had the most remarkable, wonderful three days with our students, our new-found neighbors, the church at St. Charles, and with Monsignor Potter, the pastor there who was the most extraordinary man.” Then she added, “He welcomed us in much the same way that the people of El Salvador had welcomed us.”

The stories heard at St. Charles told of a city emerging from the throes of an ongoing battle to reclaim the streets from warring gangs. The worst of times was over, the residents agreed, and a cautious rebuilding process was underway. We heard eyewitness accounts of when the gangs ruled the streets, sold drugs openly, and murdered the opposition and innocent bystanders with bursts of bullets from assault weapons. At one point, even a former mayor, talking on the steps of Holy Rosary Church, was injured by gunfire. But recently, our group learned, the gangs had lost ground, thanks to the efforts of grassroots organizers and the community policing philosophy of Thomas Sweeney, the new police chief. Once essentially a war zone, with firefights breaking out any time of the day or night, the delegation heard about an East Side slowly edging its way back to life, battling street by street to win over the hearts and minds of its residents.

“When the police first asked people in the neighborhood to join with them, to build community groups, to fight back,” reported the New York Times, “they didn’t open their doors.” The same article noted that “residents were fearful and cynical.”

According to the testimony of East Side Community Council President Karen Daden, “At night you made sure you were not sitting in any room that was on the perimeter of your house. Most people spent a lot of time in their bathrooms, which in many of these old houses, for whatever reason, are exactly in the center of the house. Why? Because 9-millimeter bullets could travel between two or three walls, and usually there’s four or five walls between you and the outside wall. That was the fear that
was here." One student who spoke to the group remembered, "They dumped a body right across the street from where I live. I had to walk through there. It's kind of scary when people are finding bags with a person chopped up."10

Community organizers and grassroots leaders, well aware of the city's problems, knew what it would take to effect permanent change. "I would be lying to you if I said it's the system that's causing all these problems," said Jorge Jaiman, the director of Crime Prevention for Bridgeport. "It's a multitude of things causing the problems, particularly the people's reluctance to get involved. We don't need any more studies. If people don't know what the problems are, then they might just as well hang up their shingles and move out of town. We don't need anybody else coming in here and telling us, 'Oh, there's problems.' We know that. Any idiot who walks the streets knows there's problems, and he knows what those problems are." Then Jaiman added, "We need people who are willing to give of their time and help us train other people in leadership skills, in how to think. You might say, 'What are you talking about?' It's how to put things together, how to problem solve. How to develop projects. How to sit down and formulate a plan that's going to be effective." Finally, Jaiman asked the Sacred Heart group, "How do we use people as a resource?" Then he admitted, "I don't think we really understand it ourselves. We need your expertise."11

During the reflection period that closed the first weekend, our group, following the structure of the El Salvador trips, talked about memorable experiences that took place during the brief stay in the East Side, then drew up an action list of some thirty "Possible Responses . . . to Perceived Community Needs." Dodge collated the responses for follow-up suggestions, and on November 27 sent the delegation members a sheet with "Operation Bridgeport Follow-up Projects" that indicated "preferences for working committees," and that asked the groups to get together to "try to flesh out the idea/project."12 The list earmarked the following:

- Offer a course at Sacred Heart University. Provide mentors/members of Art Club to teach computer graphics (Jack de Graffenried)
• Respond to Jorge Jaiman’s request for SHU training in community leadership (Ralph Corrigan, Gerry Reid, Tony Cernera)

• Establish a Center for Social Work/Psychology students to work with St. Charles; establish a Nursing Services Center broadly conceived (focus on issues of general health and community health); address Sr. Ann’s concern: counseling for children (Mike McLernon, Linda Strong, Phyllis Machledt)

• Establish an SHU version of the Jesuit Volunteer Corp (JVC) (Christel Manning, Donna Dodge)

• Rely on the University for its expertise in teaching and research—conduct research: give back to community information relevant to its needs; explore economic development/crime/social issues; record local history (Ricardo Cordova, Charlotte Gradie, Eilene Bertsch)\textsuperscript{13}

