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## Building a Plan Together

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A member of the New Washington Heights community voices his concerns and ideas.

It's no secret that the New Washington Heights neighborhood is facing challenges. From the late 1940s through the early 1970s this neighborhood, located just a couple of miles north of downtown Greenville, was a thriving community of predominantly African-American families. Back then the Upstate's textile industry was booming, and mill jobs were aplenty. There was a collective sense of neighborhood pride, and the Washington High School and Happy Hearts Community Center served as lively gathering spaces.

But things change. When Greenville's textile mills began shutting down, so did many of the neighborhoods that depended on them. And com-

## Building a Plan Together

*A 27-acre lot that once housed a high school was the soul of New Washington Heights. Now it is barren. Furman students, faculty, and community members are working to answer the question: What's next?*

BY STEVEN TINGLE

munities like New Washington Heights are still working to regain their footing.

For students of Furman's May Experience class titled Community Partnership:

Envisioning Space and Place, the New Washington Heights community is more than a nearby neighborhood, it's the focus of a class.

The purpose of the class

was to partner with the community and develop a vision for the long-abandoned Washington High School, a 27-acre property now owned by Greenville County. The old high school building was torn down last fall and the site is now raw, flat land. The county's draft concept for the land included a sports park with several athletic fields.

"That would be good for renting out field space to rec leagues," says Earth and Environmental Sciences (EES) Professor Matt Cohen, who co-taught the class with Mike Winiski (Center for Teaching and Learning/EES). "But it's not necessarily the most useful for the community. So we were invited to facilitate a process to hear from the community about what their preferences





**Top:** Meredith Schosky '17 discusses options for the project site with a resident during a visioning workshop.

**Bottom:** Furman students tour the project site with members of the Washington High School Alumni Association to learn the historical context of the land and explore options for commemorating the school.

would be for this open space and then articulate that vision to the county."

Launched in 2009, the May Experience program offers students the opportunity to enroll in an intense three-week course. From sports psychology to the geology of Iceland, the subject matter of the two-credit-hour courses varies. Approximately 600 students participated in a May Experience class this year.

The expanded Furman Advantage, launched this fall, greatly increases the opportunities for students to work on issues of importance to communities in Greenville, SC, and beyond. The university's strategic vision includes a commitment that every Furman student will be able to participate in projects that

apply their classroom knowledge in a real-world setting.

"This is much more than community service," said Angela Halfacre, professor of political science and earth and environmental sciences and special advisor to the president for community engagement. "We are creating a new model of community-centered learning, where students, faculty, and community members can work side-by-side to tackle problems of real social importance and social impact. Everyone will be learning together, and as we discover what works, we can put that into practice in communities across the region and around the world."

Throughout the month of May, students in Cohen and Winiski's class gathered information, talked to community

I have willingly, blissfully, terrifyingly, and exhilaratingly lost control of my life.

I know this statement might be jarring to hear. Perhaps you may want to encourage me to embrace my own self-agency, which, like a muscle, has strengthened with three years of liberal arts education. Perhaps you see my confession as an act of surrender or even a declaration of apathy, complacent and defiant in the face of an increasingly competitive job market. For a moment, I encourage you to put these reactions aside.

Like many Furman freshmen, I first arrived on campus with a carefully crafted "life plan." My plan would revolve around political science, with the aspiration of a career in law or public policy. I structured my first few months at Furman with perfect efficiency, saturating my schedule with as many policy courses as possible. I found comfort in the security and sense of belonging that came with my chosen "path"; however, I could not reconcile this comfort with the fear that my actions were deeply manufactured. I longed for joy and for purpose; I longed to be excited by the unknown; I longed to better understand my community and myself.

Little could I have predicted that I would come alive in the practice room of Furman's music building. What first began as part of a requirement for a small, non-major music scholarship (I was asked to take voice lessons and participate in a campus

choral ensemble) soon became my outlet for self-expression on campus. I found joy in creating and lifting up beauty, and for the first time in my life, it was my own inexplicable exhilaration—and not the prospect of a career—that drove my actions. On a whim, I decided to add music as a second major, and began to chase fulfillment in all of its spontaneity.

