

**The Micah House Program of Saint Louis University:
Integrating Faith, Community, Academics, and Service to the Poor**

Overview of the Micah House Program

by Donald Stump, Director

The aim of the Micah House program is to encourage students to form long-term, faith-based commitments to the urban poor and to back those commitments with serious study of urban problems. To the extent that we have been innovators in teaching, it has not been so much in the *content* of our courses—though we do a good deal of thinking about syllabi and assignments—but in the *context* in which those courses are taught.

We begin each year with twenty-five to thirty-five freshmen. They are recruited into the program from across the nation during their senior year of high school and pursue a wide variety of majors, from engineering and pre-medical studies to communication and social work. Since experience has taught us that having our own building isn't as important as being woven into campus life, our students live together on two floors of a mid-sized residence hall. The close friendships that form within the residential community provide the basis for everything else that we do.

To connect our students with the lives of the urban poor, we engage them in community service from their first week on campus as freshmen until, in many cases, their last week as seniors. In order to encourage them to work together and to base their service in personal relationships and long-term commitments, we concentrate most of our

efforts around a single mixed-race neighborhood just south of the university's Health Sciences Campus. There, in the Historic Shaw Neighborhood, our freshmen perform at least sixty hours of service in one of more than a dozen organizations that we support. The sites are selected for their innovative approaches to urban problems and their potential to bring about long-term change, and many of our older students remain loyal to them throughout their college careers. After the freshman year, however, students are free to explore other sites around St. Louis. We work, for example, with a need-based early childhood development center, a struggling public grade school, several after-school tutoring and mentoring projects, tool-skills and computer competency programs, a faith-based housing revitalization and neighborhood resettlement project, and a need-based respite-care facility for the disabled.

To integrate what the students are experiencing at such sites into a larger vision of the American city and its problems, we require that our freshmen take four courses together in their first year on campus. They begin with special, integrated and coordinated sections of introductory classes in Theology and Philosophy, which are specially designed to offer paradigms for thinking about issues of social order and justice. These two courses are taught in the same classroom, back to back, so that their instructors have opportunities for team teaching and creative use of large blocks of time, without all the complications involving faculty course loads and the wholesale integration of syllabi that so often hinder attempts at collaborative teaching. You'll be hearing more about these two courses in a moment.

Once the students have turned inward for a semester, reflecting on the nature of a just society, we then challenge them to think about the implications of what they have

learned for the world around them. From an interior odyssey to discover what it is to live justly before God, they turn to the hard work of living out what they have discovered in areas of poverty and racial tension in downtown St. Louis. In the second term of their freshman year, students take two more Micah House courses. These are *Advanced Writing about Urban and Social Problems* and an American Studies class entitled *The Urban Crisis*, in which the students conduct research, reflect, and write about forces at work on the urban poor. After the freshman year, students may then go on to take the equivalent of an eighteen-hour minor with us in Urban Social Analysis. Many, however, simply continue living together, either on the Micah House floor or in small groups scattered around campus, carrying on their community service at sites that excite their interest or tie in with plans for their future careers.

Along with the integration of residence life and academics, we also attempt to model for students the sort of self-sustaining support community without which most of them will probably burn out or drift away from involvement with people in need. Since Micah House is a faith-based program, we challenge students to build on their deepest religious convictions, finding ways to sustain one another, not only in the stresses and frustrations that they encounter in their service, but also in their academic, social, and personal lives. For their first year, the students gather once a week with a campus chaplain for an hour-and-a-half Community Night Meeting, in which they pray together, study scripture, talk about their experiences in the Shaw Neighborhood, and participate in various social activities designed to draw them together as a community. In the spring of their freshman year, we challenge them to begin taking over ownership and leadership of the group, and in the years that follow, they take over their own Community Nights.

I tell you all this about the way we go about integrating faith and community, study and shared living, because it is out of the synergies of these four elements that our courses gain their particular power. There are days when I feel quite sure that we are crazy to try to combine all the programmatic elements that we do. Yet everyone who has experienced our freshman program first hand recognizes its power to galvanize students and incite them to learn.