Even a glance at the above list of “preferred” projects suggests two things: first, that the University was taking seriously what the president had called “an ongoing commitment to the city and people of Bridgeport”\textsuperscript{14}; and second, that only a few of the proposals were immediately “doable” with limited funding and within a reasonable time-frame. Others, such as setting up centers and a volunteer corps, indicated a level of commitment the University hoped to make, but called for long-range planning and the writing of grant proposals to attract funding. In the case of research projects, many of the proposed studies would eventually be conducted by students in service-learning courses.\textsuperscript{15}

As of this writing, seven Operation Bridgeport weekends have introduced over fifty faculty, staff, and administrators of the University to their neighbors in the Park City. The University continues to fund the Bridgeport weekends to introduce faculty and staff to programs and the people of the inner city that they might not otherwise meet; to build bridges between town and gown that allow University volunteers to work side by side with city residents to build understanding and a more promising future; to learn first-hand the needs of schools, community organizations,
and social service agencies so faculty can devise appropriate service-learning components in their courses, and so faculty and staff can better determine where and how they might commit personal time to volunteer efforts; to help University administrators continue planning for a permanent Sacred Heart University presence at St. Charles; and, finally, to provide the space for Sacred Heart people to come together to share a mind-opening experience and to create an enriched sense of community. “The combination of physically living on the East Side in Bridgeport,” said Machledt, “listening to the stories of local residents, discussing issues with Bridgeport residents who are tied to the University but are living and working in the community, has proven to be a powerful learning experience.”

Habitat for Humanity

In March of 1995, through the efforts of several members of the University community, what in the past had been an on-going but sporadic commitment to help build Habitat for Humanity houses in Bridgeport took on a new character when the Campus Chapter of Habitat for Humanity International was officially chartered, a distinction noted in the Sacred Heart University magazine that made the school “the first university in Fairfield County to be so designated and just the fourth in Connecticut.” Recalling the planning for the campus chapter, Phyllis Machledt talked about meeting with Jim Westgate, a financial analyst for the University, who had been active in building houses in Kentucky. “Jim and I talked about the fact that we wanted to start a campus chapter,” Machledt said. “He and I both felt that it needed to be more than just a casual thing that people signed up for.” At the same time, Machledt also praised the commitment to the program made by Dr. John Roney of the History Department, a skilled carpenter and long-time Habitat worker. “All three of us were involved in the beginning, and we really pushed it,” Machledt said. “We really wanted to have it not just students, but for faculty and staff as well.”

“Our basic goal,” said Westgate, who served as the campus Habitat advisor, “is to provide active assistance towards the
improvement of living conditions in our community of Bridgeport." Annette Bosley, an English and Spanish major and president of the chapter, said "We go into Bridgeport monthly and help Habitat sites," adding, "We do painting, carpentry, and even dig holes." Machledt, the past president of Habitat's Greater Bridgeport chapter, said, "We target our building efforts within specific neighborhoods in order to make a dramatic change in the neighborhood and to provide a safer area for Habitat families." Recalling the motives that spurred him to embrace Habitat work, Roney offered this self-examination:

I believe that as a university community, we are responsible for the greater community around us. We should never see ourselves as isolated. Bridgeport is our larger community, and as a university community we must do something. Habitat is one of many things we can do.

I have worked as a carpenter all my life. I love to work with my hands, to create, to work hard physically, and to construct buildings. Religiously, this fits into my Christian worldview. I believe that God intends that fallen creation and humanity are to be redeemed and restored. While God has many means to do this, God also uses ordinary people to accomplish the divine will. No matter what I do at Habitat I feel that it's part of much larger things going on; so I don't have to worry about every detail or controlling every structure. The very little that I accomplish is never lost, it's never for naught.

I have come to the understanding that the degree to which we come to value others we come to value ourselves. I need to work there in order to re-find the proper perspective of my place in the larger world. I need to work at Habitat in order to find myself. I need to lose my life in order to find it (a biblical paraphrase).

Economically, there is a sort of adrenaline flow that I get when I volunteer in this way; it's hard to explain. In a materialistic world where everyone is getting billed for every hour (like an accountant or lawyer), this work stands in the place of economic motives. My paycheck is
pure love, and no one can put a monetary value on that, right? I feel that relationships are restored when we work together with others for free.\(^\text{12}\)

With Machledt, Westgate, and Roney serving as mentors, the Habitat chapter soon developed into the largest, most active service organization on campus.