If my first year at Furman taught me how to plan less and feel more, my next two years at Furman taught me how to see life through the lens of loving others. As a sophomore, I became involved in the leadership of EROS (Furman's LGBTQ+ organization), and became connected with a local Baptist church. Through these experiences, I became passionate about the potential for faith communities to act as a tool for love and social justice. Now a rising senior, I have begun to explore the possibility of attending seminary and pursuing a career in chaplaincy after graduation.

I share my Furman journey not to criticize those with plans, but to defend the pursuit of happiness and knowledge as good in itself. It is true that I have lost control over the path my life will take. In this loss, however, I have found freedom and purpose.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emma Zyriek '17** is a music and political science major from Bel Air, MD.



## NOW

### Reflection on Furman as It Is Now



**“WHILE WE’RE THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE, WE FOUND THAT A LOT OF FOLKS ARE DEEPLY ROOTED IN THE HISTORY AND TRADITION OF THE COMMUNITY.”**



**Top:** Sarah Barton '12 facilitates a mapping activity with a community member.

**Bottom:** Course instructors Mike Winiski and Matt Cohen prepare lunch during a kickoff event to celebrate the project and introduce the first community engagement exercise of the course.



members and presented their findings in a well-attended public forum.

“This was a very quick class,” said Cohen. “It was a very intensive community engagement exercise.”

Cohen said a sizable number of the 140 homes in the neighborhood sit vacant, and many are rentals, leaving a small group of homeowners who are invested in the long-term future of the neighborhood. Some of these residents are alumni of the shuttered Washington High School and have lived in the community for more than 50 years.

Under normal circumstances, the longtime residents might have been suspicious of academic outsiders. But Winiski helped establish a partnership with neighborhood members two years ago when he and students used Geographic Information System technology to map the streetlights in the area and identify places where new lighting needed to be installed.

“As we worked alongside one another, we ended up developing strong relationships with community members,” said Winiski. “We are learners in this situation and always aware that residents know more about this community than we ever will. But there are ways that Furman can support residents’ efforts to build on existing strengths within the neighborhood.”

With such a short time to collect data, the students had to hit the ground running. “We only had three days to plan for our first engagement,” said Cohen. “And then for the next week we were out doing things in the community every day.” The students went door to door throughout the neighborhood to hand out flyers and drum up interest for the events, the first of which was a barbecue kickoff party that

included a mapping activity to collect ideas.

The other engagement events included a public visioning workshop and a lunch with the alumni of Washington High School. “We engaged with the alumni to reflect on the history of the site,” said Cohen. “While we’re thinking about the future, we found that a lot of folks are deeply rooted in the history and tradition of the community.”

Another engagement opportunity stretched out beyond the neighborhood and over to Brutontown, a small community that borders the south end of New Washington Heights. Two students worked a table at the Brutontown Community Center in the late afternoons to chat with parents coming to pick up their children from the after-school program. In the evenings they spoke with teenagers who gathered at the center to play basketball.

Over the course of six days the students hosted seven events and connected with 112 people.

“For some of the engagements we had very strict research methods in place, and other engagements were more informal,” Cohen says. “So sometimes you are a very formal researcher, and sometimes you’re a human being having a conversation. We’re not just researchers from Furman, we’re people, and we’re talking to people.”

The students spent the final week of class analyzing the data and developing a vision report that was presented to about 40 individuals representing New Washington Heights, Greenville County, and the Washington High School Alumni Association at the Happy Hearts Community Center on May 31. Their PowerPoint presentation illustrated the collective voice of





Tim Sharp '17 listens as a community member shares his ideas.

the New Washington Heights community through graphs, maps, and word clouds. The most popular ideas for the site were playgrounds, a swimming pool, and hiking trails, with safety being a top priority.