For one thing, the close integration of the four courses in our Freshman-Year Project allows us to fashion assignments that bring together theoretical problems of social justice with practical realities of urban living, seen directly through our service in the Shaw Neighborhood. For another, the extremely close friendships that students form by living and serving together make joint research projects feasible, collaborative learning a daily routine, and dinner discussions of social issues the norm. I confess that I wasn't sure when we began that students would actually work and talk together on important subjects in the residence hall, but I assure you that it happens. When I asked about late-night bull sessions, one exhausted freshman told me "Prof. Stump, you don't understand. We never get any sleep!"

To talk in more detail about what we do in our courses and how they integrate with the other things that Micah House does, I have asked three faculty members who teach in Micah House--Gregory Beabout, Brian Robinette, and Jody Sowell--to talk in more detail about the courses that they teach. At the end, we'll hear from the two students, Gina Meyer and Aaron Meyer, about their experiences in the program. Think of the four faculty panelists as propounders of the grand idea behind the program, and the two students as witnesses to the successes and failures of that idea.

The Philosophy Component

by Gregory Beabout

In order to understand the philosophy component in the freshmen year of the Micah House program, a little background will help. First, all undergraduates at Saint Louis University are required to take at least six hours in philosophy, and most are required to take nine hours, depending on one's college. Virtually every undergraduate is required to take PL105, a course called, "Historical Introduction to Philosophy." Accordingly, our introduction to philosophy course places a strong emphasis on the history of philosophy, especially Ancient Greek philosophy. The philosophy department's description of the course states, "This course will focus primarily on the writings of Plato and Aristotle as central figures in that historical period when Western humanity began to use and to develop reason to understand the world and its place in that world. Students will be introduced to the Greek contributions to logic, metaphysics, and ethics."

When we first began planning the Micah House program almost ten years ago, we shared a common commitment to work towards an integrated program, to develop a community of students where various disciplines were integrated with each other, and where academics were integrated with the life of faith, community, and service. During those planning stages in the summer of 1996, we received a grant to support curriculum development. Fr. Wayne Hellmann of the Department of Theological Studies and I did a lot of research, thinking and talking together about how our courses might be integrated. During that period, "interdisciplinary" efforts were very much the fashion among certain academics, both on our campus and nationally, so there was a lot of literature to consider. Instead of just mixing our classes together, Fr. Hellmann and I were both committed to emphasizing our own disciplines, and we each had requirements from our academic departments that we had to meet. We wanted an interdisciplinary approach that didn't abandon the discipline of our disciplines. Since each of us had taught our respective introductory courses countless times, we each had a pretty clear sense of the academic requirements of our

courses. Our challenge was this: how do we maintain the disciplinarity of our courses while integrating the courses with each other and with the other aspects of the program?

We agreed that we could do this while focusing on the theme of justice. Fr. Hellmann's course focused on the scriptures, both the Old and New Testament, and especially on the themes of creation, call, and covenant. My course focused on Plato and Aristotle, especially on the life of virtue and the virtue of justice. The exact same students enrolled in both courses, and our classes met at consecutive times in the same classroom. For the first several weeks of the course, the two classes appeared to the students to be two entirely distinct courses. Around midterms, our classes combined for a week and we did common readings. Then, after a month of separating again, we joined again during the final weeks to read *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Role of the Church in the Modern World from the Second Vatican Council. Since *Gaudium et spes* flows out of the integration of the Greek tradition with the scriptural tradition, and since its main goal is to think through the meaning of justice in the contemporary world at the level of various social structures (the family, culture, economics, politics, and international relations), that text proved very helpful as a way to integrate the questions that Plato and Aristotle raise with the themes that the students had studied in their introductory course in theology, bringing those ancient ideas into conversation with contemporary experience. During the years that Fr. Hellmann and I had our courses cross-listed, I found the academic integration to be incredibly dynamic and fruitful. I think it is accurate to say that many of those students were deeply shaped by the vocabulary developed, especially during those meetings at the end of the semester where the two courses came together to reflect together on human dignity, human community, and how we might order our lives so that we can live well together in a way that promotes the dignity of the human person as created in the image of God.

