CHAPTER SEVEN

Recent Service Initiatives

Starting with the school’s revised mission statement that recommended service to the poor, and then the trips to El Salvador that enabled the University community to better see the needs of its next-door neighbors in Bridgeport, several key administrators continued to search for innovative ways to further institutionalize service. A Catholic institution of higher learning, they believed, should encourage campus people to interface with those who could use a helping hand. Then, as the millennium approached, several promising initiatives began to take shape.

Community Connections

Along with the Habitat projects and the annual trips to El Salvador, a new community service experience was proposed to attract entering Sacred Heart University students. Community Connections—a week-long urban plunge (a boot-camp for volunteers)—familiarizes freshmen with the needs of the city of Bridgeport while at the same time identifying who among the students most likely would be the school’s next leaders of service efforts. “At my job interview they asked me what I would consider doing,” said Phyllis Machledt, “and I said that it made sense to do something with incoming freshmen.” Machledt was impressed with a program called Urban Action at Princeton, and thought that Sacred Heart University could offer something
similar. "I'd seen what they had done," she said. "It made sense because it was a project that would get freshmen involved right off the bat. And it certainly seemed to fit in terms of developing student leadership." So it was only a matter of time before she orchestrated the first Community Connections experience. "When we felt that we knew the neighborhood well enough ourselves," said Eileen Bertsch, "we invited students to take that trip with us. We now have twenty students at the beginning of each year, entering freshmen, who come to Bridgeport and live at St. Charles."  

"Service in the community is an integral part of the mission of Sacred Heart University," announces the Community Connections brochure, which also notes the many opportunities for involvement at the school, including service-learning projects, Campus Ministry programs, and the volunteer efforts of clubs and organizations. Students applying for a slot on the Community Connections team are told that "previous construction or teaching experience" is not necessary, but "a positive attitude, a willingness to work together, an open mind, and a sense of humor are important." After completing the workday, the brochure explains, participants—aided by Campus Ministry staff, professors, administrators, and upperclassmen—"reflect on the experience of the day with special emphasis on the social, political, or religious implications of that experience."  

The first Community Connections experience took place in August 1996, when a total of eighteen students (fourteen freshmen and four upperclass student leaders) spent the week prior to the beginning of the fall term "working where the community needed the help the most," said Machelet. Besides introducing the students to Bridgeport and to some twenty faculty and staff (including the President and Academic Vice-President) who participated in the activities at different times during the week, "The project," said Machelet, "was to get freshmen involved early with other students who have similar interests." Summing up the service activities, Don Harrison wrote, "For the better part of the week prior to the start of classes, they prepared meals at a soup kitchen and wielded tools at a Habitat for Humanity building site; they performed landscaping and clean-up chores and read aloud to elementary
school classes before retiring for the night at the St. Charles Urban Center on the city’s East Side.\textsuperscript{5}

“Many times people come in to an experience like this expecting to change other people or the world,” said Machledt, but “what really happens is that you change and you and your perceptions change. I’ve seen students grow up this week. Service-learning may be outside the classroom, but it’s a valuable component of education.” Senior volunteer leader Liz Rathburn agreed, saying that the program gives freshmen “an idea of what they can accomplish. They see the community and really reach out to people.” One incoming student, Julia Torpey, said simply, “The more you give of yourself, the more you grow.” Another freshman, Mark Ungeheuer, added, “It’s not just the fact that you’re feeding people that makes this work so important. It’s treating people with respect and saying, ‘Hi, how are you doing.’” Rathburn was asked if she thought the week was successful. “Is it successful? It’s beyond a success,” she said.\textsuperscript{6}

Other participants were equally enthusiastic about their week of sharing and learning. “I definitely formed a special group of friends because of the shared experience,” said Sean Otterspoor, a campus Habitat leader. Tara Cangemi spoke about how the week-long experience opened her eyes to new worlds. “Community Connections has served as a gateway for my entire college career,” she said. “It opened my eyes to the reality of the real world. With Community Connections I was given a sense of the value of teamwork and how such a unifying effort can be the cause of remarkable change.” Another student found the week a confidence builder. “Returning to campus when Community Connections was over,” said Darlene Harris, “I was filled with confidence, satisfaction, and pride . . . in our accomplishments.”\textsuperscript{7}

By stressing the importance of service, Community Connections makes a strong statement at the beginning of the school year about the University’s priorities. It provides a select group of incoming students with a week-long, memorable inner-city volunteer experience; it identifies several work sites for future student social action; it promotes growth of personal identity and pride in personal accomplishment; it helps ease the transition from high school, family, and home life to the realities of living with
strangers at a residential college; it develops a sense of belonging to the Sacred Heart University family even before the regular school year begins; it introduces several key administrators and staff members who play a significant role in the life of the college freshman; it creates a bonding mechanism for the participants with other like-minded students who will be working together on service projects for the next four years; and it teaches one of the central “givens” of service: that volunteers receive far more than they give.

