

ON COMMON GROUND

a service scholarship cooperative between

Wheeling Jesuit University & the Laughlin Memorial Chapel

Campus and community as allies in community development and citizenship education

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In grateful partnership, Wheeling Jesuit University and the Laughlin Memorial Chapel present our vision for creating a common ground on which shared growth among university and neighborhood community members will flourish. The core of our vision is the establishment of a **service-learning scholarship house** for college students in East Wheeling, the poorest of our neighborhoods in Wheeling, WV. Almost **3,000 hours of benevolent, person-to-person contact** will be made each year, as college students living in the neighborhood residence serve and lead in proven community development centers in East Wheeling.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

- To seed the East Wheeling neighborhood with positive role models of education, career aspiration, and hopefulness while energizing existing outreach missions
- To create opportunities for Wheeling Jesuit University community members and local neighbors to gather and become acquainted in an atmosphere of hospitality
- To provide college students a deeper understanding of immediate and long-term components of the poverty cycle
- To develop socially conscious and participatory citizenship in college students through service and experiential learning
- To further the mission of Wheeling Jesuit University to *educate men and women for others*

In a community made up mostly of women and children living in poverty, the presence of caring and committed college students will communicate a message of validation—of the worth and potential of the individuals who live in this widely stigmatized neighborhood. Students will contribute as role models, advocates, and friends in the Laughlin Chapel's youth programs and at the adjacent Catholic Charities Neighborhood Center, a day shelter, soup kitchen, and clinic. In symbiotic fashion, benefits will accrue to both community and college. Allowing students to experience solidarity with and service to persons in distress realizes concretely the Jesuit stand for rigorous growth in conscience as a necessary complement to intellectual development in education for citizenship.

Our request for support from the Frueauff Foundation is for funds (\$20K) to prepare the house for students (repair, renovate, furnish) and to provide a modest stipend for a house mentor.

THE COLLABORATION TEAM

Both Wheeling Jesuit University and the Laughlin Memorial Chapel have unique characteristics that suit them particularly for the task of collaborative community development and citizenship education. The Jesuit tradition of social justice action is clearly discernable in the spirit of this undertaking. It acts to underline the already recognized and highly successful pro-community mission of the Laughlin Chapel.

Wheeling Jesuit University—Dr. Terri Erwin

Wheeling Jesuit University. Founded in 1954, Wheeling Jesuit University is committed to providing educational opportunity for the historically under-served people of Appalachia. This means serving economically disadvantaged students throughout Appalachian West Virginia, southeastern Ohio, and southwestern Pennsylvania. Ninety percent of our students are eligible for financial assistance according to federal guidelines.

The mission statement of Wheeling Jesuit University is: *Educating for Life*, the Jesuit traditions of educational excellence and service to others guide all programs at Wheeling Jesuit University. *Educating Men and Women for Others*, in its faculty and students, its research and its outreach, the University is national and international. Yet as the only Catholic college in West Virginia, Wheeling Jesuit also values its distinctive mission to the immediate area, educating local men and women and encouraging them to enrich their home communities. *Educating for Leadership*, to model the Jesuit concern for regional and global neighbors, the University welcomes people of all creeds, races and nationalities to share in the intelligent pursuit of excellence and preparation for leadership.

Our young university fosters remarkable successes. Within three years of graduation, 45 percent of our graduates continue on to advanced studies. Within six months of graduation, 90 percent are either enrolled in graduate school or employed in professional positions. The University was just named to the 10 **BEST** universities for the year 2000 in the 12 state Southern region by *U.S. News & World Report*. This is the third consecutive year for this distinction.

The university's success in creating an ethos of service is evidenced by the numerous service clubs and leadership opportunities for students. For example, the Appalachian Experience Club (40 members) is a student-run club that travels to West Virginia regions of exceptional rural poverty each semester break. They conduct service blitzes in firewood preparation (Fall) and home rehabilitation (Spring). The club has not missed a trip in 20 years. Likewise, our Students in Union, Make a Difference Day, EXCEL, and Arrupe (service) Scholarship programs provide avenues for students to make a positive impact on our community. Faculty involvement in developing a service-learning curriculum has been spearheaded by **Dr. Terri A. Erwin**, an assistant professor in Psychology, and the key university visionary for the **On Common Ground** project.

Laughlin Memorial Chapel—Director, Rev. James M. Ellison

Laughlin Memorial Chapel. The Chapel has served the East Wheeling Community since 1872. During the past three decades, its primary focus has been as a safe haven and outreach to the children and youth of the community.