Last year, I worked for the first time with one of our new theology professors, Dr. Robinette. Following a revised version of the model developed with Fr. Hellmann, our courses were linked together. Early in the semester, my students read Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, and I

encourage them to ask whether Socrates (in his role as a gadfly) is loyal to the city of Athens or is he (as his accusers allege) a disruptive threat to the common good? Can we have a community of justice where the young are encouraged to call into question the accepted norms of the *polis*?

Then, we join courses – Dr. Robinette attending my class and me attending his for a 2 1/2 hour marathon class – and we read together Martin Luther King, Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Dr. Robinette draws out the similarity between King and the Hebrew prophets while I draw out the similarity between King's imprisonment and that of Socrates. The students then write a paper on the question, "Is it possible to be both loyal to one's community and, at the same time, a critic of the community?"

The middle part of the semester in philosophy is spent reading sections from Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Both of those texts raise questions about the formation of a good community and the formation of a good life. How do we form a group of people where we can live well together? And what dispositions, what qualities of character, are needed in the members of a community in order that we can become people of justice?

I'd like to mention briefly three activities that help extend this discussion of Greek philosophy beyond the classroom. First, during one of the "community nights," the students put together skits on Aristotle's virtues. Divided into groups of threes, the students create and perform a series of five-minute skits. For example, imagine the scene: one character personifies the virtue of generosity while the others exemplify the accompanying vices of stinginess and wastefulness. These skits, which are almost always lighthearted and frequently hilarious, are followed by a reading from the section of Aristotle's *Ethics* where the philosopher explains that practicing the virtue of justice involves practicing all of the virtues in relation to others.

Second, the students write a paper in which they explain one of the virtues (from Aristotle) and then reflect on their service in light of that virtue. I've read many outstanding student papers describing the journey of a student's service experience in the neighborhood near our campus. In some cases, students describe their passage from rash overconfidence in one's

ability to save the world to frustrated fear the it's impossible to make a difference, to recognition that the people in the neighborhood, whether workers at the service site or those being served, are, in various ways, exemplars of a particular moral excellence.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly the fall retreat instituted last year by Dr. Robinette. I'll let him say more about it, but I think it was of crucial significance in helping the students see the connectedness between reflecting on the life of virtue and living in a community dedicated to the excellence of justice.

Teaching Theological Foundations

by Brian D. Robinette

As Dr. Beabout has already indicated, each Saint Louis University student is required to take introductory courses in philosophy and theology, and depending upon the college, students are required to take up to three courses in each discipline as part of the core curriculum. As a compliment to the introductory philosophy course, the introductory theology course, entitled "Theological Foundations," focuses on primary texts from the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Early Church, and the Second Vatican Council. The Department of Theological Studies has developed guidelines for specific texts and themes to be covered in the Foundations course, yet there remains considerable flexibility for each professor to shape the course in distinctive ways. In the section I teach for the Micah House, the course reflects a specific emphasis on the interrelationship of justice, community and contemplative spirituality.

Contemporary theologians commonly describe the Judeo-Christian tradition as incorporating two distinctive, yet related tendencies. On the one hand, there is the prophetic tradition. The roots of this tradition extend from the event of Exodus, where the ancient

Hebrew people were delivered from slavery and the imperial domination of Egypt, led by Moses into the desert in a trying journey of faith to at last encounter their liberator God, who established with them a Covenant, one that calls for proper worship of the One God and a community of justice. It is to this founding event of Exodus and Covenant that the great prophets of Israel constantly refer. Amos, Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah are all gripped by the overwhelming awesomeness of a God who expects his covenant people to live a communal life of prophetic resistance to the surrounding dominant culture: to be, in the words of Isaiah, a “light unto the nations.” And it is directly out of this long-standing prophetic tradition that Jesus of Nazareth and his radical message of the Kingdom of God will emerge.