Once the chapter was fully chartered and underway, it was only a matter of time before the group would look to expand its operations. Then Machledt proposed an idea for the 1997 Spring Break. "Here we are in Bridgeport hosting all these other schools coming. Why don't we go some place?" she asked.\(^\text{23}\) Soon "a group of twelve commuter and resident students and two advisers set out on their inaugural Sacred Heart Habitat for Humanity extended work-trip to rebuild houses in a low-income section of Baltimore."\(^\text{24}\) Machledt recalled, "We looked at what would be feasible in terms of money, and made some phone calls. We were looking for another urban Habitat, and then Fr. Mike suggested Francis House because he knew Baltimore pretty well, and so we found a place to stay. And it just sort of fell together."\(^\text{25}\) Sandtown Habitat, where the group helped build row houses, Machledt added, had "a very holistic approach to community development—putting your faith into action."\(^\text{26}\) After the first trip in 1997, the campus Habitat chapter returned to Sandtown for three more Spring Break work-sessions.

Then the group came up with an even more ambitious initiative: to sponsor the construction of a house in Bridgeport. Before long "a coalition of students from the University’s Habitat campus chapter and two Catholic churches, ‘The Community Builders,’ pooled their resources to construct a new, affordable home for a low-income family," reported an article in the \textit{Sacred Heart University} magazine. "Beginning in the late summer 1999," the article noted, "literally hundreds of volunteers from the University community, St. Charles Church of Bridgeport, and St. James Church of Stratford wielded hammers, saws, and other tools at the site."\(^\text{27}\)

The house, built on the corner of Shelton and Hallett streets—a site made infamous a few years back by drugs and
eighteen murders—became a rallying point for University service, much like the 30,000 Hours project. Bertsch had this to say about building the house:

When Habitat for Humanity, our chapter, and our students—who I think are probably some of the most remarkable students I've ever met—had raised 13 to 15 thousand dollars for this house, we tried to make sure that that house we built would be in St. Charles Parish. And that house that we have built—the roof is on, the siding is up, we're up to the point of insulation—that house is on Shelton Street which is about three blocks away from the St. Charles Urban Center, two blocks away from the Luis Muñoz Marín School, centered right in the neighborhood. And you know you walk by that house and you see here's a living house that has gone back to Operation Bridgeport, to our involvement in St. Charles, to our connection to our neighbor, and to finding another way to try and make that connection and keep it alive. So the house is a very important symbol.”

To build the house, work groups needed to be assembled, transported to the work site, assigned specific jobs, trained, and then supervised; and all this had to be accomplished within a given time frame and in cooperation with the two other volunteer groups. As for the University contingent, "Perhaps none were more instrumental in bringing the project to fruition," reported Don Harrison, "than the 15 students who comprise Habitat’s campus chapter building committee, and their advisors, Dr. John Roney, associate professor of History, and Phyllis Machledt, director of Service-Learning and Volunteer Programs." The same article noted, "Not only did the University community supply labor in droves, but it also contributed $20,000 toward the cost of the home and gathered $10,000 in in-kind gifts." Recalling the fundraising efforts of the students, Bertsch said, "that particular group of students went to extraordinary lengths to raise that 20 thousand dollars. It was continuous over two full years. Two years of sustained activity to raise that money, and raising every bit of it"
themselves. They even had a sleep-out in boxes on the lawn to raise money, and they collected bottles and cans from everywhere under the sun. They designed, made and sold Habitat pins, cookbooks, shirts. There was an unbelievable commitment to that project.30

A group of smiling, proud Sacred Heart workers who had banded together to accomplish something special attended the dedication ceremonies of the house on January 23, 2000. Members of Habitat construction crew from the University and the Burgos family—the proud owners of the new home—crowded on the front porch and steps and overflowed into the front yard to savor the accomplishment that everyone had worked so hard to achieve. “There was a distinct Sacred Heart University flavor to the dedication ceremonies,” reported Harrison. “Dee Young ’97, a social worker with the St. Vincent’s Center for Behavioral Health in Bridgeport, provided a moving rendition of the song, ‘There is Hope in the Night.’ Thomas Wilson ’88, a parishioner at St. James Church, read scripture. Darlene Harris, a junior from Derby, gave the opening prayers, and Angela Bowden, a junior from East Marion, New York, recited a poem she wrote for the occasion. And Machledt, long active in Bridgeport’s Habitat circles, served as emcee.” Later, in recognition of the accomplishment, Sean Otterspoor (a senior from Trumbull, the president of the campus Habitat chapter, and an indefatigable presence on the Hallett and Shelton streets worksite) and Machledt were honored at the “Hearts and Hammers Ball,” a “black-tie dinner sponsored by Habitat for Humanity of Greater Bridgeport, held at the Inn at Longshore in Westport.”31