During the school year, the Chapel offers 27 weeks of after-school programs for grade-schoolers. The programs, offered four days each week, have an enrollment of 120 children. Seventy-five children attend each week, with most children attending 2 or 3 days a week. Educational programming includes tutoring, art and music, special reading programs, computer education, recreation in our gym, field trips, and special guests. On Thursdays, an ordained clergyman leads special sessions of Tae Kwon Do training. Each day's program ends with a nutritious meal served before our children leave for home. Transportation to and from the Chapel is provided by two vans, which pick up from school and deliver children to their doorsteps in the evening.

On the same 4 week nights, for three hours in the evening, the Chapel offers programs for middle and high school youths as an alternative to the street corners. Of the group of 60 young persons served each week, 40 attend an average of 2 to 3 evenings a week. In addition to planned programs each evening (with group activities, recreation, discussion, and community building), the program includes weekend events like field trips to colleges and an annual caving expedition.

During the summer, nine weeks of summer camps are offered at the Chapel. Five hours of programming and two meals are provided each day. The Chapel also hosts work camp groups from around the country. Visiting students and leaders (about 250 each summer) work as volunteers in the Chapel Kids camp, at the Catholic Charities Neighborhood Center, and in the neighborhood rehabilitating homes. The Chapel hires and mentors nine of its own highschoolers to conduct home maintenance and make repairs for elderly community members, at no cost.

James M. Ellison. Reverend Ellison has been the Director of the Chapel since 1995. Since his involvement at the Chapel, its program has grown threefold (as measured by its budget), with the staff doubling in size (2.5 full-time members to 5 full-time members plus 3 part-time staff). Prior to joining the Chapel, Rev. Ellison was a Lutheran pastor for nineteen years serving in Washington, D. C. and Wheeling.

During his 13 years in urban Washington, D. C., Rev. Ellison was actively involved in the creation of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC), a very successful service program that has since expanded to eight cities across the country. In its early development, Rev. Ellison served as a key member of its national board, while overseeing the community life in two LVC houses in Washington. In that capacity as mentor and guide, he learned much about what is necessary to the successful development of a community house to serve the neighborhood around it as well as what is needed for young people in that situation to grow and develop personally.

Since his beginning at the Laughlin Chapel, it has been Rev. Ellison's dream, as well as that of the First Presbyterian Church in Wheeling, the legal trustees of the Chapel, to develop a similar model for East Wheeling.

THE COMMUNITY

East Wheeling: A neighborhood of poverty and promise

East Wheeling is a mixed, industrial-residential neighborhood of about 300 families living in substandard houses and two public housing apartment complexes. Roughly one-third of the structures (business and dwelling) in the community stand vacant; many are obviously deteriorated and uninhabitable. The city's "red X" sign, a marker for demolition status, appears on one or more houses per block.

The median family income in the neighborhood is \$12,200 annually. A standard measure of poverty—the number of children qualifying for free school lunches—is 90 percent in the two census tracts comprising East Wheeling. This figure is shocking even in Appalachian West Virginia, where the state percentage of 48 percent already seriously outpaces the national average of 19 percent.

The ethnic demographics of the community are intriguing. While only 4 percent of Wheeling's overall population is African-American, 60 percent of all blacks in greater-Wheeling live in the East Wheeling neighborhood. Partly because of this noticeable ethnic segregation, East Wheeling teens use the term "ghetto" to characterize their neighborhood. In fact, East Wheeling itself is ethnically diverse, with an even mix of black and white residents and a history of harmonious ethnic relations.

East Wheeling has experienced two large-scale physical assaults on its social fiber. Urban Renewal in the 1970s brought the demolition of numerous residences located "on the hill." Promises of new housing construction on the site remain unfilled as brush and garbage overtake the peak at present. Likewise, the expansion of the national highway system in Wheeling resulted in the demolition of several streets of homes at the perimeter of the neighborhood. Interestingly, families forced to relocate outside of East Wheeling remain quite loyal to their "home" neighborhood and will self-identify readily as being affiliated with the community.

Drug trafficking and violent crime are significantly more frequent in East Wheeling than in other Wheeling neighborhoods, though organized gangs have not yet gained a substantial foothold among the mostly young dealers. Community policing efforts have been undertaken, with mild improvement in police-community relations appearing recently. Better relations could come as police force demographics are remedied: The Wheeling police have never had an African-American officer on the force—a bone of contention for black community members.

