

LIVING DEMOCRACY: A PROJECT FOR STUDENTS AND CITIZENS

By Mark Wilson and Nan Fairley

Living Democracy is a project for students and citizens who want to develop the capacities of others to solve the problems that matter most to them. Auburn University's role is one of convenor and moderator, bringing together diverse people and perspectives to see what we might be able to accomplish together. We at the university have some information to share and some background knowledge that needs to be conveyed, but our main task is to ask questions and facilitate a process that will fulfill our public mission through the lives of citizens with whom we collaborate.

“Even though a place may be small, it takes many intricate relationships to run it, and those relationships can lead to success or failure,” wrote student Blake Evans, reflecting on his first week of living in Linden, Alabama, during the summer of 2012. Blake Evans is one of seven Auburn University students who “lived democracy” in Alabama communities as part of the College of Liberal Arts’ program that helps students experience democratic civic engagement in the nation’s best classroom—a local community where people are making decisions and taking action on issues that concern them. Blake’s “community instructors” came from a variety of backgrounds, since small towns are often much more diverse than stereotypes suggests, and the knowledge they imparted to him through everyday conversations and actions will continue to shape his understanding of what it takes to make democracy work as it should.

Over the past several decades, colleges and universities have increased their capacity to provide community service experiences for students such as Blake—those inclined to make a positive difference in the world and give back to society. Some faculty use service experiences with reflection to achieve learning outcomes in courses, and the range of academic disciplines incorporating the pedagogy is broad. Service and service learning experiences cultivate among participating students a sense of pride, and structured reflection challenges students to draw conclusions, ask questions, and practice the kind of reflective

examination required of productive adults in society. The nonprofit organizations providing social services in communities, not to mention the countless young people tutored and befriended by college students nationwide each year, appreciate these efforts.

Service and service learning opportunities allow students some interaction with problems that can be found in a democratic society—poverty, unemployment, crime, at-risk youth, cultural and historical ignorance, violence—but these experiences do not provide the context for students to grapple with the problems *of* democracy itself. Self-rule imposes on citizens the challenge of working through issues and decisions that matter most at any particular time. As Blake identified during his first week in Linden, an important network of collaborative relationships determines the health and future of a community, not to mention its level of resilience against forces of change that are beyond its control. What Blake experienced through a living-learning summer in Linden, Alabama, as described in this article, is wholly different from what can be learned through service or service learning experiences, and, if successful, will contribute to his understanding of citizenship, community, and the public good in a lasting and meaningful way.

“Living Democracy” is an experiment in democratic civic engagement and politics, the building of civic capacities, and will to solve issues that matter to all of us. The project, begun in 2010, rests on the following assumptions:

- Politics is best understood as the work citizens do with each other and with governments to change their communities. Politics is a public activity, not just the election of leaders and the passage of legislation.
- The best student learning occurs when students take responsibility for their learning. Responsibility comes partly through choices, decisions, and consequences.
- Local communities desire relationships with a university that are ongoing, purposeful, just, and mutually beneficial.
- To understand democratic politics in a community, students need to live in a community for a period of time. There is no substitute for living in a community.

The Process

Colleges and universities, especially those with a major focus on research and application, tend to relate to citizens and communities as either research subjects or consumers of products and services, rather than producers of knowledge and repositories of valuable lived experiences. No process for collaboration can completely bridge these complementary worlds, but we seek to build one in which the conversation begins where citizens begin, appreciating their civic learning experiences as valuable texts.

In November, 2010, professors Wilson, Fairley, and Ralph Foster, director of AU's Office of Public Service, convened community collaborators to introduce the project and develop a sense of what might be accomplished. Our colleagues come from a variety of backgrounds and professions—schoolteacher, mayor, pastor, city clerk, nonprofit social service organization, community development corporation, historical site director, chamber of commerce—although the title “community developer” is appropriate for each of them, since they actively work across different sectors and have a commitment to improving their community as a whole, not just a particular area of interest or concern. So we asked them to turn their reflections into civic learning by asking them “What have you learned about community development over the years?” and “What things would you do differently if you could?”

We asked our colleagues to think about their community as a classroom. What might students learn as a result of living and working alongside citizens for a summer? How might the presence of a student affect citizens? What do we hope students will take away from the experience? The variety of responses can be best summarized as “learning how to get things done,” which includes communication skills (speaking and listening), discerning aspects of power that are often hidden, and turning failure into a learning experience, rather than a stopping point. They identified several contributions that they believed students could make, including “bridging the gap” between age



groups in the community and modeling for everyone important ways to connect to young people in the community.

