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# Discovering Wisdom in a Whole New World

By **Daney Daniel Kepple**



*Doug Lensing '08  
and Dorothy Cox*

Roget's Thesaurus lists 36 synonyms for the word "neighborhood." Not one of them conveys the ironic juxtaposition of the idyllic Rhodes campus and the area with the highest infant mortality rate in the country. The two are located less than five minutes apart.

There was a time when the 38108 ZIP code, close as it is, would have been alien turf to the Rhodes

community. It's hardly a scenic area, and its reputation as a high crime zone leads many to avoid it. Becky Saleska Wolfe '06 recalls, "The first time I went to Hollywood Springdale I was shocked. In some ways it was sadder than anything I had seen in Mexico or India. My reaction was, 'How could this be?'"

Associate professor of political science Mike Kirby recalls similar emotions.

"The Rhodes Hollywood Springdale Partnership began not with a dream but with outrage," he says grimly. "I took a group of urban studies students to see the houses on Hunter Street built by VECACDC (Vollintine Evergreen Community Association Community Development Corporation), to give them a look at low-income housing solutions. What we found was a neighborhood that was once middle-class but which, following the demise of several industrial plants that had employed many of the residents, now faced the classic results of unemployment—poverty, deteriorating homes and homelessness, desperation, drugs and crime. There were clearly people in the neighborhood who were trying desperately to maintain their property and their way of life, but they faced formidable odds. All I could think was, 'This has to change.'"

Kirby had some experience with turning neighborhoods around. He is widely credited with helping to halt the decline of Vollintine Evergreen, the neighborhood that abuts the Rhodes campus on two sides. The results of his handiwork are visible on a drive through midtown Memphis where once-crumbling buildings are now bustling businesses and former drug houses are occupied by upwardly-mobile families.

He took his concerns about Hollywood Springdale to the third floor of



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Halliburton Tower where he gained valuable allies. President Troutt charged Russ Migginton, at that time special assistant to the president for community relations, with pulling together a group of concerned Rhodes community members who quickly became known as the Urban Team. From this group came the drive to apply for a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of University Partnerships. The grants are awarded to help colleges and universities make a difference in their communities. Rhodes, which received \$399,978, was one of only 13 colleges in the country favored with such funding. The Rhodes Hollywood Springdale Partnership officially began Jan. 1, 2004. The grant put an umbrella over, and provided resources for expansion of some Rhodes programs that were already in existence and led to the creation of many others. And it called into play relationships that had been years in the making.

For example, there was Professor Carol Ekstrom's SWEEP program that paired Cypress Middle School science students with Rhodes student mentors to the great benefit of both. Ekstrom's work at Cypress had introduced her to the principal and the science faculty, who gave her entrée to students' parents, other educators, social agencies and various other key players in the neighborhood. The relationship was so strong that Cypress played its homecoming football game at Rhodes. The need to support local schools was clear, and Ekstrom's passion made her the ideal person to administer the education portion of the grant.

Professor Tom McGowan had teamed up with Patricia Hipps, coordinator of the Community Program for the Hollywood Health Loop, to provide on-site learning experiences for his medical sociology students. A pioneer of service learning at Rhodes, McGowan is also an enthusiastic supporter of the student engagement imperative of the Rhodes Vision, "To enhance student opportunities for learning in Memphis."

"As students get involved in a real-world problem it inspires them to work on complex issues that would otherwise be overwhelming," he explains. "It's the intersection of real-world problems and traditional learning and is far more powerful than a lecture or a class discussion."

Hipps, with the backing of the Regional Medical Center, the Health Loop and Shelby County Mayor AC Wharton, had set out to work with the community to improve health care in the North Memphis area. She recruited residents to sit on the Hollywood Healthy Community Council and asked them to identify the area's needs.

"Their list exactly matched ours," McGowan recalls. "They said the neighborhood needed to be healthier, safer and cleaner." McGowan drew the job of heading the health care component of the grant.

Meanwhile, Kirby was working his vast network of government contacts, built through years of complimentary consultation for a variety of offices and bureaus. He lined up support from the Memphis Police Department, the Shelby County sheriff, the city's Division of Housing and Community Development, Code Enforcement, Public Works and General Services departments. Naturally, he took the reins of the housing and community renewal areas.

The commitment of Kirby, Ekstrom and McGowan—and that of many others on campus—was clear. Still, all had day jobs. What was needed was a person who could devote full time to the needs of the neighborhood. And who understood what those needs were.