The second major tendency is more mystical (or contemplative) in bent. Whereas the prophetic tendency focuses on the justice of God, the mystical tendency celebrates the mystery and beauty of God in the modes of hymn, poetry and meditative thought. Reflected in the wisdom books of the Old Testament—Proverbs, the Song of Songs, many of the Psalms, and Job—this stream naturally shares important characteristics with a more philosophical mode of thought. This is quite evident in the New Testament, for example, as Jesus Christ is described as the Wisdom of God, the eternal Word made flesh, or the “image of the invisible God.” As the primitive Christian movement spread throughout the Mediterranean world, it would increasingly embrace Greek philosophy in creative (if sometimes critical) ways to articulate its faith.

The Theological Foundations course is designed to historically chart and theologically engage these two major tendencies. After laying out principles of theological method early in the course, we examine the Old Testament creation stories, the narratives of Exodus and Covenant, and the prophetic works of Jeremiah and Isaiah. An important secondary text we read is Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination*. This classic work shows how the language of prophetic criticism and contemplative wisdom work

together in the Old Testament to produce a counter-cultural community of justice and spiritual vitality. Immediately following our study of the prophets we combine the philosophy and theology sections to read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail." As mentioned by Dr. Beabout, because this text readily invites comparison with Socrates and the prophets, it is well suited to allow our two courses to begin establishing thematic integration.

After the combined session, the theology course turns to the task of studying the New Testament. We focus on the gospel portraits of Jesus and examine how his life, death and resurrection provide a narrative framework for the Christian understanding of God and human salvation. We also study the emergence of those primitive Christian movements that preserve the memory of this crucified-and-risen One and form communities of worship, hospitality and justice for the Other. We bookend our study of the New Testament by examining how the Church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries provide Christians a theoretical framework for understanding Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine—the unity of humanity's movement towards God and God's movement of self-giveness to human beings. Because these Church councils adopt Greek philosophical language to express the Church's faith, we have another opportunity to examine the interaction of Hebrew and Greek thought in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In what amounts to one of the more distinctive features of the course, I next have the students read the Rule of Saint Benedict along with a short, contemporary commentary by Joan Chittister. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this text, the Rule of Saint Benedict was written by Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century to lay out principles for living in monastic community. It is easily among the most important and influential pieces of Christian literature, not least because it provided a foundation for monasticism for centuries. Undoubtedly its influence is a result of its enduring and practical wisdom. As many

commentators have noted, the Rule possesses an astonishing insight into the prospects and challenges of living in community. As it lays out guidelines for resolving interpersonal conflicts, for distributing tasks of manual labor among the monks, for cultivating a communal life of prayerfulness and attentiveness, and for welcoming outsiders with Christ-like hospitality, the Rule reads like a “how-to” guide for a dynamic spirituality of community—for any age. As we study Benedict’s Rule, the Micah House students and faculty take a weekend pilgrimage to Saint Meinrad’s Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in southern Indiana, where we immerse ourselves in a living monastic community. During the two-day retreat, we participate in the liturgy of the hours—including the 5 am morning prayer!—we eat and recreate together, and we listen to talks from monks, faculty and students. We watch the film *Babette’s Feast* together and have break out sessions to discuss the movie’s themes. Above all, the students and faculty have the opportunity to enter deeply into a climate of prayer.

During the retreat, the students are given the assignment for their final projects: an assignment designed to integrate our classroom learning, the retreat experience, and the ideals of the Micah House program itself. (After all, the Micah House is an intentional community of faith and justice, with a great deal in common with the sort of community envisioned by Benedict’s Rule.) In groups of four to five, the students are to develop a “rule for the new millennium,” to produce a blueprint for a community that includes the following aspects: a well-defined mission of social justice; a plan for living arrangements, including facilities; a process for decision-making; a plan for economic sustainability; and a set of practices for communal and personal spiritual formation. The students produce a written document of about twenty-five pages; and in a one-night celebration of their creativity, the students give group presentations on their projects to the other students in the Micah House.

