StreetFest 2008: To Embrace Fully

Each year the Service-Learning Center plans this event called “StreetFest.” Over a period of three days the office equips 1,000 incoming students with the designated “StreetFest t-shirt,” a brown paper-bagged lunch, work gloves, safety goggles, first aid kits, some information about Grand Rapids, and a bit of pedagogy about reciprocity.

The logistics of the day work like a well-oiled machine. Groups of 10-12 students, after being assigned a student leader and a mentor, rotate through a chapel service, an information session, and toward the bus stop in order to end up at their designated work site. There they are graciously met by one of our community partners and put to work! Through this service-learning project they have the opportunity to learn a bit about the local neighborhood and the work that our partner is doing there.

It is a rather exhilarating process to observe and to be a part of. Wearing their turquoise and yellow uniform with this year’s theme, “to embrace fully,” written across their chests, students had the opportunity to explore Grand Rapids, where they will be living for the next four years or so. Throughout the day they were encouraged to observe with eyes seeking potential opportunity, consider ways in which they can get involved during their time at Calvin, and revisit these places. The intention is that students will continue to seek to know the city better and begin to build relationships there.

StreetFest is unique in how this introduction comes by way of community members. Students learn about the city as they interact, work alongside these community partners, and listen to the stories of these neighbors.

Projects this year included advertising and implementing a back-to-school carnival at Mosaic Life Church, trail maintenance and wood-splitting at Blandford Nature Center, painting and cleaning at several different agencies such as Guiding Light Mission or Safe Haven Ministries, helping out at the Hispanic Festival, and even learning about the city of Grand Rapids by way of canoe on the Grand River.

It was exciting to watch our courageous student-leaders guide these service-learning experiences. It is also exciting to see how students grow and learn about the importance of engaging people and place throughout their time in college. And StreetFest is a wonderful introduction to this process. It seeks to show students that their task in this community is not to come and speak to a place, but to participate in a place, to offer themselves to Grand Rapids, through relationships and care.
Can a poem be a covenant? What about a picture—can an absence of words really produce any concrete sense of unity, commitment or motivation? I suppose I could enthusiastically offer an affirmative here, but perhaps the most candid answer is, “We’ll see.” This year, the student staff of the S-LC has chosen two rather unconventional sources for its annual covenant, a photograph and a poem. There is something about both of these media that draws its beholder in rather than repelling him, as we feared another prolix, pedantic piece of prose might do. And as the covenant members who would be willingly bound to whatever we crafted, we wanted something that inspired our hearts to embrace and to rejoice in our service-learning, kingdom-seeking work rather than anaesthetizing our minds with the sterile, bureaucratic language so often bred by cubicles and fluorescent lights. Indeed, in Mary Oliver’s poem “Song of the Builders,” we found much that was inspirational, convicting and relevant to our work. The poem’s contemplative narrator is a reminder to value introspection and all that is larger than what we do (which is, avowedly, most things), the cricket a testament to the still, small ways in which each of us may humbly persevere. And at their intersection, when narrator-musings and cricket-strivings come together, we arrive at the poem’s climactic, revelatory proclamation, “How great was its energy, / how humble its effort,” a sentiment that continually serves as an apt word of encouragement as well as a sustainable ethos of justice pursuits. The poem’s linguistic message is complemented with a visual one, a portrait of a harvester in a vast field, sedulously attending to his row, unaffected by the immensity of his task. Both works speak to the importance of the one in the grand scheme of things.

A little grandiose? Maybe. Sincere and earnest? Definitely. In any case, we believe that, in lieu of a catalogue of hackneyed “we will”s and “we promise”s, the image of the diligent harvester and Oliver’s story of the cricket will do much to unify and motivate us, whether our task is as vast as a wheat field or as minute as a cricket.

**Song of the Builders**
by Mary Oliver

On a summer morning
I sat down
on a hillside
to think about God—
a worthy pastime.
Near me, I saw
a single cricket;
it was moving the grains on
the hillside
this way and that way.
How great its energy,
how humble its effort.
Let us hope
it will always be like this,
each of us going on
in our inexplicable ways
building the universe.

