

Newark Project

Courtesy of Drew Magazine. Article originally appeared in the Spring 1996 edition, by Sara Nuss-Galles

Confirmed vegetarian Matthias Beier had not planned to experience American cuisine at the local Burger King. Certainly when he came from Germany, the Ph.D. candidate in religion and society didn't anticipate that he would sacrifice moral convictions to research. He enrolled in Drew's Newark Project intent on delving into the relationship between racial issues and economics. "I was interested to see how European-Americans responded to being a minority and whether there is some racial connotation in the division between rich and poor," he recalls.

To explore his thesis, the Newark Project placed Beier in the primarily white North Reformed Church in the largely non-white city. The moral battle ensued, however, when homeless participants in the church's Jug and Loaf Program "invited me to accept a voucher and join them at Burger King."

Beier was pleased to accept the men's overture until he discovered the vouchers could only be used for hamburgers. Wrestling with his conscience, he concluded that, the more he blended in, the more effective his experience would be: "So I made the great sacrifice of Sunday Whoppers."

The weekly gatherings prompted not only a change of his diet but also a refocus in this thesis to the relationship between socioeconomics and religious life. More important, trading stories over a burger and fries helped the student/minister forge friendships with the homeless men. "Many homeless people have great gifts; they are fighters," he came to realize. "But they don't have the institutional power to change the infrastructure."

The group particularly impressed Beier with their ideas for surmounting poverty during an intense Bible class discussion. Praising their acuity, he then posed a challenge: "But I don't know what you do all week long when you leave here." That comment provoked the group to strategize about building a community, an exercise Beier believes will empower them.

By placing participants in real-life situations, the Newark Project offers graduate students like Beier meaningful research opportunities. At the same time, the Project teaches seminarians how to be ministers in an urban center, explains Project Director Karen McCarthy Brown. Brown's commitment to field education sustains the Newark Project, which was launched in 1993 with grants from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund and The Prudential Foundation. The heart of the Project, she says, lies in doing just what Beier has done, forming friendships with groups and individuals.

As an integral component in these nascent relationships, "field faculty" hired by the professor of sociology and anthropology of religion provide knowledge and access to the community. They include a dean of a community college, leaders in health care and religion, and business people, who share their expertise and function as indigenous researchers.

In that role, Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton, Episcopal minister of Newark's House of Prayer, shepherds M.Div. students through the complex world of HIV and AIDS. By apprenticing themselves to patients, students encounter "racism, homophobia, sexism, poverty, and hunger. Because of the population affected, everything is there," Kaeton explains.

By using an "action-reflection" model, students experience urban ministry firsthand, Kaeton explains, then reflect on those experiences and their readings in the classroom. As the Project makes "religion relate to people's lives," the pastor has observed that students "begin to question the nature of charity and find ways to revolutionize the system. I can see seeds being planted for a new style of leadership in the church ... to change systematic problems in how church and government deal with poverty and homelessness."

Brown stresses that relationships fostered by the Project must be reciprocal. "We don't want to make sectors of the Newark population into objects of our scholarly gaze," she explains, "or to interfere with the serious work of social service agencies by placing untrained students in them."

The Project's AIDS legacy work clearly illustrates reciprocity in action. Last year's student participants worked exclusively with mothers. The women commonly feared that they would die and their children would forget they ever had mothers who loved them. So, in addition to providing willing ears and emotional support, the students took photographs and recorded oral histories. After transcribing the stories verbatim, the students compiled them in albums for the clients and, ultimately, their children.

"As far as I'm concerned, I met an angel," second-year M.Div. student Tood Jordan asserts of client Nadine Haskins. Despite her initial nervousness, the thirty-ish mother of three "was a lot more articulate than she thought," says Jordan. During visits in her apartment and occasionally in the hospital, Haskins shared a life lived against a backdrop of abuse, poverty, violence, drugs, and AIDS. "Nadine wants her name and story told so that people can know what's going on," Jordan explains.

Fleeing an abusive mother, Haskins lived on the streets. She danced in topless bars at 15, got pregnant at 16, yet always did "what she had to, to make sure her kids were taken care of," Jordan says. Listening to his client, he "realized how geographic and socioeconomic factors affect lives. Things that were unthinkable where I grew up are everyday for her."