When the presentation was over the students, along with professors Cohen and Winiski, answered questions and discussed the next step of the process, which included turning the vision report into an actual site plan. "Before moving forward on this we need to determine the county's expectations for the final deliverable," Cohen says. "I have two sustainability science majors this summer conducting thesis research on the project, and they will help push this through. One is evaluating our process to determine if it was a fair, just, open process that yielded fair outcomes. The other student is comparing the outcome to alternative scenarios to determine if we are planning a sustainable open space."

Once the research is complete the plan will be brought back to the community for additional review and comments. But Cohen is quick to point out that the final approval lies in the hands of the County Council and that the ultimate implementation of the plan is far from certain. "The county

doesn't have the resources to develop 27 acres right now," Cohen says. "Instead, we will propose phased implementations and highlight some low-hanging fruit for which we can attempt to attain funds."

According to Cohen, having only three weeks to complete the course forced a quite effective learn-by-doing approach. "It was a chance to learn how to facilitate these engagements by jumping in and facilitating them," he says. "This is how I was trained to do this type of work, and it's terrifying. You resent your instructor while it's happening, but afterward you really know how to do it."

Tim Sharp, a sustainability science major and class participant, agrees. "Dr. Cohen threw us into the deep end to teach us how to swim," he says. "Putting yourself in an uncomfortable situation is hard, and you feel really vulnerable, but it's the best way to learn." He and his classmates, too, received a crash course in social dynamics where county politics, funding, and community input are in play.

"Being a sustainability science major, it is a constant cycle of being really romantic about a concept that you think is going to change the world and then realizing your idea needs a lot of work," says Sharp. "This project made me more realistic." ●



## NEXT

### Reflection on Furman Going Forward

Each time I enter Furman's beautiful campus, I am reminded of how privileged I am to teach at an institution that inspires intellectual pursuits. Our students and faculty are dedicated, hard-working and they genuinely want to make a difference in the world. Like most liberal arts colleges, the majority of students who enroll at Furman tend to be middle-to-upperclass Anglo students.

In order to remain relevant, we need to attract and admit more students who reflect the changing makeup of our country. The demographics of the US are shifting. While Hispanics are estimated to become the largest minority group in the US, the percentage of Hispanic students at Furman is 3 percent. In South Carolina, the growing segment of Hispanics in the population is a recent part of the state's history. Currently, 7 percent of all K-12 students in South Carolina are Hispanic, and as the fastest growing minority group, their number will continue to rise.

Hispanics are a diverse group with differing political views and varied stories of immigration. While some Hispanics are recent immigrants, some of us have families who have been in the US for several generations. My students are often surprised when I share that I have a Mexican-American ancestor from Texas who served as a sergeant in the Confederate Army during the US Civil War.

Furman's recruitment and enrollment goals should reflect these changing demographics. The value that a diverse student body will add to our academic goals is

immeasurable. Access to a Furman University education should not be limited to a particular segment of our society, especially when we consider that recent census data reveals there are more nonwhite children under the age of 5 than there are Anglo children. We need to be ready to educate all of those children when they are college-aged.

We should continue to seek international students to enroll in our institution; however, we should define diversity by the ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds that historically have been underrepresented at the college level. Many of these students may be first-generation college students—as a liberal arts institution that prides itself on mentoring each individual student, we are perfectly positioned to help these students to succeed at Furman University and beyond. Doing so will enrich all of our academic pursuits, will help to shape and define Furman as a leader in diversity, and will better prepare our students for the increasingly diverse country they will live in when they graduate.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Angélica Lozano-Alonso is an associate professor of modern languages and literatures, who began her career at Furman in 2001 after receiving her Ph.D. from Cornell University. She was born in Boulder, CO, and is thankful to her visionary parents for her bicultural and bilingual upbringing. Her field of study is Latin American and Latino literature.*