In conclusion, allow me to make just one final comment. As Dr. Beabout has already mentioned, the final two weeks of our courses are combined sessions in which we carefully

read *Gaudium et Spes*. This document is an excellent example of the integration of philosophical ethics and the Judeo-Christian tradition in a way that allows both to creatively bear upon contemporary problems. These sessions provide a rich opportunity for dynamic interaction across disciplines, which is an important dimension of the Micah House experience.

The American Urban Crisis

By Jody Sowell

On first glance, the second semester of the Micah program seems to be a very different academic experience. The American Urban Crisis class is a 300-level course, and it is the first time most of these students have taken a class at that level. The course focuses on the fate of U.S. cities post-World War II, a much more recent historical period than they study the first semester. It is also a course that provides many new challenges and provides an opportunity for students to achieve a new contextual understanding for their service work.

The American Urban Crisis examines suburbanization, public housing, racial conflict, the Great Migrations, transportation policy and explores the questions of why and how cities became defined as areas in crisis and how and why some of those same cities are now seen as “coming back.” I pay particular attention to how the image of the city has been constructed and how that construction changes over time.

The urban crisis can be taught through a number of frames—political, economic, through public policy or criminal justice. Because it is part of the Micah curriculum, we put a special focus on social justice and moral issues—while still addressing politics,

economics, public policy and criminal justice—and make room for moral inquiry and reflection.

I often impress on the students that the best part of the class is its laboratory, which is the city of St. Louis. It is the lab where we test some of the historical hypotheses that have been passed down and the lab where we discover new trends or counterarguments to history's prevailing wisdom. Our classroom last semester literally sat on the site of one of the biggest urban renewal projects in the country. Mill Creek Valley was home to 20,000 people, 95% of them African American and included more than 800 businesses and organizations. In the late 1950s, the families, businesses, churches and organizations were forced to leave by the government, and bulldozers were moved in to erase the area from the city's landscape. The area went through several transformations and now part of it is used for the Saint Louis University campus. St. Louis was also home to one of the most infamous housing developments in the country. Pruitt-Igoe was a thirty-five-building, fifty-seven-acre public housing cite that was home to 100,000 low-income residents. The public housing failure made national headlines when it was demolished less than twenty years after it was opened. St. Louis also has one of the highest rates of segregation in the U.S. and saw a flight to the suburbs unparalleled by most major urban centers. St. Louis now finds itself wrapped in the rhetoric of being reborn, of "coming back."

This is a history that students are not usually familiar with and is one they can connect with because they see it in their daily lives on campus and at their service sites. They begin to see how the urban landscape has changed and how history can be buried or preserved the same way buildings can. They see how some of the individual problems

and issues that they see at their service sites—from poverty to education inequality—have been created through systematic choices. To me, this is one of the most important benefits of the class—to show the students that social justice does not need to be pursued at just the individual level but also at the bigger political and policy level (an area where students often feel less comfortable). To facilitate this exploration of the world around them and examination of larger issues, we had daily show and tell sessions. And not unlike the sessions that you remember as kids, students were asked to bring in items or share stories that interested them. Students and I would regularly bring in newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, government reports that we had seen that related to the lessons we were learning. We saw how automobile advertisements always placed families in clearly suburban locations; we read about recent eminent domain debates that were happening just blocks from the former Mill Creek Valley site; we discussed how the city was being represented in the national media during last year's Final Four. Students also came back with stories of things they had noticed at their work sites, during their spring breaks, or while doing their research. I remember a few students talking about a conversation they had had with a downtown librarian about new rules the library had put in place to try to discourage the homeless from spending their days there. It turned out that middle and upper class residents who had recently moved downtown had started to complain about the homeless at the library and had pressured the library to do something about it. I dare say those students wouldn't have had that conversation or certainly would not have seen the many ironies in the situation before they took the class.

