

Community Engaged Learning and Anthropology

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This has been an exciting semester as a number of our Anthropology and Cultural Production courses have been pursuing “community-engaged learning” initiatives. Our new Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) program at Brandeis brings together undergraduates, graduate students, faculty and staff working closely with partners in local community organizations. During 2007-08, we are concentrating on developing productive partnerships with low-income and new immigrant groups in Waltham.

Ellen Schattschneider's Anthropology of Gender (Anth 144a) class has in many respects taken the lead in the department on the CEL front. The students began the semester with a commitment to develop a digital ethnographic film on women housing activists in Waltham, in close partnership with the Waltham Alliance to Create Housing (WATCH), a vibrant local community development corporation. The class has held a series of



community work days based at Prospect Hill Terrace, Waltham's largest public housing development. Working with tenants, students and faculty have helped to plant a beautiful flower garden, worked with children to create a gorgeous mural celebrating community diversity and unity, and cleared weed-grown areas. Students from a number of other classes, including my Cultural Production (CP 201) and Elizabeth Ferry's Anthropological Inquiry (Anth 83a) courses, have also been active in the workdays.

The workdays have led in some interesting, unanticipated directions. Tenants have mobilized around a campaign for a community center on the property; forty-seven tenants signed and submitted a petition requesting a center and many of them attended, with members of the Anthropology Department, a meeting on this request with the Housing Authority. I'm delighted to report that the Housing Authority has now acceded to the tenants' request, and that a Prospect Hill community learning center will open in January 2008. We

anticipate that several Anthropology and Cultural Production courses will be actively involved in the community center, helping develop afterschool programs and undertaking community-oriented research during the semesters to come. Our students have written many fascinating reflective pieces on these experiences of action-oriented ethnographic work.

Meanwhile, students in Janet McIntosh's Language in American Life (Anth 61b) class studied conceptions and practices of slang among adolescent youth attending the Waltham Boys and Girls Club. Students in my Making Culture (CP 201) graduate seminar also partnered with the Boys and Girls Club to put on a cultural enrichment after-school program for eight Waltham teenagers; we've helped them develop 'zines, reflect on issues of cultural representation and been in conversation with them about the empowerment of low income youth. Working

closely with Anthropology and Studio Art major Hannah Chalew '09 and a number of graduate students, this group recently completed a beautiful mural called "The Waltham Kids Declaration of Independence," in Thompson Park. In turn, Elizabeth Ferry's students in Anthropological Inquiry have been involved in a range of community-engaged undertakings, including participating in a weekly language exchange walk held on the university's track, in which students and our Central American neighbors exercise together and speak in Spanish.

Many of these projects are linked to the “Waltham Community Archives” project, a dynamic wikispace in which faculty and students in Anthropology and other disciplines, as well as community members, share observations and narratives about the city's cultural diversity. We invite everyone in the broader Brandeis Anthropology community to check out the wiki, at <http://walthamarchives.wikispaces.com/>.