Always on the lookout for new Habitat site experiences, Otterspoor and company “went to extraordinary lengths this summer—13 time zones and 12,000 miles away—to build Habitat homes in the Philippines,” reported Fairfield County Catholic in its September 2000 issue. The group32 spent the first two weeks in August working “side-by-side with the future residents, who are known as Home Partners, in humid 90-degree temperatures,” to build four “cinderblock and cement dwellings in Tagaytay, a community located on the rim of an extinct volcano about two hours south of Manila.”33 According to the Fairfield County
Catholic article, “The new homes might be modest by U.S. standards, but they represent a significant upgrade for the new owners. Each 12-by-12 foot house consists of just one room, with a ‘mezzanine’ or loft serving as sleeping quarters. But there is electricity, running water, and toilet facilities.”

Senior Angela Bowden, president of the campus Habitat chapter, placed the work trip in perspective when she said simply, “The Philippines definitely was a different experience. I’d been doing Habitat locally and going to Baltimore for Spring Break, but going to another culture gave you a different perspective on things.”

Continuing its efforts as the most active volunteer organization on campus, and to serve as a kickoff for the new year, on September 8, billed in the campus paper as “a night to remember,” the Sacred Heart University Habitat chapter hosted a special occasion: an on-campus visit of Millard Fuller, the founder and president for Humanity International, who came to speak for the Anniversary Habitation. “This was a celebration with the families that own homes because of the help of Habitat for Humanity,” reported the Spectrum. “One hundred and fifty families showed up” for the evening’s events.

“This event was a fitting tribute to the extraordinary achievements of all the members of the campus Habitat chapter, past and present,” said Machleidt. “This group exemplifies what it really means to put the directives of the school’s mission statement into practice.”

**Spring Breaks in El Salvador**

Another new initiative involved annual student work trips to El Salvador. Once the faculty and staff trips to that country proved successful, it was only a matter of time before students were invited to participate in a Salvadoran work experience. Two students, Gloria Irizarry and Angela Donohue, already had accompanied the faculty and staff during the summer 1993 trip, but the thinking at the University—particularly that of Dr. Maria Teresa Torreira, Dr. Katherine Kidd (director of Global Studies), Eilene Bertsch, and Sr. Donna Dodge—was that a delegation of students would benefit more from a “work experience” in El Salvador, and that the best time to plan for such a trip would be during Spring Break.
A connection already had been made through the efforts of Torreira and the student group La Hispanidad when they adopted the school at Hacienda California. Then in the fall of 1995 a good friend from El Salvador, Sr. Elena Jaramillo, who has devoted her life to helping Salvadorans displaced by the war, visited the campus to meet with students, University officials, and members from past delegations that visited her adopted country. A report written in 1998 provides a useful overview of this remarkable woman:

An American by nationality, and a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, California, Elena (as she prefers to be called) has been working with the poor in El Salvador for some ten years now. The families of San Hilario are particularly close to her heart. Through her work, she is helping them learn to live and work together as a civil and religious community and as responsible citizens of their country. She believes deeply in the Church’s mission to serve the poor, and demonstrates that commitment in her every waking moment. It was Elena who, with Dr. María Teresa Torreira (former language chair at SHU who retired in 1997 after serving the University for over thirty years), selected San Hilario as the destination for SHU’s student delegations.38

Kidd said, “Having Sr. Elena visit the University is very important . . . because she embodies the commitment we have to El Salvador.” At the same time Bertsch remembered Sr. Elena “as a gift. . . . There was such a sense of peacefulness about her, coupled with a sense of great strength. And she saw the richness in the people she served.”39 With Sr. Elena providing a personal link to the area, soon plans were underway to send the first delegation of students to work in El Salvador.

