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Finding that people stumble if bad public policy blocks way

By Colette Carmouche

"We real cool.

We left school.

We lurk late.

We shoot straight.

We sing sin.

We thin gin.

We jazz june.

We die soon."

I don't know what it is to grow up in poverty. I don't know what it means to sell drugs to get by, to drop out of school or to hold a gun. However, for some reason this Gwendolyn Brooks poem I saw on a wall at Village Gate Square resonated with me.

"We die soon."

It hits me because it captures some truth in the community we live in. It personalizes the story on the news, and yet leaves the question of why unanswered. Why are young men of color the victims and perpetrators of violence? Why does the problem persist when so many people are working on it?

This summer I was involved in the Urban Fellows program, an internship sponsored by Leadership Rochester and the University of Rochester, geared toward the study of urban issues. Each fellow was matched with an internship of his/her interest while attending weekly sessions on topics like education, health care and activism. It was during this experience when I began to question how to create change.

My two tasks at Housing Opportunities were to work on a grant proposal for new housing development in lower Marketview Heights and to find ways to encourage homeownership in the area.

On my first day as I toured Marketview Heights with Spring Worth, a community project manager through Housing Opportunities, we talked about the neighborhood issues: vacant houses, crime, drugs, teen pregnancy.

My eyes widened as we whizzed by one boarded-up house after the next. I began collecting materials on the vacant lots in the neighborhood, while taking weekly tours to verify my information.

I worked closely with senior housing developer Julie Everitt and slowly began to pick up on the intricacies and politics of the housing field. Julie taught me another way of viewing the problems facing our city; she reminded

me of the positives and strengths we could build upon.

During our weekly sessions, I also met many community stakeholders. I heard a call for individual responsibility from some in the community development world. On the other side, I heard a call to provide options and care for our poor. And, by going door to door, I also heard from people who live in the community.

I've come to believe that despite our class divisions, we all experience human emotions and hardships. What separates us is access to resources and the ability to choose.

In generations past and present, my family has been poor. My parents, like many other people of color, became part of the middle class through education. My siblings and I have been able to gain resources and social capital through education. I've had choices and resources that remain alien to many people.

I wonder if the powerless people are angry enough. I wonder if the desperation is great enough. I wonder what it will take for bureaucratic barriers to fall and bad policy to change. I wonder when these people will be heard.

During the summer of 2005, I climbed the slopes of Machu Picchu in Peru and saw some of the many faces of poverty. The memories of dirt floors, thatched roofs and hungry children will never be erased from my mind. I learned about my heart and how to connect with people of a different culture and language.

This summer, I learned to use my head. To take the openness I found in my heart and combine this with practical skills to consummate change. Julie said that low-income neighborhoods can be safe and viable communities — we just have to get there.

Quotes from Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. are inspirational and push me through some days, but I find that action and change require more than open hearts.

Change takes organization, people power, skills, and most of all, patience.

Carmouche, a junior at the University of Rochester, was one of 17 Rochester Urban Fellows working in the city this summer.