Community policing efforts will continue as the Department of Justice Weed & Seed program becomes fully implemented. Wheeling is the smallest U.S. city to have been selected for participation in this federal program. East Wheeling is the particular target of Weed & Seed programming, and the Laughlin Memorial Chapel is designated one of the "safe havens" for youths, contributing to the "Seed" part of the overall plan.

In summary, the East Wheeling neighborhood is a community facing many obstacles; however, it is also a neighborhood in which problems, economic and social, have not intractably eroded the social fabric and spirit of the residents. Strong, extended family histories of neighborhood affiliation

and loyalty still exist. Community leadership is discernable, while still coalescing. The absence of organized gang activity is a blessing, though still too many young men, in particular, cycle from street to prison and back. Lack of jobs and the health of East Wheeling commercial prospects are being tackled by a new, grassroots group of business owners, gathering at the Laughlin Memorial Chapel. Recently, a Hope VI grant for housing development was awarded; it will spur substantial growth in East Wheeling.

The clergy of the urban core churches have recently undertaken a community organizing initiative that goes by the endearingly positive title: "In the Hopeful City: The Church's Initiative for Good." Though physical and emotional hunger and discouragement are not hard to find among East Wheeling residents, there is also a self-consciousness of this community's budding potential for rebirth and renewed vitality. Evidence of positive synergies continue to emerge, and our proposal for the **On Common Ground** endeavor is an expression of Wheeling Jesuit University's recognition of its own power to contribute distinctive resources—and its desire to do just that at this critical time.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: On Common Ground

A model community service scholarship program is proposed as a cooperative venture between Wheeling Jesuit University and the Laughlin Memorial Chapel. It is a practical plan for fostering community development in the poorest neighborhood of Wheeling, West Virginia and allowing college students to explore socially conscious, participatory citizenship through service and experiential learning.

The core of the program is a **service-learning scholarship house** to be located in East Wheeling, where 10 service-scholars will receive lodging in exchange for 10 hours of community service work each week. The house will be staffed with an adult mentor, a coordinator who will oversee the daily business of the residence and, importantly, facilitate an introspective component to the in-community experience. The Jesuit community will provide direction in obtaining a suitable house coordinator. The mentor will also coordinate a weekly "hospitality night" dinner, which will bring together house members, community neighbors, and university faculty and student guests. Opening the residence in this way—as a common ground for gathering and breaking bread is a key tool for knitting personal relations among university and neighborhood community members.

Employing students as a bridge for bringing WJU faculty members from all disciplines into better acquaintance with the neighborhood and its needs is the basis for cultivating future university involvement through new service-learning courses. Patently, the first step, and the one proposed currently, is the establishment of our anchoring link—the service-learning scholarship house.

The Laughlin Memorial Chapel will provide the house and coordinate service placements in community development positions. Under our present timetable, house renovations and preparation will take place over the summer of 2000, with a student move-in date of September, 2000. Service-scholars, juniors and seniors at Wheeling Jesuit University, will be recruited and selected during the spring 2000 semester by our existing Arrupe (service) Scholarship board. Summer orientation to the residence program would occur in August and be directed by Rev. Ellison and the house mentor.

During the initial year, two proven community development programs will host Wheeling Jesuit service-scholars: the Laughlin Memorial Chapel's K-12 youth advocacy program and the adjacent Catholic Neighborhood Center, a day shelter, clinic, and soup kitchen. Together, these agencies constitute a trusted, central, outreach presence in the East Wheeling neighborhood. By working with these pro-community programs, in addition to living among the very children, teens, families, and elderly served by them, Wheeling Jesuit service-scholars will obtain a deeper understanding of immediate (housing, hunger, health care) and long-term (education, employment) components of the poverty cycle.

One of the primary purposes of locating the student residence in East Wheeling is to make visible the presence of energetic, caring, and future-oriented young people in a neighborhood where role models for hopeful aspiration are lacking—especially for young children and teens. Support for school success and encouragement toward higher education often go missing in East Wheeling where parents, mostly single ones, struggle to meet the most basic requirements of daily survival. Time—consistent, attentive time with children—is one of the gifts Wheeling Jesuit University

students will bring to this community. By their leadership in the Laughlin Memorial Chapel's K-12 youth programs, college students will soften hearts for education. They will work to boost feelings of self-worth and promulgate the experience of scholastic success throughout the crew of Chapel Kids (K-5). Already, Wheeling Jesuit University hosts the children for violence-prevention theatre as part of our all-Wheeling Martin Luther King Celebration. Likewise, the Psychology Department invited the Chapel Kids this June for an afternoon of "natural play," a non-competitive, safe-contact play style developed by one of our staff counselors, Daniel Caron, MSW.