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**Giving to the Service-Learning Center through the Grand Rapids Community Foundation**

Since 2003, the Service-Learning Center at Calvin College has been building an endowment of its own at the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. Begun with generous support from the State of Michigan, this fund enables donors who would like another way to support Calvin College while at the same time taking advantage of the Michigan 50% tax credit for gifts to community foundations (up to $400 for couples, $200 for individuals). This tax credit is in addition to the similar tax credit that accompanies gifts to institutions of higher education.

What does this mean for you and for the Service-Learning Center? After you make your regular gift to Calvin College, you can also make a gift to the Service-Learning Center through the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. In this way you qualify for two State of Michigan tax credits. All you need to do is identify the Calvin College Service-Learning Center on the memo line of your check to the Grand Rapids Community Foundation.

This fund now hovers around $40,000. It will begin to pay out usable interest when it reaches $50,000. These dollars will enable programs like StreetFest and Residence Hall Community Partnerships, as well as a wide variety of academically-based service-learning projects to grow and flourish.

If you are interested in giving to the S-LC please use the enclosed envelope and help us reach our $50,000 goal.
I recently finished reading Lionel Basney’s little book, An Earth-Careful Way of Life: Christian Stewardship and the Environmental Crisis, and I moved immediately to N.T. Wright’s Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church. I love how the two connect. Wright’s reason for writing Surprised by Hope is to counter ages-old misconceptions about what kind of a “place” heaven is. With a host of other observers, Wright perceives that the less your idea of heaven connects with earth, the less you are likely to care for the earth. Why bother, if it’s all going to burn, and besides, what really matters are our spirits, right? This pattern of thinking is wrong, and shockingly so.

Basney offers a hopeful little commentary on the relationship between nature and culture that defies easy categorization. He covers a lot of important ground, explaining why our connection to the earth, not vaguely but in actually touching dirt in the growing of productive gardens, enables us to a fuller humanness. He has all kinds of potential to sound off prophetically about the wasteful ways most American Christians consume in blissful and self-centered ignorance. But for the most part, he contains his cynicism and stays hopeful. Hopeful for a world that turns upside down, mostly through local communities and their growing connections to earth. He also avoids any hint of pantheistic earth-worship that worries many Christians about their friends who are “into the environment.”

Wright’s contribution to the conversation is primarily in reminding us that the weight of scripture points to a future in which earth and heaven are reunited.

He spends quite a bit of energy countering the popular notion that heaven consists of an existence that is ethereal, or non-material, drawing on C.S. Lewis’s description of heaven as a place where our bodies are actually “more solid, more real” than they were on earth. Again, if this is so, and if this earth will be transformed rather than burned up, then Basney is right to encourage us to get to work on this transformation of the earth.

If you’ve paid attention to some of the work that Calvin students and faculty have been up to over the past few years – rain gardens, native plantings, invasive species reduction efforts, LEED certification programs, and reforestation projects to name a few – you will recognize in these projects the influence of contemporary prophets like Lionel Basney and N.T. Wright.
Reflections on StreetFest

By Emma Slager, StreetFest Leader

StreetFest was the favorite part of my own orientation as a freshman. This year, I had the chance to enjoy it again as a StreetFest leader. The entire experience was good, but I remember the first day in particular because despite bad weather and my accompanying anxiety, everything worked out. The students in my group really appreciated the experience and had a good time.

Armed with makeshift raingear, vegetarian lunches, and various other supplies, we headed out to catch the city bus to our site. During the ride, the group struck up conversations with some of the regular riders and at our site they had thoughtful questions for the people at our organization.

Thankfully, we got to work inside putting together pamphlets and stuffing envelopes, which gave us the chance to talk. I was glad to answer questions about my ideas of life at Calvin and was happier to hear them take an interest in each other’s lives and experiences.

During our reflection time, the students said that they felt like we’d really helped the organization and were interested in ways to stay involved with service-learning and the city.

