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Lewis '16 Organizes Successful Building Blitz for Bus Stops

June 14, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Julie Lewis is not one to sit around, but thanks to her efforts, people waiting for the bus in Bloomington will soon have a place to do just that.

Bus stops on Bloomington's west side had no seating, so Illinois Wesleyan University recent graduate Lewis spearheaded a community-wide project to build benches for several of those stops. During a one-day Bench Blitz, more than 40 volunteers built 23 benches that will be installed this summer.

The idea began when Lewis, who was enrolled in IWU's "Action Research Seminar" course in fall 2015, attended a Town Hall meeting out of curiosity. The seminar bridges theory and applied research in community action, and introduces the student as scholar-citizen to the multiple ways of examining community issues. At the two-hour Town Hall meeting, Lewis listened to residents' concerns on a wide range of topics, from a new flamingo exhibit at Miller Park Zoo to potholes marring multiple roadways. But one problem resonated with Lewis: a citizen spoke of seeing an elderly woman fall after a lengthy wait for her bus. At the meeting, residents expressed concern about the lack of public seating at bus stops.

"That was not the moment where I said to myself, 'I need to build benches,' but it was one of the things that stuck with me," Lewis recalled. "Of all the problems people talked about, this seemed like one that could be solved."



Hearing about an elderly woman who fell after a lengthy wait for a bus with no place to sit, Julie Lewis took action.



"Recognizing and seeing the power and the structures of communities... learning about something that's more than just yourself – those concepts are probably the most important lessons I learned at Illinois Wesleyan," Lewis said.

stop benches were more feasible, especially since Connect Transit, McLean County's primary provider of mass transportation, supported the idea from the beginning.

Through talking with ARC Director Deborah Halperin on ways to scale the project for multiple benches in several locations, Lewis applied for \$1,5000 in funding through the [Zoellick Fellowship in Social Entrepreneurship](#). Established by Todd Zoellick, an IWU 2000 alumnus, the fellowship helps a student develop an idea that works in an innovative and creative way to generate positive and sustainable societal change.

Lewis's proposal called for bringing community partners together in a one-day "blitz" building event. Groups or individuals could sponsor a bench for \$100 to cover materials but also as a way support the Tool Library.

"The Tool Library was already sponsoring free workshops, where people could come and learn how to build things," said Lewis. Such workshops have ranged from making jewelry stands to constructing raised garden beds. "It does cost the Tool Library to put these on, however, so by initiating the idea of sponsorships in the Bench Blitz, we were interested to see if that business model would provide some revenue for the Tool Library."

Lewis and other organizers were thrilled with the success of the Bench Blitz. A reporter from the local CBS affiliate asked Lewis if she'd be proud of what she'd done when visiting Bloomington in the future after graduation from Illinois Wesleyan.

"It's not about 'look what I did,'" she told the reporter. "It's 'look what we did, look at what the community did,'" Lewis told the station, which spotlighted her efforts in a "CI Heroes" segment.

She said recognizing the power of community is the most important lesson she learned in the project, although it was a concept with which she was already well acquainted. As Halperin explains, action research does not program on to people and organizations. Instead, good action research reaches people in a community where they are, and helps to develop ideas that are meaningful and sustainable.

"On one level, I built a bench and nothing more," Lewis added. "But on another level, it's so much more than that. It's the community coming together to help make change happen. Recognizing and seeing the power and the structures of communities, getting to know other people and learning about something that's more than just yourself – those concepts are probably the most important lessons I learned at Illinois Wesleyan."

A [Hispanic Studies](#) and [sociology](#) double major, Lewis was already heavily involved in Illinois Wesleyan's [Action Research Center](#) (ARC), which connects the campus and community in a myriad of meaningful ways. She directed Mini Masters, a program where IWU students provided free music lessons to area youth, and she'd received a [Weir Fellowship](#) to provide instrument repairs and transportation for Mini Masters students to attend professional musical performances in the community. Off campus she'd interned with the Boys and Girls Club and with Conexiones Latinas de McLean County. For her Action Research Seminar project, her initial idea was to make a little free library of books attached to a bench.

Lewis was also a veteran of numerous Habitat for Humanity builds across the U.S., so she knew her way around hammers and drills. Through "hard-core Googling," she found instructions to make a simple, sturdy bench using 2" x 4" boards. With a few friends, she cut boards at the West Bloomington Revitalization Project's [Tool Library](#). With a drill and clamps borrowed from the Tool Library, Lewis and her friends constructed a bench in two hours. The idea for the little free library never materialized, and Lewis decided the bus



Volunteers from several community organizations helped build 23 benches for bus stops in Bloomington.