

## **THE NEW SCHOOL / WOMEN IN NEED PARTNERSHIP**

Joseph Heathcott, Faculty Director

As part of the larger effort at Eugene Lang College to put civic engagement at the core of liberal arts education, the college is building long-term partnerships with a few key community organizations and institutions. To this end, the College is developing a partnership with Women in Need, Inc. through its Office of Civic Engagement.

### **The Community Partner**

Women in Need (WIN) is highly regarded non-profit organization in New York City. Founded in 1983, WIN provides housing, services, and support to women and their families who are homeless and disadvantaged. WIN operates a range of programs including temporary shelter, supportive housing, tenant advocacy, job training, domestic violence services, substance abuse treatment and childcare. Given the complex nature of the issues faced by their clients, they offer wrap-around services that meet the multiple needs of homeless women and children. According to their mission, their primary goal is to "restore dignity, promote independence and provide stable housing to vulnerable families who face major obstacles that threaten to destroy their lives."

### **Benefits of the Partnership**

The basis of the partnership between Eugene Lang College and Women in Need is to add capacity to both organizations that cannot be added through routine program development. The partnership places the resources of Lang College at the disposal of WIN to build organizational capacity, rather than merely to extend routine client service. Likewise, WIN does not simply provide slots to plug in an ever-changing cohort of interns; rather, WIN provides Lang with a valuable site for the ongoing study of major issues of urban poverty, social justice, housing, welfare, and civil and human rights.

The partnership is greater than the sum of its parts in that it enables both institutions to devise programs together that would be difficult or impossible acting separately. For The New School, the partnership provides students and faculty with access to an established, successful non-profit organization. Through exposure to the day to day workings of WIN, students in programs as diverse as psychology, urban studies, sociology, media, and the arts can greatly expand their understanding of how non-profits function in complex urban environments. They can study up close how one organization engages some of the most pressing political, social, and economic problems of the city.

With faculty and student expertise at their disposal, WIN can shape a range of programs, services, and activities to suit their needs. The partnership will provide WIN with access to the research and training capacity of a university, which can in turn shape the quality of services and the direction of programming. Finally, WIN can also draw on the special qualities and creative ethos of the New School to imagine program opportunities that might not otherwise be feasible given the constraints of funding or the limits of expertise within the organization.

## **Impact on Students**

Students continuously report that well supported civic engagement opportunities are transformative and life changing. The WIN Partnership provides Lang College with just such an opportunity--an environment where they can gain experience, training, and practical application of theory. Through their work at WIN, students develop relationships with diverse communities, strengthen leadership skills, and engage the world around them in meaningful ways. Students pursue their interests with support and guidance from both Lang faculty and WIN supervisors, influencing their paths beyond graduation. Not only will their experience and dedication to community service make students more competitive in the advancement of their careers, the relationships they form with staff and clients at WIN will profoundly affect their views of the world.

## **Partnership Breakdown**

The WIN partnership is structured around two key components: coursework and internships/practicum. In each case, representatives of Lang and WIN work together to determine arrangements that maximize the benefits of both organizations.

### Coursework

In 2007, Prof. Jürgen von Mahs introduced a course on homelessness that linked students to Women in Need. Building on the work of Prof. Von Mahs, the Office of Civic Engagement is working with WIN staff to expand the range of courses connected to the work of the organization. Courses will not only provide a site connection for the individual faculty and students involved, they will also deepen curriculum in fields such as Urban Studies, Psychology, Media, Theater, and the emerging Housing and Shelter Studies rubric. At present, Lang College has developed three courses devoted to the partnership.

### *Engaging Homelessness*

Taught by Prof. von Mahs, this course examines the multifaceted problem of urban homelessness through service learning, offering undergraduates the opportunity for academically supported field experiences at Women in Need. Students work with WIN for approximately 50 hours during the semester. WIN places students in their various divisions to undertake a variety of tasks supervised by division directors. Students work with clients on skills building, assist staff in developing fundraising strategies, conduct phone surveys of present and former clients, and coordinating special events. These day to day experiences provide insight for students into the complex workings of non-profit organizations. Furthermore, these experiences are framed by in-class discussion of the nature, extent, and causes of--as well as societal and policy responses to--homelessness. Students learn to confront common stereotypes about homeless people, to deal with the challenges and constraints homeless service providers face, and to examine ways to address homelessness in creative, innovative, and unconventional ways.

### *Theater in the Public Interest*

Theater is a powerful vehicle for connecting people to ideas, emotions, values, and knowledge. The collaboration between WIN and Lang uses the communicative potential of theater to build client self-esteem, convey important information, provide a dramaturgic outlet for creativity, and mentor youth residents. Building on curriculum developed by the City's Administration for Children's Services, the thematic priority for the Theater program will be public health awareness.

Overseen by Prof. Cecilia Rubino, the theater collaboration will unfold in two phases. In phase one (Fall 2008), Lang College will introduce the Spoken Word/Poetry Workshop. Two advanced students in the Lang theater program have developed a 15-week curriculum for an after school workshop that features spoken word and poetry. WIN youth from 12-18 can participate in a program where they investigate genres of spoken word, and then write and perform their own pieces. The theme for the first Workshop will be body and mind awareness.