The show and tell sessions—and the class as a whole—is meant to prime students to be keen observers of the world around them, to recognize major contemporary urban

issues, and to connect what they learn in the classroom to a practical interpretive strategy. And that is what makes the class so similar to the other classes and the Micah experience as a whole. It is meant to move students to a new place—a place where they read material more critically, see the city differently, and engage the world more reflectively. “I will never look at cities and suburbs the same way again,” one student wrote in the evaluations. To me that is what the Micah experience is all about.

The Freshman Writing Course

by Donald Stump

Let me turn now to the last course in our freshman curriculum, entitled Advanced Writing about Urban and Social Problems. In many years of teaching composition, I have become more and more convinced that the context in which student writing takes place is more important than many of us realize. Consider the situation in which most college students study rhetoric. They are generally placed in classrooms with fifteen to twenty-five strangers and are asked to expose their half-formed personal positions and their fledgling efforts at sophisticated writing to the scrutiny of others, often in small working groups composed solely of students--who, as it turns out, are neither the best nor the most sensitive evaluators of one another's work. In most composition classes, moreover, students do not write on subjects that they are currently studying with genuine fascination. Instead, they ‘work up’ their papers, drawing either on past experience or on relatively quick and superficial research. Only rarely are they having experiences outside the classroom on which to draw as they take on important issues. Finally, most college

writing assignments follow a dreary pattern familiar to students since grade school: work hard at an essay, then at the end of the term, throw it in the trash. It is not surprising that so few students become genuinely excited about freshman composition classes or throw themselves wholeheartedly into mastering the skills that they need.

In solving some of these problems, a holistic curriculum such as that of the Micah House Program has a number of advantages. Since students are already attracted to the subject of urban poverty when they sign up, interest in their class work is higher than it would otherwise be. Since they pursue that interest in four integrated courses taken over an entire academic year, their initial thoughts have time to develop and mature. The other students who are listening to them each day in class are also friends, not strangers, having brushed teeth with them earlier in the morning. There is, in short, a level of shared commitment and trust virtually impossible to achieve in a class of strangers. Friendship also allows the particular skills of one student to be harnessed in helping another's writing, and collaborative research projects work better among trusted friends who don't have to get out their planners to schedule times and places to meet, since they study together every evening in the residence hall.

The one problem that even a holistic learning community cannot address without special effort, however, is the debilitating effect of writing papers that students know from the outset are destined for the trashcan. With a small grant from the Lilly Foundation, conveyed through the Voices Project of Saint Louis University, Micah House has recently developed an on-line publishing project to allow students to write papers that have value beyond the classroom. The project is called *Students and the City: Essays from Saint Louis University's Micah House Program*, and it can be viewed at

<http://micah.slu.edu/>. Though we cannot publish every student essay on line, the project has altered the tone and effectiveness of the class in tangible ways.

For one thing, nobody wants their own writing to “go public” with bad punctuation, flimsy research, or an incoherent argument, and I suspect that students attend more closely to such problems when they may be writing for a real audience. For another, everyone likes helping to reach audiences that need their expertise, and in our case, we have three such audiences. The first is the incoming class of Micah House freshmen who arrive each year. Since we teach them a great deal about the Shaw Neighborhood and its problems, having essays about it available on line for homework reading and class discussion is really quite useful. Our older students, in effect, provide a textbook of model essays for our novices. Another audience for the project is the roughly 7000 residents of the Shaw Neighborhood. The site allows the children we serve to try out their fledgling computer skills to locate familiar faces. It allows the neighborhood community organizations we serve to gain a bit of publicity, and the people of the neighborhood as a whole to have a visible sign of our commitment to it. A final audience is comprised of people interested in Micah House itself, whether prospective students and their parents, or college teachers gathering ideas for service learning activities or innovative writing projects.

Whatever the audiences we actually reach, the final course in the Micah House curriculum allows students to draw together concepts of social justice gained from their Philosophy and Theology courses and to bring them home to the real world, the world of a city in crisis around them. And when they come to write about that world, they have

thought deep, studied long, and prayed hard over it. To write about the urban poor with all that preparation is to write in a way that few freshmen ever experience.