At the conclusion of the November workshop, colleagues completed a “Telling Your Story” questionnaire, adapted from the Harwood Institute’s “Seven Knowledge Keys for Understanding a Community” report. The questionnaire prompted participants to identify, in their own words, the aspirations of citizens for their community, the civic places where people create community, the concerns people talk about, and stereotypes about the community. Participants also identified the sense of place that an “incomer”—someone who is not an “outsider” to a community, but one who has “come into” the community by invitation and with a spirit of collaboration, openness, and exchange—might discover. As a way to begin our community collaboration over the immediate spring semester, Professor Fairley, who has been active in civic engagement for most of her more than twenty years at AU, assigned students in her community journalism course to visit the communities and write feature stories that were compiled in *Front Porch* magazine, an online publication that became a basis for information on the communities for Living Democracy students. We did not convene community collaborators again as a group until August of 2011, when most met their Living Democracy student for the first time.

From Classroom to Community

Blake Evans grew up in the small town of Deatsville, Alabama, and he was the third generation to graduate from Holtville High School, which was the subject of a 1946 United States Information Services film documenting daily life in a Southern, rural community. Having participated in numerous service opportunities through school and church, the Living Democracy program interested him because of its community-building aspects and opportunity to gain valuable experience, particularly in his major of communications. He does not know exactly what type of profession he would ultimately like to pursue, and he is typical of most of the cohort of Living Democracy students who want to be prepared for a variety of opportunities.

Shortly before the fall semester began, Blake and his cohort met their community collaborators at a workshop in Fairhope,

where he met Linden city clerk Cheryl Hall. The city of Linden, population 2,123, is located in west central Alabama, away from interstates, and not too far from the Mississippi state line. White citizens are a slight majority (51 percent), with African Americans making up 46.7 percent of the population. Not unlike many rural communities in the South, the public school enrolls African American students, while the private Marengo Academy educates white students just down the street. The schools' football teams had long shared a common field, but at the time of the workshop, the community was in the middle of a dispute that left the public school playing its games out of town for the immediate season. The nearest metropolitan newspaper reported that Linden was a town divided by race, a notion that some locals consider an inaccurate and short-sighted characterization.



Hall represented Linden native and mayor, Mitzi Gates, at the workshop, who had already begun the new school year in her “day job” as English teacher at Linden High School. The workshop led student/citizen groups to answer the following three questions: Who is our community? What are the opportunities for our community? What are the challenges facing our community? Each group mapped the sources of knowledge in or about the community (i.e., people, places, things), and then drew lines representing connections or relationships between each source of knowledge. Students listened while community members reflected on what their citizens seem to value most and learned about the traditions and activities that reflect what they hold valuable. Students asked questions related to challenges and opportunities, and they compared the communities under discussion with the community in which they were reared.

Just a few short days after the workshop in the Fall, 2011 semester, Blake and the cohort enrolled in CCEN 2000: Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement, a course which seeks to introduce the context, issues, skills and experience for

A journalism seminar gave students a crash course in writing for the public.

living in a democratic society. Students learn about democracy from the time of the Greeks and early Americans, and they consider some modern theories and research related to civic participation and involvement. But the core of the course is about the nature of problems—“wicked” vs. “tame”—and the ways in which the public might develop sound judgments and secure commitments to act together on these problems. But Linden was close to Blake’s mind, since he read his copy of the *Linden Democrat-Reporter* each week. During the holiday break, he visited Linden for the first time and participated in Chilly Fest, the town’s annual winter festival.

A 2012 spring journalism seminar on Communication and Community Building gave Blake and his cohort a crash course in writing for the public—a skill not likely developed in their respective majors—and helped them acquire a number of additional skills, while they made collaborative summer plans with their partners. Building on the framework of www.coveringcommunities.org, students studied the basics of journalism, wrote profile stories, and conducted interviews. They also created a number of social media tools to help them document their summer experience. Blake visited Linden one additional time during the spring semester, when Mayor Gates led him on a tour of the most unique of all Living Democracy student accommodations: a room above the B. W. Creel Fire Station. While he would spend his nights hoping sleep would go undisturbed by a fire call, he worked out of City Hall during the day.

