

Service-Learning Feature Story: Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS



Sign outside entrance to Francis House.

(Photo by Joy Winheim, Executive Director of Francis House)



World AIDS Day banner made by Francis House clients to remember those who lost their battle with HIV/AIDS. (Photo by Joy Winheim, Executive Director of Francis House)

Francis House, a Seminole Heights day respite center for those living with HIV/AIDS, served as the community partner for Professor Marcie Finkelstein's *Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS* undergraduate seminar. The class encourages students to examine ways in which basic research can address pressing societal needs. Students study social psychology theory and research while volunteering throughout the semester at Francis House. Their challenge is to use social psychology as a framework for understanding and developing potential solutions to some of the problems confronting the organization's staff and clients.

The course structure satisfies the objectives the Psychology Department has established for its curricula. Department guidelines state that psychology graduates should be able to formulate hypotheses and conduct a literature search, discuss major theoretical positions in psychology, and describe how psychological theories can be used to practical ends. Students should learn to think critically, write clearly, and speak effectively about the implications of empirical data. *Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS* provides a pedagogically rigorous course while directly linking that pedagogy to community issues.

Many Francis House clients are homeless; almost all are unemployed. The agency offers myriad programs and services including support groups, meals, mental health and substance abuse counseling, case management, recreational therapy, a food pantry, and HIV education classes. With more people living longer with HIV and AIDS, there is increasing need for services in a time of shrinking resources. Like many social service agencies, Francis House has a lean budget and few paid staff. Volunteerism is critical to its operation. A true partnership between university and community developed as Francis House staff worked with Dr. Finkelstein to design the course.

Students were required to volunteer a minimum of 15 hours during the semester. Every student in the class exceeded the 15-hour minimum, with several putting in 30-40 hours. In addition, each student selected a "buddy"—a Francis House client—to interview throughout the semester. The aim of these conversations and volunteer ser-

vice was to provide students with an understanding of the issues confronting those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. The experiences at Francis House provided the basis for weekly written assignments and class discussion. The students' task was to frame the issues that arose in the context of social psychology theory and to use the theory to develop possible solutions.

While the course focused on academic objectives, an unexpected outcome was how the students were changed by their community service experience. One said her fiancé remarked that she had lost her tendency to complain about minor irritations. She attributed the change to the influence of her buddy. The two became real friends, with the student turning to her buddy for advice. Thus the beneficiary of volunteer help also became a helper. Several students said they learned not to pre-judge, stereotype, or fear; they maintained that the clients helped them as much as they helped clients.

A student who initially said she was afraid to visit Francis House ended up being the one who logged the most hours volunteering. In short order, her time there became the highlight of her week, with much laughing and teasing involved. Another said that each morning, his buddy sent him text messages that helped him through his day. A final session at Francis House was a deeply moving experience as students and clients maintained that they were friends for life. After the course ended, Dr. Finkelstein received letters from three students. These testimonials are fine examples of how meaningful and life-changing a service-learning experience can be for students.

Service-Learning Student Testimonials:

Prior to my experience at Francis House, I thought I was pretty aware of stereotypes and prejudices, and certainly didn't think I harbored any. However, once I began volunteering, I realized, although I've never deliberately acted to harm anyone, I certainly stereotype. Most of this stereotypical thinking was the result of my lack of exposure to certain groups and my ignorance regarding many of the issues with which they struggle.

My experience at Francis House not only exposed

Story continues on page 5.

Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS, cont'd from page 4

me to many different groups of people that I had only interacted with very minimally, but also provided me with a close look at the myriad of issues different members of these groups face. I got to meet and even build friendships with people struggling with debilitating diseases, poverty, drug addiction, and social stigmas all in one shot. My relationships with the clients at Francis House helped me see past all of the labels and problems, and appreciate that people are people, and their struggles don't define them.

I'm so grateful to have had this experience; it really opened my eyes and reached my heart. I understand a lot more about myself, and I think the way I view and interact with others has improved greatly as a result of my experience. —Allie

My experience at Francis House was unforgettable. This class gave us the opportunity to learn so much more than we could ever learn simply from a textbook. I learned so much from the people that we worked with—not just about them and their struggles, but about myself, as well. The people at Francis House were always so positive despite all their hardships, which makes me look at myself and realize how often I get so stressed over trivial things.

This experience also opened my eyes to my own prejudices and helped me overcome them. I will never forget all of the wonderful people I met at Francis House and I will always remember what an impact this class has made on me. It is a one-of-a-kind class and I wish that everyone could have the same wonderful experience that I had. —Nicole

The second class meeting at Francis House completely melted my heart. I met my buddy that day, and she has made the largest impact on my outlook than anyone else in my whole educational career.

She taught me things that I couldn't read in a textbook. She opened my eyes to a world that I had pretended hadn't existed until now. We talked as if we had been friends for years, and you would have never even guessed she was infected.

I admit: I was scared at first. Scared to touch the door handles, use the silverware, and breathe the same air as these people diagnosed with HIV, but I knew I had to get over it. I was afraid that they weren't going to be receptive to me, because I wouldn't be in their shoes. They were as welcoming as a family could have been. With open arms, they told you everything you would want to know, and even some things you didn't.

I absolutely loved being there. Out of the 15 hours we were required to complete, I was there well over that amount with nearly 40 hours by the end of the semester. I couldn't get enough! I could have had the worst day of my life, and I would walk through that front door and I was greeted by every person with a smile and hug that would light up the room.

This class has the ability to teach you something you can't find on the internet, in a research paper, or a textbook. It teaches you about the hardcore, really gritty stuff that a lot of people don't want to face. By getting involved with this organization, I feel like I have given these people a voice. They often go unheard and unnoticed, but not anymore. We are making a difference by being there for them.

And most importantly, you are making a difference in yourself. I find myself being more patient and accepting. I don't jump to conclusions any more. Everyone has a story. Trust me when I say you will never find a better story than the ones at Francis House. I am forever changed by the experience and I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world. —Hilary

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Supporting tomorrow's leaders

High school students from the Mayor's Youth Corps of Tampa attended the annual Suncoast League of Cities conference, where OCE Director Elizabeth Strom led them in discussions about urban development and political leadership. After hearing USF's Dr. Susan Macmanus and Ken Small of the Florida League of Cities discuss challenges facing local officials in the current political climate, teens had the opportunity to share their own views.



OCE Director Elizabeth Strom leading teens from the Mayor's Youth Corps of Tampa in a discussion about urban political issues.