Having worked together in the Spring of 1999 in a WJU service-learning course in Community Psychology, the **On Common Ground** partners have witnessed the transformation of homework hour at the Chapel when college students are present to work one-on-one with neighborhood children. It matters. Truly, truly, it matters to the children that someone sees their efforts, comforts their frustrations and applauds their victories in the arenas of memorizing U.S. Presidents, copying alphabet letters, multiplication tables, and coloring in the lines. That these same mentors stay with them through story time, past arts & crafts, to join in the evening prayer and meal is a critical service of continuity and sharing for children who undergo instability in family, economics and safety. Our best hope is for carrying over the positive effects of Chapel camaraderie to the neighborhood streets where college students and children will live mere doors and blocks apart.

The service-learning scholarship house will serve as a beacon of hope for East Wheeling teens as well as children. These teens readily express discouragement with their social and economic prospects. They identify racism and stigmatization as impediments to their success in the wider Wheeling area in particular. While they attend a high school that pulls from all the neighborhoods in Wheeling, often their school friends refuse to visit them at their homes because of the perceived danger of East Wheeling streets. The teens cover their bewilderment with street bravado.

Early pregnancy, drugs, and crime flourish in an atmosphere of despair. Continuing our already initiated efforts to connect with these at-risk teens will remain a priority in partnering college students with East Wheeling youths. Last spring, as part of the service-learning course in psychology, college students hosted five Chapel juniors and seniors for a university visit. Admissions and financial aid counselors provided information about application procedures and welcomed the questions teens posed. Without parental models of education—and without financial sources—dispelling for poor teens the inaccessibility myth surrounding college becomes an outreach responsibility of the University. Placing our own students in the Chapel's teen programming staff is one concrete way Wheeling Jesuit University seeks to do this.

In addition to participating in the programs of the Laughlin Memorial Chapel, service scholars will contribute to the adjacent Catholic Charities Neighborhood Center. Many of the children who come to the Laughlin Chapel are also regulars at the Catholic Charities day shelter. They come with their families and receive meals, groceries, toiletries, clothing, and health care, as well as moral support from the caring volunteer staff at the center. Three hundred free breakfasts and dinners are served each day. Meals-on-Wheels deliveries are made from the Neighborhood Center every weekday and Saturdays—some going to remote, substandard dwellings in the rugged mountain hollows and ridges of our Ohio River Valley.

Persons who come to the Neighborhood Center may be homeless or simply too poor to afford both their rent and food. Medical care is typically considered a luxury. Last spring, Wheeling Jesuit service-learning students interviewed 30 of the Center's clients to discover their reasons for homelessness and/or instability. Reasons ranged from mental illness to domestic abuse to unemployment and beyond. Many had experienced intermediate support from family and friends, but tensions of crowding and shallow finances overcame available resources. Putting college students in contact with the human faces of poverty is an overarching aim of the **On Common Ground** project. By interacting with individuals making use of the Center's outreach services, students will add to their understanding of the day-to-day poverty experience.

The Laughlin Memorial Chapel and the Catholic Charities Neighborhood Center are seasoned partners at sharing volunteer resources, thanks to their summer work camp experience. Their cheerful, ecumenical collaboration is a model of purposeful and successful mission. They have earned credibility in a community that is shy on trust in institutions and authorities. Certainly, the **On Common Ground** endeavor will benefit from their having established a working conduit through which good can be channeled to East Wheeling neighbors.

In Closing

In soliciting Wheeling Jesuit's partnership in this endeavor, Rev. Ellison envisioned a keenly reciprocal relationship between the University and the community. Consequently, the proposed collaboration with Wheeling Jesuit University is unusually strong in its foundation in the community's *self-identified* needs. As Rev. Ellison puts it, community advocates seek to "seed the neighborhood" with positive role models of education, of career aspiration, and of hopefulness. Respectfully addressing these community needs with the professional and human capital of an academic institution, while furthering the mission of Wheeling Jesuit University to *educate men and women for others*, is the essence of this win-win proposition for collaboration.