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Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

Students Offer Ideas on West Bloomington Revitalization

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Students from an Illinois Wesleyan University class are taking a look at how to make the west side of Bloomington stronger.

Illinois Wesleyan students enrolled in the University's Action Research Center (ARC) class have spent the semester investigating the needs of youth in west side neighborhoods, as well as the resources that are currently provided by not-for-profit organizations. Students will present their findings at 3 p.m., on Friday, Dec. 5 at Beckman Auditorium of The Ames Library (1 Ames East, Bloomington). They will be joined by students from an Illinois State University class, who will present findings on issues facing seniors on the west side.

The event is free and the public is invited. Members of the Bloomington City Council have been invited, along with members of the West Side Revitalization Task Force, which studies ways to rebuild and attract homeowners and businesses to the city's west side neighborhoods.

Students in the ARC class conducted surveys and interviews with youth and several organizations to ascertain challenges and opportunities for young people. "The goal is to help find some creative ways to get youth engaged in improving their community," said ARC Director Deborah Halperin.

Illinois Wesleyan junior Rae Rein said she was thinking of the future when she joined the ARC class. "Everyone says youth is the future, but how can young people get to a promising future if they don't have the resources they need in the present?" Rein asked. "If we want to see kids succeed, then we have to give them the opportunities to succeed."

Halperin said the project has an added "butterfly benefit" of building bridges between organizations. "When the students were conducting interviews with organizations, they found themselves saying, 'That's a great program. Did you know that this other organization has a program that would work well with that?' Students were able to help connect the dots." While conducting interviews, Halperin said Illinois Wesleyan students discovered several young

women with aspirations of working in fashion. “They are looking at matching up a teen girl’s group from one organization with a sewing circle at a west side church. It’s great to be able to combine ideas like that,” said Halperin.

The Illinois Wesleyan and ISU students also will be informally recognized at the Bloomington City Council meeting on Monday, Dec. 8. “These students have been a phenomenal asset to the community,” said Illinois Wesleyan University Librarian Karen Schmidt, who has worked with the students as a Bloomington alderman for Ward 6, which encompasses much of the west side. “They have so much creativity and energy for the project.”

Schmidt said helping with the west side project has “caught on like fire” with Illinois Wesleyan students. After Schmidt spoke to an Illinois Wesleyan design class, several students submitted logo designs for the west side, with senior Marli Jones’ design of a tree with deep roots and new, emerging leaves chosen. “All of the Illinois Wesleyan designs were incredible and well-researched,” said Schmidt. “Marli’s design perfectly encompassed the pride in the history and the vision for the future the west side represents.”

Other Illinois Wesleyan students have been involved with the west side revitalization as well. This summer, senior Aaron Massey helped plan the West Side Community Garden for his ARC internship. And senior Danny Burke is researching how to make the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps) available in plans for a farmer’s market on the west side, enabling residents access to local fresh fruits and vegetables. “The students have really been working,” said Schmidt. “The programs they are helping to develop now will be around for a long time.”

For further information on the Dec. 5 presentation, contact Deborah Halperin at (309) 825-6006.

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