

Piedmont Housing Association of Residents
1000 Preston Ave., Suite C
Charlottesville, VA 22903

It was a pleasure working with you when I served as the Director of the Leadership program for PHAR, the Public Housing Association of Residents. I have resigned and now am focusing on my new responsibilities on City Council. Combining the UVA students in your courses with the public housing residents enrolled in the leadership program proved to be mutually beneficial.

The Westhaven community is the oldest public housing site in the city of Charlottesville. The urban renewal plan of the 1960's that spawned the development of public housing created systemic barriers in not only housing but employment and education with clear racial ramifications. That historical backdrop of the African American community is the framework of the town vs. gown culture that we currently experience.

The relationships between the students and public housing residents provide an opportunity to breakdown those barriers. Even something as simple as a meeting in a coffee shop was a new experience for the residents. I must admit that I was taken aback when I found out that the residents had never been to Barnes and Noble. The idea of going inside a book store just never crossed their mind. Conversely, meeting in the neighborhood community center was a new experience for the students. Many didn't even realize that there was an entire community hidden behind the Main Street they so often traverse.

The students and the residents discussed issues of race, poverty and what it feels like to be marginalized. The struggle of being a student and trying to survive combined with the struggle for economic opportunities created an empathy one for the other and created a very unique bond. Without this intentional interaction it would not happen.

The highlights included the invitation to view the film "Space Traders". It was the feeling of inclusion in the class that shakes the foundation of the town vs. gown barrier. The film was quite provocative and created interesting discussions afterwards. The other event that received highlight status was the reading of the book, The Community of Self, by Dr. Na'im Akbar and the subsequent dinner and book discussion. Your down to earth approach made everyone feel comfortable. Literacy is such an important issue in the low-income community. Reading the book created a shift in the way residents perceived the value of reading. Further, the book and discussion created a new way of thinking in terms of their own self worth and future goals.

I hope that this opportunity can be continued and sustained.