

Island professor finds mission in connecting with the world

By Eileen M. Daly

When Jamestown Jill Harrison talks about the importance of experiential, hands-on learning, she's not just spouting empty rhetoric. Harrison, an assistant professor of sociology at Rhode Island College, spends her time and energy living that belief.

She recently returned from Ecuador, a country she visits several times a year.

"I really wanted to get back to Latin America," Harrison said, adding that she lived in Bogota, Colombia, while working with the Organization of American States in Washington and earning her master's degree. As part of her work in Ecuador, Harrison said she has been conducting research in a women's prison there, as well as helping to develop cottage industries, such as the production of recyclable shopping bags.

A needs assessment conducted at the women's prison uncovered a dire need for medical care, Harrison said. Now, through a partnership with the Brown University AIDS program and the Rhode Island College nursing program, a conference will be held in Quito, Ecuador in March, 2010, to look at ways to address this need, she said.

"They may be a developing nation, but they are not so different from us, and in fact, we can learn a lot from the way other cultures and peoples handle adversity," she said.

Outside the classroom

Harrison began traveling during her high school and college years to Latin America, Europe, and Africa, she said.

"I found that I learned a lot more that way than I did sitting in a classroom," she said. "I feel that we need to connect to the outside world. It's important to get out and see how we are all connected."

Harrison's numerous sociology degrees include a bachelor's degree from Wells College, a master's degree from George Mason University and a Ph.D. from the University of New Hampshire.

Harrison, who grew up in rural Maine, said she discovered the importance of getting out and connecting with the larger world early on. Now that she is a teacher, she said, she has taken to bringing her students along for the ride.

"I make my students go out and do things: Go out on a ride-along with the police, talk with inmates at the ACI or go into a developing country," Harrison said. "It's the cornerstone of how I see my sociology degrees working for me."

Harrison said she believes exposure to new people, environments and ideas will serve to increase understanding and decrease ignorance.

"It's an adventure getting out there. I am a life-long learner and I want my students to be life-long learners. This kind of learning and exposure leads to a well-developed student body that is able to

embrace diversity and difference," she said.

Harrison is teaching a two-week course in Quito, Ecuador, where students will have the opportunity to engage in study and volunteer work – or "service learning." Students will also have the opportunity to take classes at two local universities there, she said.

"Students can take the two-week course in a mixed class with our students and theirs at FLACSO University or they can participate in longer-term study (a semester or a year) at the Catholic University in Quito," Harrison said. Even students who do not speak Spanish or do not speak Spanish well can participate, she said.

"We match our students up with their students who want to learn to speak English better," she said. "We will also be offering an intense Spanish-speaking course on medical terminology that will be beneficial to nursing and medical students. There will be a lot of different opportunities for student participation and student exchange. For example, students studying in Quito may attend a morning class and then work in the afternoon with women on parole or with a non-profit organization that supports the children of incarcerated parents. Medical students may have the opportunity to work in clinical settings in public health clinics, including the women's prison," she said.

Harrison said that many of

these programs are in their initial stages, although she said she is hopeful they will continue to grow and offer opportunities for connection and learning for students from both countries.

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'Energizing' work

Harrison is delighted to be living in Jamestown and describes both where she lives and the place she works as "a gem."

"Rhode Island College has been very supportive of the programs I am trying to develop. The vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Ron Pitt, and the new president, Dr. Nancy Carriuolo, have been extremely supportive. Rhode Island College is a small school, so I can go to them and say, 'What do you think about doing this or that,' or I can send an e-mail and hear back from them the same day," she said.

In terms of financing such programs, Harrison said she is not unaware of the potential for criticism. Those that feel developing new programs during such a fiscally constricted market is irresponsible may be reassured to know that as of yet, no costs have been incurred to start these programs. In fact, it is much cheaper for students once

there: \$15 a day will provide students with a private room, three meals a day and laundry service; therefore, the programs are either cost-neutral or may even generate some income for the college, Harrison said.

She also said that much of the start-up costs are provided through small grants and scholarships. Students can use the college's study abroad office and apply for scholarships through the Shinn Fund. Harrison has also written some small grants herself, which have supported her travel and start-up costs.

"Students from other schools can also come through Rhode Island College to easily benefit from these programs," she said.

Though Harrison said she believes in "going out and connecting," with people from all over the world, that doesn't mean she neglects those in need right in her own back yard. For the past three years, Harrison said she has coordinated a meditation group for inmates at the Adult Correctional Institutions.

"It is a weekly program where we bring in community volunteers. About 30 or so inmates participate and receive time off for their participation," she said. As part of that program, Harrison said, she writes letters to the parole board and participates in other efforts directed at rehabilitation.

"This work energizes me in a unique way," she said.

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