Enter Dorothy Cox. Although she grew up in North Memphis, Cox left

for 10 years to work in an administrative position with AT&T in Atlanta. Upon retiring, she came home to try to make a difference. With her sister, she founded the nonprofit Community Mentoring Outreach Services Inc., spending her days working one-on-one with her neighbors to instill confidence and hope. Cox first encountered Ekstrom and McGowan at a meeting of the Hollywood Healthy Community Council.

"Here were these Rhodes professors talking about their grant and how they wanted to help," Cox recalls. "I told them, 'Don't come over here giving us hope, then leave. That's happened here plenty of times before.'"

The Rhodes professors answered her challenge with a job offer. Cox became a full-time employee of Rhodes in March 2005. Two months later the center known as Shasta Central opened at 2375 Shasta Ave. Amazing things have happened since. For example:

- Litter has drastically been reduced thanks to multiple organized cleanups by Rhodes students and neighborhood residents and intervention from several city service bureaus. Tire dumping, once common, has ceased.
- The involvement of Rhodes faculty and students in neighborhood schools has increased astronomically, leading to a variety of offshoot projects. Ekstrom's Cypress Springdale Community Partners, comprising parents, teachers, school administrators and representatives from Buckman Laboratories, local churches and the U.S. Attorney's Office, formulates strategy. Programming runs the gamut from tutoring and chess clubs to activities that bring neighborhood children and teens to Rhodes.
- A neighborhood association is strong and active, complete with constitution, officers and street captains. Currently the association is developing three projects—a neighborhood garden, continued cleanups and a regular open market where residents can sell their wares.
- Shasta Central—staffed by Cox, fellow COPC executive board member Gene Person, resident Darrell Wright and legions of students—has become the heart of the neighborhood. Groups operating out of the center provide advocacy and a variety of programming. Children gather weekly for supervised play, and there are regular "Healthy Thursdays," where residents meet for a meal and information on everything from HIV Aids to diabetes to "Coping with the Inner City Blues."
- Code enforcement has been beefed up and absentee landlords are being held accountable for their properties.
- The Memphis Police Department and Shelby County Sheriff's Office have increased their patrols. Recently three drug houses in the area—one on Shasta itself—were closed.

All of this, of course, signals criminals that their activity will not be tolerated.

Memphis has taken note. Three local television stations have done major features on the program. WHBQ called it "a model for revitalization," WREG reported, "People who live in the area say the program makes the neighborhood a better place to live," and WMC called the program "a credit to the community."

Perhaps as important as the improvements in the community is the impact that working for change has had on the lives of Rhodes students. Becky Saleska Wolfe says, "I grew up in a loving, middle-

class family, believing we are all not only able to, but responsible for, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps.' What I failed to understand are the many factors, including education, socioeconomic status and racial prejudice that can and do seriously impact our life outcomes."

Saleska Wolfe attended one of the first organizational meetings of the Cypress Springdale Community Partners as a work/study student for Kirby. She identified her niche when she learned from Springdale principal JeVon Marshall and Cypress principal Raymond Vasser that they had urgent needs for math, science and reading tutors. The following week she visited both principals. A few weeks later she had mobilized 60 Rhodes students as weekly tutors.

The St. Louis native, who's now teaching sixth grade math and science as a member of the 2006 Teach for America Corps in Los Angeles, says the veteran educators were at first skeptical of her ability to deliver. Their doubts quickly faded.

"Becky is an inspiration," says Vasser. "Her effectiveness is all about her smile and her can-do attitude. She's a firm believer that you can't lead from behind."

He is equally enthusiastic about the impact of the Rhodes students' work.

"This is a very critical time in the lives of middle-school students. They are at a crossroad, and too many don't find who they want to be. They get exposed to gangs at a very early age, and there's the danger that they will turn in that direction in a search for love. It's a constant battle to show them a different way of life. That's where the Rhodes students come in."

Marshall agrees: "Our children get excited when they see their tutors coming. It's not just about increasing their knowledge. They truly feel cared about. There are always plenty of hugs to go around."

Saleska Wolfe, who organized a summer reading camp for 30 Springdale students and ran a weekly family literacy program known as Dinner and a Book throughout her senior year, says she received far more than she gave.

"It seems we always learn the most from the people we're supposed to be teaching," she muses. "For example, it would be easy to criticize parents for not being more involved in their children's education. Such an assumption, however, could not be further from the truth. Of course parents care about their children's education and their potential for success. Just because you are a parent, however, doesn't necessarily mean you know how to help your child with math. Plus, a good number of parents are working 15 hours a day just to make ends meet. These parents have no choice but to trust that the school is fulfilling its responsibility: educating children.