The Mission of Micah House: A Student's Perspective

by Gina Meyer

As articulated in its mission statement, Saint Louis University “maintains and encourages programs which link the University and its resources to its local, national, and international communities in support of efforts to alleviate ignorance, poverty, injustice, and hunger, to extend compassionate care to the ill and needy, and to maintain and improve the quality of life for all persons.” Within this statement lies the essence of the Micah House program. This program not only fulfills the mission of Saint Louis University, but also the Catholic and Christian mission to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is a constant calling we hear in the classroom, the dorm, and the Shaw neighborhood. The question becomes, then, do we actually live this mission out? How close are these ideals to the reality of Micah House? Well, what I have found from living in this community is that each of its members does not answer God’s calling to love once but they answer it everyday.

Micah House is an alternative community within Saint Louis University. It is an alternative for students of the University, and it is an alternative to our individualistic and often egocentric American culture. We are a community that uses our collective resources to help others. In small ways and great, we do justice, love mercy, and try to walk humbly with God, just as the prophet Micah encouraged.

Furthermore, Micah House espouses several important relationships. The first of these is with the people we work in solidarity with at our respective service sites. These relationships, along with the fruits that come from them, are at the heart of the program. In addition, we have a relationship with the University and other students. Through these relationships, we are able to bring our mission of justice, mercy, and humbleness to the culture we live in. Perhaps the strongest relationship is our bond with other Micah House students. We are a close-knit community of faith, peace, and joy. These underlying values have made us friends and help us to function jointly as a true community.

Micah House students do not simply take classes about justice, live on the same floor, or participate in community service once a week. Separately, these activities are advantageous, yet when experienced concurrently with a common group of people, their effects radiate exponentially. In Micah House, we combat a crisis of injustice. We learn about it in the classroom, we see it at our service sites, and as a community, we try to find ways to address it and bring about change. From the Micah House classes, I have learned a great deal about the true nature of justice and how to achieve it, and with that knowledge, my views have been changed, improved and strengthened. As that wisdom continues to revive our community as a whole, we grow together in the struggle for a more just world.

That struggle manifests itself through our service. Last year, I had had the opportunity to work with students that are a part of the Kindergarten class at Sherman Elementary in the Shaw neighborhood. I saw several of them in tears due to frustration with activities, such as writing their names or recognizing numbers. I see these tears as a harsh criticism of the injustice in our education system. The school consists

predominantly of African-American students raised in homes where, often because of poverty, education has not been as important as it was in my home. It is amazing, though, how much joy, hope, and love their little bodies really hold. Almost every week, they each gave me a hug as they lined up to leave. I wanted so much to be able to fill a void in their lives. In a small way, I feel I was able to. I believe in their futures and embrace them, especially since they are inextricably intermingled with my own.

Coming to Saint Louis University as a freshman last year, I was filled with anxiety about my future, as any first year is, whether she would admit it or not. However, the community that formed within days of living on the Micah floor calmed those worries and has made my college experience unforgettable. Getting to know each one of these amazing people, I have found the friends that I had been praying to find. They are people that share similar beliefs in justice, peace and spirituality. We are all unique in how we arrived at the Micah House and how we live, but in living together, we have learned how to incorporate our ideals into our everyday experience. We have a lot of fun doing it, too. Looking back on my first year, I realize how blessed I was to have that community to grow in. Micah House is in fact not a house, but it becomes a home. And the family that lives within it works together to share its ideals of community, friendship and justice with the rest of the world.

The Influence of Micah House on Students

by Aaron Meyer

After understanding the central dynamics of Micah House from Dr. Stump and after listening to Professors Beabout, Robinette and Sowell elaborate on the academic components of the Micah House Program, the overarching question that remains to be answered is “How does this Program influence its members?” Individuals want to know how this service group differs from other community-oriented organizations. What makes Micah House so special? I believe that it is the infusion of faith, academics and service which makes the community unique, and it is this infusion that has enabled me to grow as a person and as a member of society.

