



A Sense of Place:

Place-Based Initiatives
Help Communities and Students

By Rick Skwiot | Photos by Geoff Story

MSW student Nina Ghatan and Jason Carbone, MSW '06, work with the Emerson Park Development Corporation, which offers programs to enhance the quality of life for residents in the Emerson Park Neighborhood of East St. Louis.

ALTHOUGH JACK KIRKLAND attempts to couch it diplomatically, he nonetheless contends that traditional family-focused social work often does more harm than good—at least as far as urban communities are concerned.

“You can help families move up and out, but as they go, one or two other families move in that are more needy and with a lesser ability to provide for themselves,” says Kirkland, associate professor at the Brown School. “Instead of uplifting the community, the community is lowered in its capacity to function and deprived of its strengths.”

To counter that, Kirkland has been advocating and teaching “place-based” social work for some 30 years under the rubric “social and economic development.”

“Social work has to have a broader perspective than working with families in traditional ways. How do you strengthen the whole community so people take pride in the community and utilize its resources to grow emotionally and psychologically and enhance economic well being?” asks Kirkland.

He thinks he has the answer and is putting it to the test in one of America’s poorest and most troubled cities: East St. Louis, Illinois.

A Rent Womb

"The community is a womb," says Kirkland. "As it is strengthened so are the families within it. You can't save families unless you're saving the community."

In the case of East St. Louis, that womb is less than nurturing for many of its people. Situated across the Mississippi River from the Gateway Arch, it claims an estimated 29,000 residents—a fraction of its 82,000 peak some 50 years ago, when it was named an All-American City by the National Civic League. Its median home value now stands below \$69,000, a third the state average. Its people, 98 percent African-American, have an annual household income of \$25,000—less than half that of Illinois. ("We are always in recession,"

claims one city official.) In 2007 it was home to 29 homicides—one per 1,000 residents.

A rust-belt town with a history of racial strife, white flight, gang violence, blight, and corruption, it now serves as a model of American urban decline, which, says Kirkland, has weakened communities nationwide.

"We grew up in heterogeneous communities with reinforcing role models and adults who could use their authority to influence our good behavior," he says. But school integration contributed to whites fleeing to the suburbs, followed by waves of blacks, "leaving behind lesser and lesser strength," says Kirkland, and fewer good role models, as well as social and economic malaise.

Thus the city becomes less a sustaining womb and more a cauldron for failure. However, place-based social work can counter that, Kirkland contends, with interventions that "reach and pick up the community so everyone in the community can benefit" and that deal more with institutions and infrastructure than individuals.

Elevating Place to Lift People

Placed-based social work encompasses and supersedes what used to be called "community organizing," says Barbara Levin, coordinator of the Brown School's Alliance for Building Capacity. She's working with Kirkland to develop graduate-student practicums in municipal governments and agencies in East St. Louis and across the United States.

"They're learning what it takes and what a social worker can accomplish in municipal government," says Levin.

Levin has placed Master of Social Work (MSW) students in various East St. Louis agencies—at city hall, homeless shelters, community development organizations, senior services providers, and housing development institutions. But that's not all. Since last August the students have been working together in a graduate seminar led by Kirkland and Levin, examining how the city's problems interrelate, coordinating efforts, and effecting change.

"We're trying to bring all the agencies to the table—some that have never talked before—to create opportunities for community organizations to collaborate in ways they never have," says Levin. "We're identifying big community issues we can help the community tackle and making this a sustainable, holistic approach to community building. In this case, Jack is making his vision real."

"These practicums give students a perspective that their input is part of a whole that can make the community more viable."

Jack Kirkland, associate professor

Kirkland's vision is focused on broadening the perspective of social workers.

"These practicums give students a perspective that their input is part of a whole that can make the community more viable," says Kirkland. "They see how it benefits unseen populations—future populations and those with whom they have no direct contact. They learn how to be creative and make cities functional and responsive."

Kirkland concedes that such work once lay in the province of politicians—when well-oiled political machines ran cities and, for better or worse, made things happen. But urban decline has left a vacuum that social workers are best suited to fill, he argues.

"Social workers have a better view of the needs and the people," says Kirkland, and, with the proper training, the tools to promote economic and social development. "Social workers can be the bridge between municipal governments and residents, to make the city responsible, and to fix that bridge where it is broken and needs repair."

The Best Social Program: Jobs

East St. Louis Mayor Alvin L. Parks, Jr. agrees. Parks, elected in 2007,



Mayor Alvin L. Parks, Jr. hopes to revitalize East St. Louis with the help of Brown School.

hopes to revitalize his town with the help of Kirkland and Brown School graduate students working to coordinate community development efforts.

"They can provide the academic and professional expertise in community development, and intellectual capital in getting things organized," he says. The School currently has some 12 MSW students doing

research and practicums in East St. Louis—a "win-win for all involved," according to the mayor.

"We don't have the money to hire people with the expertise that Professor Kirkland's people are giving us," says Parks, while the MSW students get a "first-rate education" in dealing with entrenched urban decline.

However, Parks has his own view on how to deal with that decline: "Jobs. It's the best social program I know of."

The continuing lack of commerce and jobs in East St. Louis—despite its seemingly prime industrial location at the intersection of interstate highways, railroad lines, and the Mississippi River—

leads to ongoing social ills.

"We have too many people barely making it or not making it," says Parks. "With not enough good paying jobs, the younger men here have nothing to do. They turn to selling drugs, carjacking, or stealing copper or air conditioners to have some piece of economic power—but at everyone else's expense."

STUDENT DEMAND DRIVING PLACE-BASED INSTRUCTION

STUDENT DEMAND for strategies that address poverty is driving increased emphasis on placed-based social work, says Tonya Edmond, associate dean for academic affairs.

"We're recruiting a sizeable number of MSW students—perhaps 20 percent—with some kind of social-work learning background—Teach for America, the Peace Corps, or other organizations. And 20 percent come from outside the U.S. They're interested in macro-level work, strategies to eliminate poverty," says Edmond, and that can be applied in international community-development and in U.S. urban environments.

"Our place-based work is expanding opportunities for pertinent practicums and internships," she says. "Rather than send a student out to a community organization, we like to send teams of students to the community who are partnering with the community and developing long-term relationships."

Also, clinical social work students seeking to learn more about social and economic development are energizing place-based social work at the School, according to Edmond.

"Those interested in clinical casework see how poverty impacts, say, mental health and mental health care. They're looking at social and economic development," says Edmond, "not to become engaged in community development but to know the role poverty is playing in their work."