"My time at Rhodes was rewarding. I could be quite happy spending the rest of my life as a teacher. From what I've seen, though, the whole system needs to be restructured to meet the needs of all our students. Eventually, I hope to find myself in an administrative or policy position. My goal for now is to become the superintendent of a large, urban district—perhaps St. Louis. Only time will tell."

LaToya Newsom '06 was stunned to learn in her medical sociology class about the infant mortality rate in the 38108 ZIP code area. She stayed after class to discuss the issue with Professor McGowan, who told her, "Go talk to Dorothy Cox. Get her to give you her neighborhood walking tour."

The trip was an epiphany for Newsom

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"Hollywood Springdale is not that different from where I grew up in Detroit," she says. "Both areas have the same problems, just of a different magnitude. This area highlights everything bad that can happen to a city—unemployment, poverty, deterioration, hopelessness, crime. On that walk I saw mothers younger than I am and I kept thinking, 'If they had more information, maybe they would make different decisions.'"

At the end of the walk, during which she discussed her idea with Cox, Newsom decided to start I Am, an organization she describes as an educational and empowerment program for girls aged nine to 14. The group engages in a variety of activities, from sleepovers at Rhodes and field trips downtown to cooking, sewing and homework.

"I try to do for them all the things I'm glad my mother had time to do for me," she says. "Looking back, I see that I got my self-confidence from my mom. That's what I would like to give my girls."

The first thing she learned from her charges was to talk straight.

"I talk to them the same way I talk to my friends," she explains, "and I always tell our guest speakers, 'Don't sugarcoat the information. At age nine they have seen things that might scare you to death. If you want to get through to them, you have to break down the barriers. That's where most programs fail."

"Many of my girls come from homes where there is always some kind of domestic dispute going on, so it seems normal to them. I spend a lot of time talking about healthy relationships, showing them movies about healthy relationships. When we walk down the street and some guy hits on me, not only do I not respond, when we get past I tell them why. 'What's he doing here on the street in broad, open daylight if he has a job? That doesn't work for me,' I tell them."

"I'm a big believer that self-esteem is magic, and that's what I want to give them. I know how my mama did it for me. She would tell me every day, 'Baby, you deserve anything in the world you want. Education is the key. That, and don't let anybody else define who you are.' So that's what I tell them."

Newsom, who is now preparing for the Peace Corps in Africa, then medical school, says her time in Hollywood Springdale and her internships at Memphis hospitals will have a huge impact on the kind of doctor she will become. "I like the human, teaching side of medicine as much as the clinical part," she says. "I like to look for the causes of problems so they can be prevented next time. I like to use both sides of my brain."

Justin Guthrie '06 confesses that he blundered into his involvement in the neighborhood.

"It took me awhile to find my niche at Rhodes," he recalls. "There are so many activities and possible sets of friends, some people have to experiment a bit. But when I found my place, I never looked back!"

His breakthrough happened through a class. "Looking for an easy A, I signed up for a one-hour advanced GIS (Geographic Information Systems) class without taking the prerequisites." Big mistake. "Not only does the software have a steep learning curve, Professor Kirby has expectations that are, shall we say, not simple to fulfill in a regular 12-hour day!"

Kirby, never an easy taskmaster, was in the throes of the grant

application process, so his hunger for data was insatiable. Guthrie was assigned to gather reams of information and convert it to maps. Rather than finding the task onerous, Guthrie says, "I discovered a new talent. I loved it!" Kirby hired him as a work-study assistant, and Guthrie continued to hone his GIS skills.

At about that time, he pledged a fraternity and got involved in the IFC (Intrafraternity Council) effort to clean up the neighborhood. "It was like being involved over there became part of my social life," Guthrie recalls. "It fit in with my academic involvements, too. I chose urban studies as a major because I discovered that I really love planning and executing projects."

His final endeavor was a partnership among the Shelby County Health Department, the Memphis Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), and the Rhodes Hollywood Springdale Partnership. Its objective was to provide financial incentives to landlords with properties in the area to remove lead paint.

Guthrie tackled the problem as he often does, using GIS software which enables him to "translate spreadsheets into maps." Using Housing and Community Development data, he located all properties built before 1978, the year lead paint was outlawed. Once he plotted the 450 identified houses on an area map, the real work began.

Guthrie and four students from McGowan's medical sociology class went door-to-door on Saturday afternoons in February, interviewing residents. Since federal guidelines target rental properties inhabited by pregnant women and/or children under age six, the final number of qualified residents was 12.

"That means it's possible that 12 kids might have a major impediment to their learning and their health removed, which is why I prefer projects to papers," Guthrie says. "This one has the possibility to change someone's life. I used the experience for my senior thesis.