Last year, I worked at an urban public school that had minimal achievement levels in mathematics and literacy. I tutored seventh-grade children who could not multiply four times five without counting on their fingers, and I assisted students who had a difficult time writing an introductory sentence on topics such as “My favorite sandwich.” Each time after I finished my weekly tutoring sessions, I felt helpless in my attempts to better these students’ lives. It was not the students’ lack of desire that bothered me the most. It was the fact that they desperately wanted to learn but did not have the opportunity. It did not seem right that a child’s socioeconomic status would prevent them from achievement. But I remember them telling me that their parents were never at home, so they could not practice their flashcards, and I recall hearing them say that their teacher simply gives them good scores to pass them to the next grade. This was not right. Children were not being pushed to succeed; they were merely being allowed to fail. No matter how much a

child learned in a one-hour sitting, it seemed like these positive results were counteracted by factors at home and at school.

It is imperative for each person to have the opportunity for educational betterment. In my Micah English class, I elaborated on these concerns by comparing St. Thomas Aquinas' definition of natural law with education. Aquinas' natural law asserts that good is to be done and evil avoided (94, 2). Aquinas states that good has three aspects: it promotes life, it pursues the truth, and it promotes the common good. The right to education is a natural law because it meets the above qualifications. Consequently, when one fails to aid in the educational process, an injustice is occurring. This common belief that to provide an education is a natural law is evident in Micah House, particularly in the number of schools that the program serves. This is just one avenue that the Micah House Program takes to better the extended community.

My experiences tutoring at this public school made me realize that service is not an extracurricular activity; service is a way of life. It is more than a weekly commitment; it is a constant process of transformation. Our continual service helps to shape us as individuals who demand betterment. As we proceed through college, the mission of Micah House becomes further ingrained on our conscience. The program strives to turn selfishness into selflessness, and this aim is supported through our shared faith and our community living.

The faith aspect of the Micah House Program fortifies our mission of service as well as strengthens the nature of our community. Last November, we went to St. Meinrad's Abbey for a weekend of relaxation and contemplation. This retreat not only allowed me to search the Abbey for traces of hidden catacombs, but it also enabled me to

simply live, away from the stresses of academia. Often I do not take enough time to reflect on my relationship with others and with God. And it is precisely this realization that makes the Micah House so special. It would be so easy to inundate myself with school and friends; Micah House challenges me to become more. It is activities such as this retreat and our weekly community nights that make me realize the role I play in this world. These events of reflection continually remind me of the power I have to better the lives of others. The constant reevaluation of the importance of service strengthens the presence of God in my life.

Perhaps the most unifying part of the Micah House Program is the community life. Central to this community life is friendship. Friendship on the Micah Floor is bolstered by our many shared experiences. I remember studying for our first Philosophy test on Plato and Socrates. We had twelve Micahs crammed into a minute ten by six foot room trying to go over the significance of the Allegory of the Cave and the deeper meaning behind the Theory of the Forms. I do not think it was a successful endeavor; we probably talked Philosophy for a solid fifteen minutes. But the point is not that we studied; the point is that we studied together. Through our shared academic experiences, community is built. The Micah House community is also manifested through various floor activities. Last Halloween, we all dressed up in costumes as children from a local Church paraded through our floor. As we passed out candy and joked around with the little kids, I could not help but think that this is what life is all about. It is this enjoyment of service that captures the essence of the Micah House Program.

As I reflect on my experiences with Micah House, I am filled with a sense of gratitude. This gratitude is not merely because I have formed bonds with a group of

people whom I deeply cherish. This gratitude is based on the person I have become.

Through the service work, the faith community, and the intertwined academic coursework, I have become more aware of the significance of my actions and their effect on others. It is my deepest desire to have programs like this at other colleges so that students elsewhere can know firsthand what it feels like to be a Micah House student.

Thank you and God Bless.