Not every day was as ideal as the first, but I was glad to be part of these students’ introduction to Calvin as I know it: full of people eager to learn, ready to serve and deeply concerned about living lives that please God in our broken but hope-filled world.
An Interview With Reb Roberts

By Jessica Ennis and Jocelyn Jones

Reb Roberts is an artist living in the Heartside neighborhood. He designed the artwork for the StreetFest t-shirt this year that was worn by both students and leaders. He is heavily involved in using his art to shape communities.

S-LC: How did you get involved in designing for Streetfest?

Reb: Becca Timmermans and Rebecca Garofano, the student organizers for Streetfest, came to my shop. They were interested in my artwork and how it has been a part of the development of this neighborhood. They approached me with the idea of the theme of Streetfest, which was “to embrace fully”. They wanted something that would give an urban feel but still be inclusive of the world as a whole. They had some ideas for the design and colors. Jeff Bouman came down to finalize the deal and talk with me a bit more about Calvin’s mission of student participation in culture and service. I felt it would be a good mix for my art and the mission of Streetfest.

What do you think it means to embrace a place fully?

Reb: To embrace really starts close. It means to be able to see what’s right in front of your face—your immediate world but also the things surrounding that. The focal point in the shirt design is the city and everything around that. It is simple and naive art, but it shows how things enter in and out of our circles. Things flow in and out of our world from other worlds. The purpose of our life is to go beyond, always stretching. Service is going beyond your boundaries. The things you encounter become a part of your life, and your boundaries get bigger.

How did you come to reside in the Heartside neighborhood?

Reb: Art attracts other artists. Artists noticed the art in this area and settled here. That’s how this community developed. My wife and I moved here because there were already other artists living here. There are a lot of creative spaces for artists in this community and there is always a flow of artists coming through. There are spaces like the Free Radical gallery, where work is displayed in storefront windows.

What has been your role here in Heartside?

Reb: Originally I would seek out opportunities, like approaching a school or the city. My wife and I have done a lot of projects with the community, with schools, non-profits. We’ve done a lot of networking and collaborating in our community. We’ve had referrals through word of mouth, acknowledgement, and generous press. Most of the projects we’ve done have been in collaboration. Grand Rapids gives a lot of support to collaborative art. And art is perpetual. You have an idea and someone else has an idea and you bounce these ideas off each other. Every neighborhood has an artist. Our own art has not really been the focal point. We facilitate, we promote, but most of the focus is on other individuals and groups. We get the inspiration of working together with people who haven’t had many chances to create art or who live in environments where you wouldn’t see a lot of art.

Most of the artists here have no formal training. That’s how it’s always been, and we have stayed true to original work. That’s unique. A lot of galleries have to supplement with gift shops, selling trinkets and things. I’ve always felt that that undersells the artist, but there is that dilemma of raising money for business. We’ve supplemented by keeping doors open to community and city projects.

What is the role of art in shaping communities?

Reb: Why do people go to the Vatican? Because there is an incredible collection of art there. I mean, there is the aspect of spirituality there too, but really most people are drawn to the beautiful artwork. Here in Grand Rapids, we put art in boarded-up districts that had been abandoned and ignored—Division, Fulton, was all boarded up. We created a new focal point, and before you knew it people were seeing the potential. Businesses were interested. People started thinking, ‘That would make a great restaurant, or bakery’. That’s the power of art, and it starts at grassroots. Art is admired and becomes a source of community pride. Somebody’s cousin or neighbor worked on something. People start to have conversations, people start to shop here. It spreads wealth—not always money but another kind of wealth, you know?

Where do you see yourself going from here?

Reb: I see a thousand more things that could be done that I’ll never be able to get to. My vocation is what I love to do. There was a road to get here and skills I learned along the way. It all takes practice. I think many people want an instant everything—one hit wonders, fifteen minutes of fame—it is a lonely life going from hit to hit. The process of practicing and doing is about people intersecting, not trying to get ahead or to the top. I see it as a highway where we pass each other. We are going different ways but there is this connection. We need a common denominator. Art’s a good one.
Health, Housing, and Environmental Justice

By Jeremy Koh, Communications Coordinator

Pairing environmental issues with justice issues is not something that regularly happens. Yet Paul Haan from the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan made a compelling argument for why we should consider these two issues hand-in-hand when he gave a talk at Calvin College during UNLEARN week.