When Jordan presented the transcription, Haskins was moved to tears. "She felt good that her condition might help others," Jordan recalls, and was honored that "someone actually took the time to listen to her. What I gave was an ear; what I got..." he says, pausing with a deep sigh, "I was moved spiritually; my perspectives were widened."

Beauty Maenzanise's progress with her HIV-positive client was more gradual. In fact, she admits that, initially, she was as skeptical of the relationship as her client was reluctant. "She didn't trust that I could keep confidential information," Maenzanise relates, even accusing that "some people just come to learn but don't want to share." The mother of three's reticence deepened when she learned that Maenzanise was a pastor. Unaccepted by many denominations because of her HIV status, the woman had grown wary of religion.

Maenzanise, too, had inhibitions to overcome. In her native Zimbabwe, the pastor says people avoid dealing with diseases like AIDS. That background made helping her client both "challenging and empowering." In time, "I accepted her as she is, and she accepted me," Maenzanise reports. "Now she calls me her pastor."

Kaeton relates that feedback from clients, "people who have been mostly ignored by organized religion" has been strong. Participants at HIV/AIDS support sessions recently greeted her with "How do I get onto this list?" and "Hey, I want me a seminarian, too." Knowing that "their stories are being heard makes them feel connected," Kaeton explains, "and that is very powerful." Usually, Brown adds, "people listen to policy setters, to caregivers, but not to the people affected. We are."

An interest in adolescent pregnancy prompted student Kathleen Bishop to conduct her Project field work at a Planned Parenthood clinic last year, sitting in on counseling sessions, learning the issues. This year the graduate student works with "at risk adolescents" at a satellite mental health clinic in a Catholic school.

"As a scholar," she says. "I'm trying to understand the context in which adolescent pregnancy occurs." However, she points out that her work is not pure research since she also functions as a therapist, "advising and hearing their personal stories, the challenges of being a high school kid in an urban school."

Bishop has observed an inordinate gap between when girls first suspect pregnancy and when they confirm their suspicion with a doctor's visit. "They wait until it is too late to prevent and too late for prenatal care... increasing the risk of delivering an unhealthy baby, as well as the financial and psychological risk of having a baby they can't care for."

Bishop's mandate as the Catholic school's sexuality educator "is not to present the options of birth control or abortion." She admits, however, "If they ask me, I can tell them. These kids are so at risk, I don't face a lot of opposition."

The "extremity" work these students engage in is not for everyone. Thus, the Newark Project offers options. Those who prefer to stay on campus can choose among courses that integrate facets of the Project within the curriculum. For instance, a theodicy class brings speakers to have AIDS to campus for case studies, and students may or may not follow up with further involvement.

Students may also join walking and van tours providing overviews of the city. Led by Project administrator Peter Savastano, a native of Newark's North Ward, the exploration of Newark's nooks and crannies provides experiential perspective as well as two generations of fascinating lore. "I remember when there were no shopping malls and everyone would come here to shop if they didn't want to go to New York," he recalls, pointing out schools he attended and clandestine spots where he and his friends caroused their teens away. "Movie theaters, restaurants, you could pretty much find it in Newark."

Snaking through the city's front and back roads, the Ph.D. candidate in religion segues smoothly from the imposing Tiffany silver factory turned condos to the stone-fences monastery occupied by an order of cloistered nuns. Sill, painful realities abound; abandoned buildings, rubble strewn lots, seemingly aimless people on street corners.

From the sanctuary of a van, M.Div. student Masahiko Sagara seems stunned by the pervasive barbed wire and wrought iron enclosures erected by residents in often futile attempts at security. "How difficult the daily lives are," he observed. "Security is a crucial thing we all need for harmony."

For some, the tours are knowledge enough. For others, they are merely an introduction. Graduate students interested in ethnography can delve deeper by participating in a walking census of Newark's burgeoning religious life. Assigned sections, they walk every city block, writing and recording on film and tape all evidence of religion observed. Besides traditional manifestations, students document any spiritual expression, including fortune tellers, Tai Chi parlors, tarot card readers, lawn altars, monuments, even signs and bumper stickers.

The walking census is part of a larger religious mapping project, Brown says, that seeks to "chart the full spectrum of religious expression in a contemporary urban environment and consider how the dimensions of the pictures work together." The endeavor includes exploration of nontraditional spirituality. For example, Brown says the students have learned that people with AIDS, prompted by feelings of disaffection, often formulate their own rituals. Their funerals, which tend to mix religious traditions, take place in rented halls, away from churches that have been unwelcoming.

