

Service learning ties community needs to UT students' studies



Jeremiah Harris

Natalie Pinzon says UT's Service Learning Program helped her connect with the community.

By Ronda Robinson

Special Publications correspondent

Natalie Pinzon wanted to gain experience in her field while she was still a student at the University of Tennessee. So she signed up for Sociology 495, a Social Justice and Community Service course that offered the chance to do supervised field work with nonprofit agencies helping underprivileged persons.

It was all part of the University of Tennessee's Service Learning Program, which provides an outlet for UT students to apply abstract classroom theories to real-life experiences. At the same time, the program helps students learn about social responsibility by providing meaningful service to the Knoxville area and addressing genuine community needs.

After graduating in December 2006 with a major in sociology and minor in Spanish, Pinzon landed a job as an immigration domestic violence advocate at the Knoxville Family Justice Center.

She believes UT's Service Learning Program helped her connect with the community in ways she wouldn't have otherwise.

Her Sociology 495 professor, Dr. Sherry Cable, says the course is designed so students can extend their learning beyond the classroom and develop a sense of caring for others. She also hopes students will examine their values and develop a sense of civic responsibility.

"We all learn best and most deeply by rooting our knowledge in the immediacies of our personal experience," says Cable.

Dr. Michael Handelsman, UT Spanish professor, says the program helps UT students realize they are a part of the community. "Our students in service

learning are working in the community as partners, as fellow community members who are committed to addressing issues of social inequality or social injustice, but without the idea of dropping in, volunteering, offering important assistance, and then going back home. Service learning stresses the fact that home is the community, and there is no 'dropping in.'"

The Office of Academic Outreach in UT's College of Arts and Sciences began the Service Learning Program in 2000. The service opportunities vary widely. For example, mathematics majors can tutor elementary school pupils, while Spanish majors may help Hispanic families communicate with staff members at East Tennessee Children's Hospital.

Though the opportunities are diverse, there is a common thread among all the projects: They all address a real community need and relate to the student's academic study.