More at Stake

In January 2012, we convened our students and community collaborators for a workshop to plan summer projects. We asked each community to develop ideas for a project based on past conversations, visits to the community, and interests of both the students and citizens. Some teams had a general direction or theme for a project, while others had numerous details. The project idea or general direction is important, but not every project can build the capacity of citizens to solve the problems that matter to them. Some community projects, unfortunately, erode citizen will and capacity. A project could only be a Living Democracy project, we suggested, if teams worked through and incorporated five different aspects: hopes; a table; conversations and crossroads;

actions; public celebration and reflection. Participants discovered these through the following questions:

Hopes

Every community has dreams, goals, and aspirations. What are citizens seeking to do to fulfill the community's potential? How will your project connect to citizen concerns and what people in the community consider valuable?

A Table

Every community project has a table where thoughts are shared and plans are made. Are people in the community already at a table working on the problem? Who, specifically, needs to be at the table for what you are hoping to organize citizens to do? Why will they want to be at the table? What might prevent them from being at the table?

Conversations and Crossroads

Communication is key to productive human relationships and the work citizens seek to do together. And the communication we are talking about is different from publicity and advertising. How will you communicate regarding the project? How often? Where? Some of these conversations will result in decision making. What decisions do you think will need to be made regarding the project? What decisions will be difficult but necessary? What will you do to make your conversations creative and productive?

Actions

What actions will need to take place to execute the project? When? Make a timeline for what needs to take place immediately, as well as over the next few months, as you prepare to live in the community.

Public Celebration/Reflection

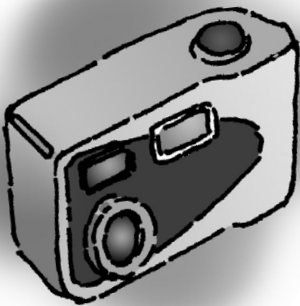
We measure the success of our projects in terms of what we've learned and experienced. There is no such thing as failure, only failure to learn. And there's nothing more fun than a culminating event that documents, makes public, and celebrates the work of citizens. How will you document, celebrate, and lead a public reflection on your project?

A Living Democracy project cannot be mapped out in complete detail because the project's success is dependent on a process that thrives on unpredictability. We do not expect participants to have answers to each of these questions, but we do expect students to understand the questions and why they matter.

Through his conversations with Mayor Gates and Cheryl Hall, Blake discovered that the city of Linden received assistance from neighboring University of West Alabama to develop a promotional video on the city for economic development purposes. The opportunity for Blake to learn about a community's desire to communicate its assets became a perfect project to coordinate. He became the script developer, which meant that he had to ask questions and listen to citizens, discover on his own the community's strengths, and manage all of the various details that preproduction would entail. In a very real sense, Blake helped create the space for citizens to speak to the world. In week nine of his ten-week summer, Blake introduced the video crew to each interviewee during two jam-packed days of filming.

Throughout the school year and into the summer, Blake followed the football field situation, and he learned that although race relations need improvement in towns such as Linden, some efforts were underway that were designed to make a difference. He found the local Youth Leadership Council, created by Mayor Gates and others to bring students from both schools together for shared experiences, an important local activity, and he decided to

organize a project among the council teens in town during the summer. Mayor Gates requested support from the town's Industrial Development Board, a modest amount of \$350 to \$500, but when the IDB heard the details of the effort, they tripled the amount and appropriated \$1,500 because the project was innovative and unique. Blake distributed single-use cameras to students and asked them to take two pictures: one of something they believe illustrated why "Life is good in Linden," and another that identified an aspect of Linden that needed improvement.



Measuring What You Can't Count

Students who take responsibility for their learning live a life of reflection. Living Democracy students are required to reflect almost daily through email correspondence with us. "If you don't write it down, it didn't happen," we remind them, and more written communication means more opportunities for reflection, thus learning. We (students and faculty) participate in a conference call, usually lasting an hour, where we go town by town, each student reporting on the past and upcoming week. Complaints and frustrations are welcomed, even encouraged, although they are always outweighed by stories of success or pleasant surprises. Students start to understand each town better over time, even if they have never set foot in the place.