The young have also been found to embrace the non-traditional. When a young person is killed, Brown relates, friends commonly paint a memorial wall where they light candles, bring flowers, and hold services. Needing more intimate expressions of grief, friends even tattoo memorials for the deceased on their bodies.

Religious mapping often reveals the unexpected. Students have learned, for example, that the largest single group of Episcopalians in Newark hail from Liberia. Mapping also illustrates "multiple religious allegiances," according to Brown. Ghanians, for instance, largely attend Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, but perform private ceremonies from their traditional religions. Likewise, many Haitians practice Catholicism and baptize their children, then have *Vodou* ceremonies to heal problem areas of their life, such as job loss and love. Home based religions including Santeria, Epiritismo, and Palo Monte also thrive in Newark, but locating them requires an in, which students try to cultivate.

Beyond these spiritual explorations, the Newark Project affords uncommon opportunities for students to work within their own ethnic groups. Ph.D. candidate Gye Ho Kim lived with a Korean immigrant family for three days. Up buying produce at 5 am, the immigrants regularly worked in their grocery store until 10 pm. Too exhausted to play with their children, who had been under a sitter's care all day, the couple arrived home, "cooked, ate, and went to bed."

"Their everyday life is hard," Kim recalls, citing, "the language barrier, totally different customs, and problems with customers who are mostly black." Despite recurring shoplifting, the grocer told Kim, "my customers are not bad." He pointed out that blacks and Koreans had similar backgrounds of struggle and colonization: "If we understood each other, the problem would be much reduced."

Kim relates that bureaucratic procedure often perplexes the immigrants. In one instance, the grocer asked Kim to accompany him to court in response to a legal summons. The man had amassed numerous parking violations, and, daunted by the settlement process, he ignored the tickets and owed hundreds of dollars in fines.

Perhaps avoiding further governmental red tape and the expenses involved with on-the-book employees, the grocers hired all undocumented workers, according to Kim. Generous and kind to their all-Hispanic staff, the couple managed to keep them despite a competitor's offer of more money. Such competition however, ultimately forced the grocers to close shop, Kim says. "The major reason they emigrated was to give their children opportunity," he reflects. "It wasn't working for them."

The experience taught the minister the heightened significance of the church in Koreans' lives after they leave their homeland. "The church is extended family. Everybody speaks Korean; they get information and take care of each other." He also discovered that "the Korean minister's main job is to introduce new immigrants to jobs and housing."

Documentation of field work such as Kim's, transcriptions of oral histories, and the trove of religious, social, political, and economic data gathered from the Newark Project

are being archived on campus. Hereafter, students and researchers seeking information on urban population issues and, specifically, Newark will find a wealth at hand.

Brown believes the Project's findings prove those who have been raising alarms about religion "are dead wrong. A number of years ago sociologists predicted the waning of religious influence." Instead, she asserts, "there has been a rebirth, but not where it was expected; spiritual energy is teeming throughout the city."

Savastano, too, recognizes this energy. He hypothesizes that "issues of violence, crime, and AIDS almost necessitate a response, affirmative or negative, raising traditional questions of why, wherefore, and how come. Grassroots level theologizing comes directly out of peoples' experience ... rather than from the top down."

To that point, students visiting Newark for the first time express amazement at the sheer quantity of storefront churches, often several on a single block. "Churches can empower and ease some of the disease, it's possible," graduate student Monica Shumate reflected on a van tour. Then, her voice trailed off, "But it doesn't always happen that way." To make churches more effective, Newark Project participants have found that church leaders must bridge the chasm that exists between rich and poor, black and white.

Early on in his meetings with the people in the Jug and Loaf program, for example, Matthias Beier sensed an unease within the general church community: "Some members were concerned everything would be given to the poor" and their traditional programs would suffer. Gradually, Beier saw those fears allayed by the parish ministers' unswerving commitment to the destitute and by seeing the homeless folks succeed.

Todd Jordan, too, continues to work hard plugging gaps widened by differences in class and race. A parishioner recently brought her visiting mother to services at the African American church where Jordan serves as pastor this year. "Who's that white man up there?" the elderly woman kept asking. Eventually realizing that her mother meant Jordan, the daughter replied, "That's no white man, that's Minister Todd."

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