“This is a week we will remember for the rest of our lives,” Machledt concluded.8

CURTIS Week

The e-mail message announcing another innovative week-long service project in Bridgeport asked two questions: “Interested in community work and diversity issues? Want to do something positive in these areas?” Aimed at students looking for an alternative winter intersession experience who missed either Spring Break in El Salvador or Community Connections, the e-mail announcing the first CURTIS Week experience invited students to “consider joining with a diverse group of students to live, work, learn, and reflect together” in Bridgeport.9 Named in honor of the school’s founding bishop, CURTIS Week (Community Understanding and Reflection through Inner-City Service) promised the experience of “community life at St. Charles Urban Center,” and the chance to explore “issues such as poverty, immigration, racism, and changing economic conditions.” These issues, announced the information sheet, “as well as concepts of service and social justice, will be topics for discussions with faculty, students, and community leaders.”10

“Once we started doing Community Connections,” said Machledt, “I still saw a need for a week where students who weren’t freshmen could have an immersion experience in Bridgeport.” Machledt also wanted to honor Martin Luther King, and since across the country people were beginning to recognize Martin Luther King Day as a day of community service, she thought “why don’t we do a week-long experience, do it before
the second semester, and tie it to Martin Luther King and the issue of diversity.” Machledt said to prospective students, “This is something we’ve been talking about in discussion groups, but this is a chance to really live together and work together.” She knew from personal experience that intensive involvement in community “led to more changes in attitude than just discussion.”

The e-mail message and Machledt’s personal contacts with students worked: eight men and eight women signed up for the first CURTIS Week, held January 12 to 17, 2000. The students worked at “Habitat for Humanity sites, Merton House soup kitchen, Remesa East Elderly Day Care Center, and Caroline House, and tutoring at Columbus and Marin elementary schools.” Then during the evening reflection periods at the Urban Center, students talked about the social, political, and religious implications of the day’s experiences. But what pleased Machledt the most was the diversity among the group itself. “We had several African-American students, and we had four different religions so it was a very interesting mixture of faiths. We had the jocks, the campus ministry types, the service people, and the marines. It was really a mixed bag,” said Machledt, who credited much of the success of the program to the student leaders. “Three of the four had been involved with Community Connections and were actively involved with Habitat or schools,” she said, “and were expected to be in charge of some of the service projects.” Machledt added, “I also wanted leaders who would be willing to lead discussions.”

The CURTIS Week Information Sheet outlined several ambitious goals: “We hope to introduce students to the issues of diversity and poverty in the Bridgeport community through service and reflection, to create a caring community of students, to involve faculty and staff in the week with the students, and to discuss positive approaches to the issues of racism and prejudice in the community and on the SHU campus.” A Spectrum article on CURTIS Week quoted Machledt: “There are issues of racism and prejudice on this campus and it’s something we have to work on.” She added, “We have to ask ourselves why we have such extreme inequalities that are unfair. We can’t just fear our differences.”
The week started out in the campus chapel with a "Sending
Ceremony" that included this opening prayer by Patricia Leonard-
Pasley from Campus Ministry:

God of new beginnings grasp the hearts
Of these CURTIS Week participants
Encourage them to
Ask the difficult questions and
To seek out the ancient paths.
To ask where the good way is,
And to walk it.
Stir in them a Holy discontent for a world
Which gives its gifts to those who have plenty already
And turns away from those who have little of what
they need.
And above all Lord,
Dare them to risk everything
For love of you,
And may the rest of us prove
Worthy companions
For the journey ahead.

Amen.

Then the ceremony ended with these words of blessing: "Guide
them as they struggle / to separate light from darkness — / And
in the changes they seek to shape / May they in turn be shaped. /
Amen."

