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Auburn Students Become Small-Town Citizens for the Summer

By Libby Sander

From his tiny apartment above the B.W. Creel Fire Station, Blake Evans is contemplating life in Linden, Alabama, population 2,123.

Residents of a small town—Mr. Evans, a rising senior at Auburn University, wrote in a recent paper—appreciate qualities that passing visitors often overlook. Although a visitor to this rural community, he is hardly passing through: He's one of seven Auburn students placed in towns across the state this summer as part of a civic-engagement program called Living Democracy.

Auburn and the Kettering Foundation, in Ohio, started Living Democracy in 2010 to help students develop a distinct sense of place as they take on projects their assigned communities choose. This summer's group is the first to take part in a yearlong curriculum, which began last fall. One woman, a sophomore, is connecting youth in Valley, Ala., to a business-development project. A recent graduate is in Selma, collaborating with civic groups to show young residents that there's more to their community than vestiges of the civil-rights-era incident known as Bloody Sunday.

But expectations of students go far beyond completing those specific tasks. Dive in, the students are told. Immerse yourself in your community. Learn the personalities and politics that shape the place.

Mr. Evans, a communications major, is writing a script for a professional video to attract new industry to the town, which took a hit several years ago when the local lumber mill laid off several hundred workers. He is also collaborating with students from the city's two high schools—mostly black Linden High School and mostly white Marengo Academy—on a photography project to identify features of the community worthy of praise and improvement. More than anything, Mr. Evans's job is to become, over the course of the summer, an engaged citizen of Linden.

That's why he tagged along for a day with city employees as they read water meters and responded to, as he says discreetly, "a sewage issue." It's the reason he wanders about town taking pictures: an eatery called the J&K Whistle Stop; the grocery store, Papa's Foods; the county courthouse; the library; even the churches and banks. Once he spent a day with a gentleman who had bought a crumbling Victorian on Main Street just to restore it to its former grandeur.

Mr. Evans "is just immersed in the community and understands what some of the challenges are and what some of the really positive aspects of Linden are that we might not even see," says Mitzi Gates, a city native who serves as mayor and teaches English at Linden High.

For nearly three months, Mr. Evans will ponder Linden and its people. "It's really interesting to me to figure out how a city runs from a technical aspect," he says. "But anytime you stay in a community for a time, you see the tough issues they're facing, and you see how they're combating them."

A Different Classroom

That kind of unstructured curiosity makes Living Democracy different from service-learning programs that have been popular among college students for years, says Mark Wilson, director of civic-learning initiatives at Auburn.

"Usually it's about the students," he says. "It's about them doing something good for the world, which is great. But what happens is students who have episodic experiences leave without knowing much about the communities they've worked in, and leave having more pity than respect for the people."

If students approach an experience with an attitude of discovery, he says—"Hey, what can I learn from local people?"—they are likely to gain more.

For Angela Cleary, a senior at Auburn, Bayou La Batre was something of a surprise. In the small city on the Gulf of Mexico, known as Alabama's seafood capital, a sizable population of Southeast Asians works the shrimping boats.

"I feel like I am in a completely different place," says Ms. Cleary, who is working with a local nonprofit group that provides social services to the Asian community. She has been thinking about what it means to be an American citizen, an exercise she never bothered with much until this past year. "A community is the smallest part of

what can be considered a government," she says.

"Until you live in a community and talk to people and listen to what they have to say, you'll never know what needs to be done," Ms. Cleary says. Young residents of Bayou La Batre, for instance, have told her they want to build a welcome sign with flowers.

For the seven students now in the program, learning isn't a total free-for-all. Each day they file short dispatches to Mr. Wilson and Nan Fairley, an associate professor of journalism at Auburn. And every week the students write papers on what they've learned. Prompts guide them: After the first week, they had to explain what made their communities "unique and special." Another week they wrote about how citizens had approached a "wicked problem."

As the summer progresses, students will delve into the dynamics of political life, citizen participation in crucial decisions, and how residents talk about issues that matter to them. By August, the students, who each get an \$1,800 stipend and free housing, will have earned 12 credits toward a minor in community and civic engagement.

Connected to Place

Living Democracy is part of a growing movement to use communities as classrooms, giving students more-dynamic learning environments, says Harry Boyte, director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, in Minneapolis, and a scholar of civic-engagement theory.

Pedagogies for the 21st century will have to be more connected to place, he predicts, and will increasingly emphasize civic engagement. In that sense, says Mr. Boyte—whose research focuses on how people develop a sense of agency in shaping their communities—Living Democracy's is a pioneering approach.

"Since lectures are going to go the way of the dodo bird," he says, "it's an enormously important example."

Marian Royston, a history major, has found lessons in the tiny community of Hobson City, population about 800. Its claim to fame is its incorporation in 1899 as Alabama's first black municipality. In recent years, it has been plagued by poverty and a shrinking tax base.

In collaboration with Hobson City Community & Economic Development Inc., Ms. Royston is interviewing residents on what services they think the community needs to get back on its feet. "I

lived 45 minutes away from Hobson City my whole life," she says, "and never knew it existed till last year."

The ties students create with their communities are ones that Mr. Wilson, the program's director, hopes to sustain. Some students say they plan to pursue careers in public service and build their lives in Alabama. Next year a new crop of students will fan out into the towns Auburn is working with—and possibly others.

Ms. Royston, meantime, plans to write her senior thesis on Hobson City's unique history. Beyond that, she has her sights set on graduate school in community development or public service.

For now she revels in the community's nascent reawakening. On the way out of town, she says, a road sign urges motorists to "Hurry back to the city of opportunity."

A few years ago, she wrote in a recent paper, that would have been painfully ironic for residents of Hobson City. But now, she wrote, the message may again ring true.

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