During the fall of 1995, while the logistics for a spring trip were worked out, other connections to El Salvador were in full swing: a small group of faculty and administrators drafted a proposal that would ensure the University’s continued involvement in the Land of the Saviour;40 and Shelley Lyford, a Global
Studies major, was in the country collecting data for her senior thesis on Non-Governmental Organization-sponsored health projects in rural El Salvador. "I spent three amazing days in Suchitoto in an adobe house made of mud and burlap with a family of eleven," wrote Lyford in a letter to the Spectrum. "I have never seen such poverty in my life. My family lived in a two-room house with a dirt floor, no electricity, and no water." Ending her letter to the University community, Lyford wrote, "This has been a very humbling experience. I have taken so much for granted in my life and I know I will return to the States much more appreciative than when I left in September."

As the trip moved from its planning stages to its implementation, students hoping to participate in the first work trip to El Salvador were subjected to a rigorous selection process: they had to have completed or "be currently enrolled in either Spanish, history, or social work courses," and were required to prove proficiency in Spanish, carpentry, or masonry. They also underwent "training by rendering services for Habitat for Humanity" in Bridgeport, and attended two orientation workshops prior to the trip.

Once in the country, they stayed in a village with "no indoor plumbing or running water. In addition there was little electricity and scarce contact with the outside world. Those who participated on the trip lived just as the villagers in a small cement building," and spent their days working to rebuild masonry terraces for a salt works factory. "It was an absolutely amazing experience, something I will never forget," said Greg Botello. In another article on the trip, Botello was quoted as saying, "Going there has changed my life. . . . It was incredible how despite losing everything in the war and having no real material things, the people are so close and supportive of each other and are genuinely hopeful and happy."

Machleit, one of the advisers on the trip, offered the following perspective on the experience: "We learned a lot by living right there with the people. . . . We learned what it's like to be in a country torn apart by a bitter war. We learned about the role the United States played in that war. But most of all we learned about courage and dignity of the people and how they endure, despite everything." And finally, Torreira said, "This was
the kind of trip these students are going to remember for the rest of their lives, no question about that.\textsuperscript{47}

Since the first trip in 1996, annual delegations of students and faculty advisers have traveled to El Salvador during spring break, returning to the village of San Hilario about five miles south of Sr. Elena’s parish of Tierra Blanca, where they helped construct a community center and pavilion, new classrooms on the primitive school building, and a concrete basketball court. Much of the continued success of these visits can be attributed to the efforts of two people: Dr. Lauren Kempton, formerly of the Education Department, and her husband Brooks Parmelee. “These trips could not happen,” said Bertsch, “were it not for Lauren and Brooks. They are the ones who keep in touch with Sr. Elena throughout the year, and they are the ones who anticipate the trip and the needs of the students.” Dodge agreed. “It’s like a synergy, an energy, that’s there,” she said. “It’s part of their lives, and integral to who they are.”\textsuperscript{48}

In the spring of 1997, Torreira, speaking about the success of the second trip, said in an article in the Sacred Heart University magazine, “For me to see our students working so closely with the Salvadoran people, this is what made this trip so special.” The work days for this second delegation were described as follows: “Mornings were spent creating a level foundation for the church-community center or digging post holes and painting decorations on the walls in a new, yet primitive, two-room elementary school. Wheelbarrows, shovels, and paintbrushes were the tools of the day. During the afternoon heat, which often exceeded 100 degrees, the students played games with the youngsters in the village.”\textsuperscript{49}

Parmelee captured the experiences of the third delegation in 1998 as follows:

After an early breakfast on Friday morning, we went to work. The basketball court we had been asked to build was located in a field between the community center and a daycare facility on one side and the village school on the other. We met our local project leader, Roberto, and discussed the project with him. After concluding that it would make better sense to build a “half-court” rather
than a full court, we spent the day shoveling dirt fill into the walled area on which the court was to be built. On this day, we established the pattern for our work days: each day we would work from 7 A.M. to about 1 P.M., break for lunch and a short "siesta" and then resume work again from about 3 P.M. to 6 or 6:30. While most of us worked on the basketball court, Dr. Kempton worked at the daycare center next door, providing guidance and training for the teachers and reading stories to the children. She also made sure we always had ample supplies of water and soda to drink.

