

Rochester leadership programs create next wave of social entrepreneurs

By Melissa Greco Lopes

Clarence Onyiriuka '11 spent his summer as an Urban fellow working for the South East Area Coalition, a grassroots organization that serves the residents and merchants of southeast Rochester. Most of his duties involved conducting research on the history of South Avenue. Through this employment, he learned about the intricacies of a nonprofit organization and both the challenges and opportunities of working with community members to create positive social change.

For Onyiriuka and 16 other students, the Rochester Urban Fellowship program at the University of Rochester's Rochester Center for Community Leadership served as a teaching tool for social entrepreneurship. The urban-immersion program paired students with community-based organizations whose missions are to look at issues facing Rochester and find solutions to those problems.

"This is really a flagship program at the RCCL," said Glenn Cersaletti, the director for the Rochester Center for Community Leadership. "Its mission is to help engage student leaders who are eager to effect change and who will have a deeper connection to Rochester once they've graduated from the program."

The Urban Fellowship, which began in 2002, has seen more than 100 Rochester-area college students complete the program since its inception. While enrolled in the program, students spend one day a week discussing the history, politics, demographics, and sociology of urban communities like Rochester. Through workshops, the students learn to brainstorm solutions to the problems and weigh the strengths and challenges of the solution.

As undergraduates in the Urban Fellowship program are training to be social entrepreneurs, recent graduates of Rochester-area colleges are using those same tools to spend a year of service as AmeriCorps*VISTA Rochester Youth Year fellows. Rochester Youth Year is administered by a consortium of six colleges: Nazareth College of Rochester, Roberts Wesleyan College, SUNY Geneseo, The College at Brockport, St. John Fisher College, and the University of Rochester.

Youth Year fellows elect to remain in Rochester and work with selected youth-serving agencies, helping to alleviate poverty, create or enhance programs, and improve opportunities for youth and their families.

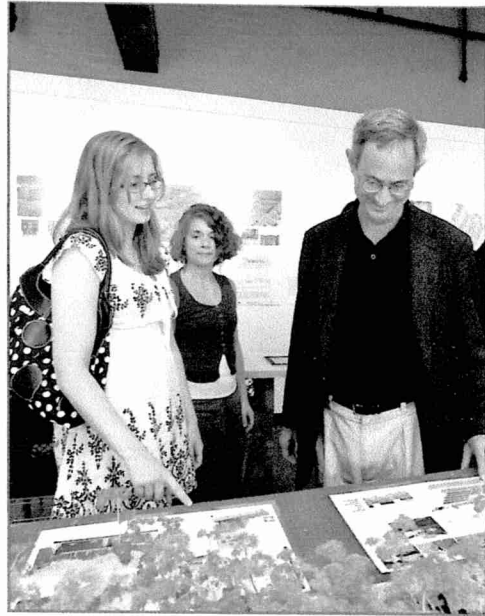


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Urban fellow Jenna Furman '10 (left) shows project posters at the Rochester Regional Community Design Center to President Joel Seligman (right) as Liesel Schwarz '11 (center) observes. The President toured community agencies with students in the Urban Fellowship program this summer.

Youth Year fellow Ferdous Zannat '09 will spend this year working for Brown Square Health Center. Zannat will work with community organizers to develop culturally appropriate events for women and children. Her current project, The Pumpkin Festival, is in collaboration with the Refugee Women's Network. The festival encourages refugee women in the Rochester area to share cultural dishes from their native countries.

For students like Zannat and Onyiriuka, programs like the Urban Fellowship and Rochester Youth Year Fellowship provide unique avenues for leadership training and civic engagement.

"The program is beneficial for students because we're not just talking about issues and problems that urban communities face. It's a hands-on experience," said Onyiriuka. "We're actually going out into the community and changing things for the better."

For more information about the Urban Fellowship and Rochester Youth Year programs, e-mail Glenn Cersaletti at community.leadership@rochester.edu or visit the Web site, www.rochester.edu/college/rccl.