Environmental justice has to do with examining how an environment disproportionately affects people of a specific race, gender, social class, and age. The question of what environmental justice looks like differs from place to place. Within Paul Haan’s work it has to do with the internal environment of houses in the West Michigan area.

Healthy Homes’ goal is to better the housing conditions of neighborhoods in West Michigan in order to make it a safer place for children to grow and develop normally. For the organization it is imperative that children should be able to live in homes that are free from toxins. This is because children are at a much higher risk of being damaged by exposure to toxins and in West Michigan, the most dangerous toxins can be found in a home.

In his presentation, Paul Haan showed how people living in low-income housing in the Grand Rapids area tended to be at much greater risk for asthma breakouts, radon exposure, and lead poisoning. Since low-income housing in Grand Rapids tend to be disproportionately occupied by minorities, this means that minority children are some of the most exposed to deadly toxins within a home.

The most startling revelation was the statistics of lead poisoning in Grand Rapids. Lead poisoning impairs the development of a child’s body and organs and is irreversible. Research shows that children who have been lead poisoned have much more difficulty learning, are more prone to delinquency, and as adults make much less income than those who have not been lead poisoned. In Grand Rapids, there are currently no regulations for realtors to check for lead poisoning. And currently 43% of lead poisoned children are African American and 48% of them are Hispanic/Latino. To compare, only 9.2% of the population of Kent County is African American and 9% are Hispanic Latino. This disparity shows that there is a strong case of injustice and discrimination within housing regulations of Grand Rapids.

Housing is an environmental justice issue because poverty limits housing choices and, as Haan showed, low-income housing is much more likely to have deadly toxins within it’s environment. It is also well-documented that racial steering and segregation still exists in the housing market and that housing policy in Grand Rapids is inadequate in protecting children from an exposure to deadly toxins.

While solutions are difficult and complex, it is exciting to see that Healthy Homes is taking on this task, using education and advocacy to bring awareness and solutions to the important issues of environmental justice in Grand Rapids.

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S-LC Spring Break Trips 2009

Each year students spend their Spring Break traveling around the country to serve and learn in a community. This Spring Break they are going to:

**Houma, LA**
**Chicago, IL**
**Grand Rapids, MI**
**Boston, MA**
**Knoxville, TN**
**Pittsburgh, PA**
**CRWRC Disaster Relief**

Spring Break Trips are a meaningful, exciting way for students to spend their break. Stay tuned for updates in the spring newsletter!

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Blood Drive Data

Our September Blood Drive, sponsored by Michigan Community Blood Centers was a huge success! 277 people donated blood which resulted in 198 pints of blood. There were 78 first time donors!

Thank you!
Calvin College

Service-Learning and Art Education

By Professor J. VanReeuwyk, Department of Art & Art History

Service-Learning has become an inherent part of taking a class in Art Education at Calvin College. It not only benefits our larger community but also it benefits us, as teachers/students. We understand our work as a partnership. And a partnership can only work if all parties benefit.

How does our community benefit? Well, we provide our enthusiasm and willingness to take on the challenge, first of all. Even more than that, we provide a service that would otherwise not be filled. Our work at the Grand Rapids Art Museum is critical because without our willingness to be aides and teachers for the art programs, the programs would not be alive. We provide the same for the Grandville Arts Academy for their Saturday community art school classes. However, it is not only children who we wish to communicate with. We also believe that learning and the experience of art should be lifelong. We provide aides and teachers for the Work Release Program at the Kent County Jail. The adults there have made some unhealthy decisions. Providing art experiences for them promotes healing and perhaps an alternative way of seeing the world. This year a collaborative mural with inmates and students that was generated last year will be hung in the prison facility. Someday we hope an exhibition can be mounted of inmate artwork that we have helped generate or have assisted in.