The first CURTIS Week turned out to be a rich sharing
experience for the students. "Meeting as a group each evening at
the St. Charles Urban Center—where they lived for four nights—
they agreed that the time was well spent and helped eliminate
some misconceptions about the inner city," wrote Harrison. First
were the student reactions to the people they met. Sophomore
Chris D'Amico spoke for the group when he said, "The people
there are full of love and dedicated to making the world a better
place." Then the reflection periods, especially the sessions on
diversity and racism when participants shared their personal
experiences with the group, were lively and pointed. "A lot of
people in the group,” said Angela Bowden, one of the student leaders, “had either experienced some type of discrimination or had witnessed it.” Then she added:

Being able to talk to a group helped people make friendships and also helped them work out problems. Because there were times in the past when they wouldn’t trust one another because of the experiences they had, so it was very helpful to have a discussion. There were things that would come up that no one would think about before, and that first discussion helped start the whole week. It made for a lot of thought about why exactly you do what you do, and what positive experiences have helped mold your perspective on things—which is something that was good.¹⁹

Machledt added, “What was interesting was that unlike Community Connections where the freshmen are often very quiet and it’s hard to get them to talk, this group you couldn’t shut up. They really wanted to talk. They were strong in their opinions and yet I have to say it was a respectful discussion.”²⁰

“One of the successes that came out of the experience,” noted Machledt, “was the friendships that formed and the sensitivity that occurred among students who would never have really been together other than just to say ‘Hi, how are you’ or maybe served together on a committee. The fact that we lived together and worked together was very important.” Machledt also called attention to the sense of pride that developed among the members of the group as the week progressed. “I think there was a certain pride that they had in the fact that they had been such a diverse group and had gotten along well, and had listened to each other. When you got right down to it, we had four races, four religions, five nationalities represented out of sixteen people. When you put the lacrosse player together with the international student, it’s a mixed group.” Did the week affect the students’ awareness of inner-city issues and the roles that they might play in trying to make a difference in peoples’ lives? “A lot of them became a lot more involved because of the experience,” said Machledt. “The key piece is allowing them to choose the path they take.”²¹
With the second CURTIS Week successfully completed in January 2001, plans now call for making the community service and diversity-focused experience an annual event, held before the start of each spring semester. "There are very few times in a person's life when you can see so much personal growth in a week," said Machledt. "This last CURTIS Week was an example. As one of the girls said, 'It was really challenging, and we grew.'" Looking back on the week, Machledt said, "I didn't think last year's experience could have been better," said Machledt. "But this year's was!"

*The Health and Wellness Center*

Another recent service initiative developed out of a confluence of interests: the University's desire to become more actively engaged in the day-to-day activities of the Bridgeport community, and St. Charles Parish's need to respond to the community health care requirements of its parishioners. With delegations traveling to El Salvador and then to St. Charles with Operation Bridgeport, the feeling was that somehow the University needed to become involved in a long-term service commitment to the people of the East Side, but the form of that commitment remained unclear. For example, members of the Operation Bridgeport planning committee, and especially Sr. Donna Dodge, dreamed of the University purchasing property and developing a University-staffed service presence in the area, not unlike the Jesuit Volunteer Corps—and like many such dreams, the idea would not go away. So when the need for health care services was identified in St. Charles Parish, the idea for a partnership in a Wellness Center was born, an idea supported by St. Charles and the Sacred Heart University administration as well as the heads of several key disciplines, including Dr. Linda Strong, assistant professor of Nursing; Dr. Michael Emery, director of the Physical Therapy Program; Dr. Dori Taylor Sullivan, director of Nursing Programs; and Dr. Patricia Walker, dean of the College of Education and Health Professions.

The current administrator of St. Charles, Fr. Joseph Saba, embraced the idea of creating a Wellness Center. "The area within which I and many others serve," he wrote, "will be truly blessed
by Sacred Heart University committing itself to an additional partnership with us. The students and staff will experience the positive benefits of ‘real world’ intervention. Everyone becomes a winner. Students will learn first hand about the cultural and ethnic differences which they will inherit. The citizens of the area will receive the assistance they need.” Emery recalled Saba saying, “We’ll find space for this.”

“I think he sensed that a lot of people saw St. Charles as sanctuary,” Emery said, “and that they had many needs, including health needs, and he felt they were unprepared to respond to those needs. This could help start to answer some of those questions.” At the same time, Emery recalled Saba saying, “I don’t want to be the person here at St. Charles leading the parish side of this effort. I’d like to bring in some other key people.” So, Emery said, Fr. Saba asked Sally Fernandez, a member of the Parish Council, “to take it on as her project, and she has done an extraordinary job. She brought in five or six people, so now we have what’s called a Coordinating Committee for this project. So in a very real sense it’s a joint venture.” Those early discussions, said Dodge, are “probably different than anything we have done because they went to the community and asked the community what it needed.”