"I'm amazed by how it all fits together at Rhodes," he concludes. "You make your best friends while doing service and those experiences make classroom work exciting. Wouldn't you know that about the time I figured that out it was time to graduate?"

When Doug Lensing '08 arrived at Rhodes, he was already familiar with the Hollywood Springdale area, having volunteered at Hollywood Elementary School as a high school student. He soon met Becky Saleska Wolfe, who introduced him to the Summer Service Fellowship program and the Bonner Scholarships. He applied for, and received, both.

"I thought I had died and gone to heaven," he recalls.

Cox assigned him the not-so-small task of organizing a neighborhood association. He responded by drafting a constitution, dividing the area into districts and recruiting volunteer managers for each street. In the process, he made friends with the residents and began to educate himself about their problems.

"It seems to me that it all stems from unemployment," Lensing says, so he determined to analyze its causes. Though not a business major, he signed up for first one, then two courses in economics. "What I learned about human capital development became my whole focus," he says. "It's what I want to do with the rest of my life."

Never one to sit and dream, Lensing and Cox began brainstorming dozens of ways to improve employment conditions in Hollywood Springdale, and this past summer, Lensing formed a partnership with

a Memphis nonprofit, Bridges USA, Inc., where he began working as a liaison between its job development program and RHSP.

Work Bridge takes unemployed Memphis residents through a two-week training program on everything from confidence building to résumé development. The local nonprofit also has two rigorous job training programs for nursing and office professionals. One of Lensing's primary goals at Bridges is to take all unemployed residents of Hollywood Springdale through the program within two years.

He is also preparing himself to fight the battle on a larger front.

"I've always wanted to be president of the United States," he says. "This makes me want it even more." He ran for and was elected vice president of Rhodes Student Government, and plans to run for president. After that he's aiming for Vanderbilt Law School and a run for the state legislature in his final year. Who would bet against him?

The program continues to thrive, both structurally and programmatically. Recently Dr. Suzanne Bonefas, director of special projects at Rhodes, has assumed the role of COPC project director and chair of the COPC Executive Committee. Associate academic dean Robert Strandburg, psychology professor Anita Davis and two representatives of the neighborhood association have joined the committee, and Davis will also serve as the leader of the neighborhood capacity building portion of the grant.

A new generation of students work in established programs and are starting new ones:

Courtney Jones '07 worked with Newsom to mentor the I Am girls, now leads the activities, and Cordarius McLean '09 has started a male version.

Jessica Lotz '08 is working on code enforcement, neighborhood beautification, public relations and the community garden.

Lauren Tull '09 is coordinating and expanding the tutoring programs to include Rhodes athletes along with students from other local colleges and universities.

Elizabeth Killion '08 and JoAnna Halk '09 synchronize the children's activities at Shasta Central including a vegetable garden and a worm box to process compost.

Austin Horne '07 and Nathan Hulling '07 work with local businesses to create a nonprofit development association and conduct ongoing surveys of physical conditions in the neighborhood.

Lizzie Phillips '07 developed the Great Strides program which partners with Girls Inc. and focuses on running and mentoring for Cypress girls.

Hayley Hill '08 and Rachel Thompson '08 are partnering with Buckman Laboratories to provide art classes for Cypress Middle School, whose art program was eliminated by city budget cuts.

Chemistry major Anum Minhas '09 has successfully organized Science Saturdays for Springdale students and their parents.

Tara Daniel '08 runs the Springdale tutoring program.

Luke Archer '08 and Paul Burmenko '08 will continue the Chess Club at Cypress and try to expand it to Shasta Central.

Neither Rhodes nor the residents work in a vacuum. Ministers of churches in the neighborhood have formed the Renaissance Coalition and are effectively lobbying the City Council. One church is sponsoring

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an ambitious housing development program in an area where 42 percent of the homes are vacant. Area businesses have formed the North Town Business Development Corporation. Two nonprofit youth-serving organizations—Girls Inc. and Big Brothers, Big Sisters—are operating at Cypress Middle and Springdale Elementary Schools. Project partner Buckman Laboratories has built a state-of-the-art laboratory at Cypress.

Project director Suzanne Bonefas says, "I am honored to work with such a committed group of staff, faculty and students on a project that is so vital to the Rhodes vision's emphasis on engaged learning and compassionate leadership. It is also inspiring to meet so many residents who are dedicated to creating and sustaining positive change and to see all the accomplishments that have already resulted from the unified efforts of so many people. I think the project will have succeeded when it is administered entirely by neighborhood residents. My goal is to work the Rhodes contingent out of a job, and I don't think that day is far in the future."

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