In phase two (Spring 2009), Lang College will introduce the Drama Literacy Program. This is an improvisation- and story-based drama program that invites WIN youth to connect the joy and discipline of theater with the literacy skills they are acquiring in school. Lang students work in pairs with a group of WIN youth after school. During the first hour, Lang students work with small groups to improvise on the issue of the day. The second hour is called 'The Homework Café' where Lang students tutor their youth counterparts. The result of the program is a traveling public health theater performance that examines issues such as HIV/AIDS, nutrition, diabetes, and teenage pregnancy.

### *Media Action*

Dr. Ophelia Smith at WIN identified one of the most significant challenges to their work to be the cultural perceptions of homeless women and children. For one agency this is a difficult hurdle to overcome, and in any case must take a back seat to the more immediate needs of the clients. However, through the partnership with Lang College, the two institutions can collaborate on projects that address one major source of cultural misconceptions--mass media.

This is the central charge of a new course on "Media and Civic Engagement" devised by Prof. Tuija Parikka at Lang College. The course explores the social and economic conditions faced by marginalized women and children in the U.S. Students examine media images of poverty, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, HIV/AIDS in relation to gender, race, and class. To counter stereotypes, students work with women in WIN shelters to make them visible as citizens in the media through access and participation. In the first year, students will work with women in the shelters to produce 'counter-narratives' based on their life stories for broadcast on New York and New Jersey public radio. The ultimate goal of the course is to use the media to support women's agency and self-determination. Students must have completed the Introduction to Media Studies as a pre-requisite.

## Internships/Practicum

The major goal for internships is to place students with proven commitment in the various departments of WIN. Preference will be given to placements that engage students in projects of long-term use for the organization or in special program efforts, rather than in routine client service delivery. Students should be supervised by one of the program area directors. Ideally, WIN and The New School will jointly seek small capacity grants to offer paid summer internships for a select group of students.

### *The Lang-WIN Internship*

A separate memorandum of understanding between Lang College's internship office and the WIN volunteer coordinator establishes the basic parameters, requirements, and mutual responsibilities and expectations of internship placements. Generally, students will be expected to devote 35 hours for each academic credit earned; thus, for a 4-credit internship, students would devote 140 hours overall, or 10 hours per week for 14 weeks. Because WIN is a partnership site, Lang College assigns preference in internship placements either to students enrolled in existing courses linked to WIN, or to students that have completed one of the aforementioned courses.

Internships at WIN can take many forms, and Lang students will initially work on a few key projects. First, students will assist their supervisor to build a tracking system to follow through with clients after they have left WIN shelters and services. Second, students will assist their supervisors to gather and develop effective advocacy tools for WIN clients in their relations with landlords, agencies, and schools--possibly to be published as a web site. Third, students will assist their supervisors to improve the computer facilities of WIN sites, and to establish procedures for vocational assessment, resume writing, and computer training.

### *Non-Profit Research Practicum*

This practicum links the research needs of Women in Need to the expertise of graduate students from Milano's urban policy analysis, non-profit management, and doctoral programs. Students from Lang College are also eligible to sign up for the practicum. Prof. Lisa Servon and Prof. Aida Rodriguez supervise the work undertaken by all students in the practicum through the Community Development Research Center. Typically, the practicum requires that students devote at least 150 hours during the semester to their work for WIN; students may take the practicum more than once.

The primary purpose of the research practicum is to mine, clean, and analyze data collected by WIN over time. Students will also interpret data through presentations and reports produced for WIN on a variety of topics. The overarching goal is to develop data-driven models by which complex organizations like WIN can measure the efficacy of their programs and the impact of their work on the communities that they serve. Ultimately, the research practicum could serve WIN in shaping housing and welfare policy at the city and State levels.

### *Undergraduate Clinical Practicum*

To launch the new internship/practicum arrangement, Prof. McWelling Todman offers the Clinical and Research Practicum. This upper level practicum requires a year-long commitment on the part of the student and will be open only to psychology majors who: (a) have completed the necessary pre-requisites; (b) have received an endorsement from their faculty advisor; and (c) have been accepted or intend to apply to the BA/MA track in Psychology. Moreover, priority will be given to students who have an interest in pursuing the Concentration in Mental Health and Substance Abuse. The course will be structured around one- or two-day- a-week placements.

The goal of the course is to provide students with hands-on exposure to the daily clinical and administrative routines of a social service agency catering to a population that is at risk for substance use and psychosocial impairment. Students will be expected to acquire a familiarity with the processes of case management and certain basic clinical modalities such as group-based counseling and clinical interviewing. Under the direction of the course instructors, the graduate mentors, and the WIN site supervisors, student interns will also be expected to assist in various program development and enhancement activities, such as the manualization of group treatment protocols.

### *Graduate Clinical Practicum*

In addition to their on-site WIN supervisors, the undergraduate interns will be mentored by one of several New School for Social Research graduate students assigned to the site through the Concentration and Mental Health and Substance Abuse graduate program. In addition to providing a liaison function and complementing the supervision of the interns by WIN personnel, the graduate student mentors will be available to provide and model services that are beyond the capabilities of the undergraduate interns. These include, but are not limited to psychological and substance abuse assessments, and specialized individual interventions such as motivational interviewing.

The graduate student mentors, in turn, will be closely supervised by a clinical faculty member and will also be available to provide in-service training seminars to the paraprofessional staff on relevant research findings and best practices. All of the interns and graduate mentors will meet with the course instructor as a group on biweekly basis for group supervision.