A June 27, 2000, “Project Summary Proposal” suggested that the project would begin by identifying an advisory committee, that the Wellness Center could be housed in the Parish Center, and that the services provided “would be based upon a needs assessment that would be conducted by members of the University in cooperation with the Advisory Committee and volunteers from the parish.” Initially, according to the proposal, the needs assessment would seek “to identify those needs that are most significant and/or pressing among the community and which cannot be obtained easily elsewhere,” and “that services would begin simply with activities such as health screenings, lecture/discussions series on health issues, and wellness and referral activities.” Funding would be “sought through various federal, state and private sources through grants applications made by University faculty.” And lastly, “personnel for the Center will be provided by the University and will include faculty members, students, and volunteer professionals from the community.”
Each of the key players at the University had specific reasons for supporting the start-up of such a center. When Strong was asked how and why she got involved with the project, her response was “How could I not?” As a member of the second delegation to El Salvador, a member and facilitator of Operation Bridgeport, and a health practitioner long involved in administering to the poor in the Park City, Strong said, “This Center is a direct response to a call for help and partnership from a community comprised of those groups of people most often dismissed and ignored by traditional illness providers.” She added, “For me and most other public health professionals this is the type of opportunity we live for—to share our knowledge and skill with others, others that want to share their talents and gifts with you.”

For Emery, involvement in the Wellness Center was “sort of a delayed outgrowth of having the opportunity to travel to El Salvador. Having been there, you end with some real mixed emotions. On the one hand, there’s a whole lot to do, and on the other hand you feel pretty impotent being in Fairfield, Connecticut. And then you make the connection that the same sorts of needs exist across town.” Emery recalled talking with Strong about a more active University presence at St. Charles. “The College of Education and Health Professions had a focus on health care, and nursing was in a community health mode anyway,” Emery said. “So the opportunity to collaborate and do something with a health focus seemed the next natural step of participation that the University could pursue down there.” The other part of the equation was the situation at St. Charles which reminded Emery of what he had seen in El Salvador. “In El Salvador the church was sort of the pillar of the community,” he said. “The parallels began to become apparent, and that was very exciting.”

Walker attended a conference in the spring of 2000 sponsored by the Coalition for Community-Campus Partnerships in Health, which, she said, had “expanded its focus to facilitate the development of other community-based efforts within health professions schools.” The St. Charles project, said Walker, offered “an opportunity for the college to contribute to this priority by
developing a model for a community-campus partnership that balances the needs of the community for health and wellness programs with the needs of the college for community-based service, research, and teaching.” Calling the Wellness Center an “exciting project,” Walker said it will “allow us to expand our network with community-based health providers in Bridgeport.”

Dori Taylor Sullivan, recently appointed as the director of Nursing Programs, explained that she was excited about the St. Charles initiative because “it fits so well with the mission of Sacred Heart,” and helped her to remember “why we became nurses.” Over the years, she said, “I have grown extremely interested in what has been called the ‘healthy communities’ effort.” Taylor Sullivan also pointed to the “fit” between the needs of St. Charles and the strengths of the nursing program. “We have a very active faculty,” she said, “and this fits very naturally with what we are doing. It’s just a great opportunity for us.”

But before the Center could become a reality, two actions were necessary: first, forming committees—a Coordinating Committee in the parish, and a Community/University Advisory Committee representing the University, St. Charles Parish, and the larger community; and second, writing grants for funding. The Coordinating Committee, which began its work in September 2000 by surveying the health needs of parishioners, was made up of representatives from the Parish Pastoral Life Committee and members of the cultural communities in the parish. By August, a “Community/University Advisory Committee” was planned, “to assist the project directors and staff in their efforts to achieve the service, education, and scholarship goals of the project,” and to help “secure funding for the project.”

The first grant proposal was forwarded to the Council of Independent Colleges in Washington, D.C., the second to The Inner-City Foundation for Charity & Education, and a third to the Helene Fold Health Trust. “The CIC grant looked at student training with an interest in connecting students to the community,” said Emery. “The Inner-City Foundation grant focuses more on the service provision. They were two complementary pieces. The Helene Fold Health Trust grant focuses on the role of nursing in community health and the
involvement of student nurses in that effort.” The grants, Emery said, “would help to speed the development of the Center by providing some equipment, some rent for the church to give them a little help, and would provide for employing physicians on a part-time basis. But even if those funds don’t come through,” Emery added, “the commitment to this project has already started in the University and the church. It just means that it will take a little longer.”

All three grant proposals, drawing upon aims identified in the earlier “Project Proposal Summary,” listed the following as activities for the Center:

1. Identify and address health and wellness needs of people living in and around the community of St. Charles, Bridgeport, Connecticut.
2. Provide a service-based learning environment for students of nursing, occupational therapy and physical therapy at Sacred Heart University.
3. Develop a model of community-based partnership that balances the needs of the community with the needs of the institution for community-based service, research, and teaching into scholarship.
4. Further develop the relationship between the University and the St. Charles Parish community for the betterment of each.

