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The New York Times

March 19, 2006 Sunday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 14NJ; Column 1; New Jersey Weekly Desk; JERSEY; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 673 words

HEADLINE: Seton Hall Reaches Out To Newark

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DATELINE: SOUTH ORANGE

BODY:

DRIVERS leaving through the main gate at Seton Hall University can turn left onto South Orange Avenue and head west, toward the town that gives the avenue its name -- a place of gas lamps, designer coffee and microbrewed beer.

Or, drivers can turn right, to the east, and in about 45 seconds find themselves in the Vailsburg section of Newark, where homes have bars on windows and a sign near a vacant lot warns drug dealers that security cameras are watching.

Most people turn left. But in recent years, more than 700 Seton Hall students and about 40 faculty and staff members have turned right. Rather than rush past the faded storefronts, they stop for a while. They have tutored Vailsburg's young, taught adults how to use computers, worked with activists on issues like housing and development -- and brought their expertise back to the classroom.

While community outreach programs are a standard feature of higher education these days, Seton Hall is in the forefront of a movement to incorporate civic engagement with theory and pedagogy. The buzz phrase is "service learning."

"It's different from traditional volunteer work," said Dr. Roseanne Mirabella, a political science professor at the university. "With service learning, students do service in the field, but their experience also is included as part of their course work."

In Vailsburg, "in the field" often means a wounded community. At one time, the area seemed like an extension of Seton Hall, an ethnic Catholic neighborhood that sent the children of firefighters, brewery workers and police officers to the university next door.

Vailsburg, separated from the rest of Newark by the Garden State Parkway, was for many Irish,

Italians and Poles what Weequahic was for Newark's Jews -- an old-fashioned urban enclave. All of that changed after the riots in 1967.

Today, the neighborhood of 34,000 people is about 81 percent African-American; 21 percent of the families live below the poverty level, and 25 percent of its residents from the ages of 18 to 24 did not finish high school.

Dr. Mirabella grew up in Vailsburg, attended Seton Hall and now is a force behind the newly named Center for Community Research and Engagement, which runs programs designed to redefine the idea of service and outreach in higher education. Through its community renaissance project, it has developed a partnership with Unified Vailsburg Services Organization, one of the neighborhood's best-known development groups.

That effort received a major boost recently when the Lily Endowment, an Indiana-based philanthropy, gave the university a \$2 million grant to finance service projects. The money led to creation of the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership, which oversees programs that connects students and faculty with the poor and underserved in Vailsburg and other struggling communities in Essex County.

Michael Farley, executive director of Unified Vailsburg, said that because of the university's commitment, results have begun to show.

"We have a group of students implementing an SAT preparation class, and another group designing plans on housing and economic development issues," Mr. Farley said, adding that "in these cases, we're seeing actual results."

One of Dr. Mirabella's students, Ashley Grosso, a senior from Caughdenoy, N.Y., is developing a plan for an AIDS museum in Vailsburg.

Not that all of the learning is going on in Vailsburg. Prof. Mike Taylor, director of the university's new environmental studies program, has 22 students working in South Orange on a project to beautify a branch of the Rahway River.

"They're seeing the permitting process first-hand -- seeing what it takes to make an environmental project happen," Professor Taylor said.

That's the whole idea.

"The students are getting the theory in class, but they're also seeing the practical implications of what they're reading," Dr. Mirabella said. "That is what service learning is all about."

That, and getting people to turn right at the university gate.