Every day many local men, women and children—all volunteers—chipped in to help us fill and level the site. Everything was done by hand, and each day we took regular breaks to cool off in the shade of the community center, the "quiosco." The weather was clear and extremely hot every day, with afternoon temperatures approaching 100° F, so we consumed prodigious quantities of water and soda. Dehydration is a very real risk in such a climate, so our breaks were both welcome and necessary.50

Writing about the living conditions in San Hilario for the student workers, Parmelee reported, "The women's house, incidentally, had an advantage over the men's house in that it had a tiled floor. The floor of the men's house was dirt. Neither house had any furniture in it, other than our cots and a hammock, but each house had an electric light in the middle of the ceiling and occasional running water nearby, a major improvement since last year, when neither electricity nor running water had yet reached the village."51

The May 4, 2000 issue of the Spectrum reported on the fourth trip: "From 1996 through 1999, the group's destination each year was the village of San Hilario, a community visited by SHU's first faculty delegation to El Salvador in 1992." But for the 2000 Spring Break trip, "Sister Elena, the group's coordinator in El Salvador, suggested that the group live and work instead in a neighboring community, the village of Los Ensayos, which was still very much in need of the kind of help SHU delegates have provided to San
Hilario. The people of Los Ensayos wanted to build their own community center, and when Elena told them SHU could help, they went right to work. By the time the delegation arrived on March second, the villagers had already acquired the necessary land and had just begun work on the building itself.\textsuperscript{52} The article explained how the delegates pitched in: "They helped mix cement and put up the cinder-block walls of the building. They hauled dirt into the building by the wheel-barrow load, creating a floor one foot above the ground around the building. They cleared tree stumps and weeds from the lot, and leveled the lot itself so rainwater will drain away toward the road."\textsuperscript{53}

In spite of the primitive living conditions and hard physical labor encountered in El Salvador, the overwhelming response from participants is that the trips have been "once-in-a-lifetime, eye-opening" learning experiences about the realities of life in a third-world country that previously the students only vaguely thought about, if at all. In fact, living with the compesinos in rural El Salvador changed the students. They arrived back in the States with a new-found belief of the power of the spirit in the lives of the poor because they had witnessed the workings of that spirit with their own eyes; they returned humbled by the outpouring of love received from the people they tried to help; and they arrived home with a different, more informed perspective on the essentials that define the "good life." For many, the life of conspicuous consumption, of thinking that the ownership of "things" is the answer to happiness, came under harsh scrutiny. How was it possible, they thought to themselves, that these compesinos who had little or nothing in the way of material goods could be so generous of heart, so filled with hope, so spiritually alive?

To sum up the El Salvador experience in 2000, Dr. Terry Neu of the Education Department, who accompanied the students and who was joined on the trip by his wife Jane (a nurse) and son, recounted the story of the Red Hen:

My wife had diagnosed and treated an eye infection in many of the local children of Los Ensayos. Specifically it was concentrated in the households around the new community center the SHU delegation was helping to
construct. Every morning and every evening we would bring and administer the medication to the eyes of five beautiful children of El Salvador. The parents of these children typically thanked us and we would work side by side with them the next day tying steel and laying brick for the new community center.

One of the parents always greeted us in the morning but never came over to the work site. On the sixth day we realized why he did not join in the community effort. The father of two of the children with eye infections was stricken with severe arthritis. He came to the work site with a large fat red hen. The gentleman told us he was unable to work with us because of his hands but he wanted to contribute to our efforts. My poor understanding of Spanish could not make out the next phrase he kept repeating. After translation he stated, “We are poor Pipil (local native Indians) and you are of Royal Blood. Please take this chicken so that I can support your labor.”

Now being a native Texan and used to consuming a fresh range hen I accepted his gift gratefully. Then what hit the delegation in total was the realization that the gentleman had only 10 chickens. He was giving one tenth of his wealth to support our labor. One tenth tied up in a red hen and he was willing to give it to us?

My twelve-year-old son and I were ready to fry the hen Southern style, when we thought the hen would best serve as an egg layer for the future. Currently she resides with Sister Elena in the Mission at Tierra Blanca and lays eggs for her consumption.54

This incident, Neu admits, “brought many of the delegation to tears.” As is evident in this anecdote, and so many other memories that stream through the minds of the student-participants, El Salvador teaches lessons that will not be forgotten—which is why the annual trips during Spring Break continue to attract more applicants each year than the program can accommodate.