Components of the project would include “training of community volunteers; needs assessments to determine community health needs, interests, and service gaps; service-learning courses for health professions students; health screening, health education seminars, and other wellness activities.”

“All of our curricula,” said Emery, “have components of community health education, so this isn’t just a Center that would be focused on providing services. It would also be focused on providing health education.” Moreover, the Center would give Sacred Heart students “the opportunity to see health care needs in a different cultural context, which is pretty hard to do,” Emery said. “Our students go to Yale-New Haven, Hartford Hospital,
Gaylord, and it's really hard for them to see a lot of diversity in terms of people's cultural backgrounds." At St. Charles, with the ethnic mix of parishioners and others in the area, students would confront issues of poverty, diversity, and different cultural heritages on a daily basis. "The people of St. Charles have been excited about this," Emery explained, "because it was presented to them as: What can you teach our students? What would you want them to know as new nurses or as new physical therapists in the field to understand and provide health care services to you best? So they feel very good about that."

The Wellness Center, responding to needs in St. Charles Parish, promises a partnership that introduces new levels of student and faculty service to the community, while representing a major step toward further institutionalizing Sacred Heart University's mission statement. "It's what had been hoped for from the Operation Bridgeport visits," said Dodge. "It's an evolution of what happens when people are changed and affected," she added. The Center, concluded Bertsch, "provides an internship experience for our students, and it gives us a wonderful way to serve the neighborhood." And as Emery pointed out, an increased University presence at St. Charles may lead to other initiatives. "Whether it is health or education," he said, "I think the fact that we're at the next level of interaction with them is going to open a whole lot of other doors."

One of those other doors has already opened.

*English as a Second Language at St. Charles*

The door that opened was a project close to the heart of Fr. Gustavo Falla, the parochial vicar of St. Charles. He knew from the parishioners that there was a real need for tutoring in English as a second language, and when Jim Minor, the director of the English as a Second Language Program at the University, contacted Fr. Gustavo, a plan for instituting a program at St. Charles began to take shape. "They didn't know when they could do it," said Minor, "or whether we could coordinate the times. They didn't want to go to the Adult Education Center in Bridgeport. They wanted to do something right there." So the first step was
to circulate a questionnaire to find out if enough people were interested in learning English to justify starting a class at St. Charles. The questionnaire results were positive, and Fr. Gustavo invited Minor to attend a meeting to talk to the interested parties.

“The first night I went it was kind of rainy and cold and we didn’t expect many people,” said Minor, recalling the initial meeting. But much to his surprise, “about fifty people showed up, and they all filled out applications. A number of them paid the small fee as a commitment, and that got the ball rolling.” From that point on, Minor busied himself with planning the program. “The following week we decided to do a four-week course,” he said. “By the first night, we had something like twenty-seven people who were committed and paid, and so I had one teacher.” But as the night for the first class arrived, Minor and his teacher were in for a surprise. “I met the teacher down at St. Charles with Fr. Gustavo, and seventy people showed up,” he said. “The room was jam-packed, standing room only, like sardines in the downstairs rectory. I looked at the teacher, and the teacher said, ‘I’m scared.’ We were expecting maybe thirty.” Immediately, Minor went searching for another teacher to meet the demand. “Thank God I was able to acquire another teacher to start the following week,” he said. “And we were off and running. We had two courses for seventy people.”

As it turned out, the first four-week session ended before the Christmas holidays, and once the specific needs of the parishioners were more clear, Minor said, the curriculum was readjusted. “A good number of them are functioning at a very basic level—so that’s survival English,” he said. “They have been pretty much disenfranchised from American culture because of that, so we want to give them a way into American life. That’s literacy and life skills. We also have some people who are more advanced who are possibly interested in going to college, or at least developing their skills so they can advance in their careers. So we have a variety of needs and now we are sorting them out.”

For the spring 2001 semester, three levels of English as a Second Language were being offered on the Sacred Heart campus. “Fr. Gustavo had seventy people sign up,” Minor said. “Either he’s a great salesperson, or there’s a tremendous need. It’s probably
both,” he added. “I’m amazed that so many could come. The classes meet from 7:45 to 9:45 in the evening, which again shows the level of commitment on the part of the students. Also Fr. Saba has expressed interest in assisting one of the classes.”

Minor also mentioned three other initiatives now in operation. “We started the ESL program for Hispanic adults from St. Mary’s in Greenwich,” said Minor, “and there’s another group in Stamford that we are starting.” Beyond the language courses, Minor added, “if any of them want to go on to the University, we have another program here and we can really pursue a degree in a very cost-effective way in the Hispanic Adult Achievers program.”