But how do we benefit? Perhaps that is the more important question. We often think that to serve is a one sided affair. We help those who cannot help themselves. Well, the community members we work with enrich us. We discover that in the intimacy of teaching and being with someone on a regular basis we begin to care a great deal about them. We start to understand them and we start to advocate for them. We discover how good it feels to spend less time on ourselves and more time with the other. Yes, the added bonus is that we also gain invaluable experience in teaching. This is experience that we need to be effective teachers but are also required to have in order to be certified in our field. We benefit a great deal.

We return to the college with a new kind of joy after our experiences. We cannot ignore that kind of impact. We thank our community for being so willing to work with us and to providing such rich experiences.

S-LC Alumni: The View From Romania

By Janelle Vandergrift, and Daniel Heffner, former S-LC staff

We’ve been in Romania working with the New Horizons Foundation for a little over a year now and when people ask what brought us here we find ourselves explaining our time at the Service-Learning Center at Calvin as a motivator. Our time we spent working at the S-LC rooted us in a community where there was dialogue and action about the ways in which Christians should respond to the needs they see around them. Our belief is that education is meant to assist us in developing the capacity to be engaged, altruistic citizens as well as help us develop these capacities in others.

The work we do now with the New Horizons Foundation is multi-faceted: we work with Romanian youth as well as college students from North America, all under the broad umbrella of experiential education. The New Horizons Foundation uses adventure education and service-learning as a tool for social change in post-communist Romania. New Horizons also hosts a semester study abroad program where students have the opportunity to both study development as well as practice development work.

Our work with New Horizons has deepened our conviction that experiential education, specifically service-learning, is a powerful means by which youth can be empowered to be active citizens and create the change needed within their own community. Being involved in this work has had its challenges as most things do, however, it has allowed us to both personally experience flourishing as well as witness the flourishing of others.

Janelle Vandergrift and Daniel Heffner (Class of 2006)

To learn more about Janelle and Daniel’s work check out their blog at:
http://janelledaniel@blogspot.com
**StreetFest 2008 Partnerships**

The Service-Learning Center would like to thank the following organizations for partnering with us for StreetFest 2008:

- Adopt-a-Block
- African Community Fellowship Church
- Alpha’s Women’s Center
- Baxter Community Center
- Beacon Hill at Eastgate
- Blandford Nature Center and Mixed Greens
- Breton Village Neighborhood Association
- Burton Heights Business Association
- Burton Heights Ministries
- Cherry Street Health Services
- Community Rebuilders
- Creston CRC/Nizhoni House
- Eastown Business Association
- Eastown Community Association
- Fuller Avenue CRC
- Garfield Park Neighborhood Association
- Gilda’s Club
- Grace CRC
- Grand Rapids Children’s Museum
- Grand Rapids Housing Commission
- Grandville Avenue Academy for the Arts
- Grandville Avenue Neighborhood Association
- Grandville Avenue Neighborhood Library
- Greater Grand Rapids Interfaith Hospitality Network
- Guiding Light Mission
- Habitat for Humanity
- Health Intervention Services
- Heritage Hill Neighborhood Association
- Highland Park Neighborhood Association
- The Hispanic Festival
- Holland Home - Raybrook Manor
- Home Repair Services
- Hope Community
- Inner City Christian Federation
- In the Image
- Midtown Neighborhood Association
- Mosaic Life Church
- Neighborhood Ventures
- New Beginnings Church of God in Christ
- New Branches Charter School
- New Community Church
- Oakdale Neighbors
- Our Hope Association
- Our Savior Lutheran School and Church
- Pine Rest Mental Health Services
- Plainfield United Methodist Church
- Planned Parenthood
- Porter Hills Rehabilitation
- Pregnancy Resource Center
- Ransom Tower Apartments
- Redeemer Lutheran Church
- Roosevelt Park Community CRC
- Roosevelt Park Neighborhood Association
- Safe Haven Ministries
- Salvation Army Booth Services
- Second Harvest Gleaners of West Michigan
- Sherman Street CRC
- South End Community Outreach Ministries
- Steepletown Ministries
- Trillium Haven
- United Church Outreach Ministry
- United Methodist Community House
- Wellerwood Early Childhood Center
- Y.M.C.A of Greater Grand Rapids
- Y.W.C.A