Students must submit weekly written reflections for publication on the Living Democracy blog, and the prompt each week focuses on an aspect of democratic life and practice: the unique aspects and hopes and dreams of the community; ways in which citizens are tackling a persistent problem; civic spaces; community communication; institutional politics; and how the project is building the capacities needed for democratic citizenship. The reflections are for public viewing, and we believe they are valuable texts for citizens to gauge student learning and interaction. Some reflections suggest that students are grappling with the challenges of living in a democratic society, while others reveal that students are simply experiencing their comfort zones stretched. A post-summer interview with each student will document what students believe they have learned as a result of the process.

Mayor Gates and Blake were astounded when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* sent a photographer to spend an entire day following Blake from meeting to meeting and place to place for photographs that would illustrate an article on the program. A positive article in the *Chronicle* is high praise for those in higher education, but it is not necessarily an indication of success. During the same week in Linden, a more accurate milestone of success was achieved when city clerk, Cheryl Hall, and Mayor Gates invited Blake to be the grand marshal of the 2012 winter Chilly Fest parade in December. The parade in Linden will not be covered nationally, of course, and Blake's participation might be difficult

to include in a curriculum vitae, but it is evidence that he has become a citizen of Linden and that the contribution of his presence and collaborative work had lasting value and meaning.

Alexis Sankey

Alexis Sankey, a sophomore majoring in psychology, spent her summer living democracy in Elba, Alabama (pop. 3,940). Her main community partner was Mart Gray, pastor of the Covenant Community Church.

To meet the community's need for more opportunities in arts education, Alexis created JumpstART, which offers art classes to local children at the Just Folk Coffeehouse and Arts Center. Alexis said her greatest reward came from seeing the children's smiles of pride at the concluding art exhibition.

After getting JumpstART in motion, Alexis interviewed citizens committed to moving Elba forward and worked closely with the staff of Elba's Senior Citizen Center, delivering hot meals and helping out in the office.

While the children gained new avenues of expression through JumpstART, Alexis found a new sense of confidence. "I have definitely gained more self-assurance. I realize that progress is not easy, especially when working with and depending on lots of different people. However, it's always possible."

Angela Cleary

For Angela Cleary, an interdisciplinary studies major with a keen interest in environmental issues, Bayou La Batre (pop. 2,558) was an ideal place to experience living democracy. On Mobile Bay in southwest Alabama, Bayou La Batre continues to face challenges created by disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill.

Angela partnered with the local Boat People SOS office, an organization involved in recovery efforts, which

works closely with the community's significant Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian population in Alabama's seafood capital.

Working with BPSOS's youth empowerment program, Bayou HOPE, was her most rewarding experience. The youth organized beautification projects and community dinners, and followed a "work hard, play hard" mantra. Angela said, "These projects paved the way for the youth to become active citizens who take ownership and pride in their community."

She said her summer also changed the way she thinks of traditional classroom lessons. "There are only so many things you can learn from a textbook before you have to put yourself out of the safe zone and test some theories for yourself."

Mary Afton Day

Mary Afton Day, a junior majoring in public administration, lived democracy in Marion, Alabama (pop. 3,686) and worked with citizens and director Frances Ford through the nonprofit organization Sowing Seeds of Hope.

From sorting green beans at a local church, performing blood pressure checks at a rural community center, and mentoring local teens, Mary Afton went in dozens of different directions to gain an understanding and appreciation of how local people meet challenges on a daily basis.

Throughout the summer, she asked citizens to share images of the places in town that make Marion unique and important, and the project culminated in a public exhibition and companion blog featuring the work of citizens.

Mary Afton said one of her most rewarding experiences was spending time with the ladies of the West Perry Arts & Crafts Club who quilt together and find ways to share their wisdom with young people in the community.

Andrew Odom

From living in a “haunted” antebellum home in downtown Selma (pop. 20,756) to involving teens at Alabama’s most famous ghost town, Old Cahawba, Andrew Odom discovered how to connect the past to the future.

Andrew, an Auburn University graduate now in law school, created a team of teens who helped launch a public-use bike program at the Old Cahawba Park. Youth wearing Living Democracy shirts coordinated the launch event, which was attended by local politicians, media, and civic leaders. Other summer events connected youth to local officials, civic leaders, educators, and artists.

Andrew’s main community partners were Old Cahawba site director Linda Derry and Selma/Dallas County Chamber of Commerce executive director Sheryl Smedley.

Andrew counts his conversations with local leaders one day and with those struggling with poverty the next as one of the most rewarding aspects of his experience. “I was able to listen and discuss concerns and possible solutions with both.”

Marian Royston

Marian Royston, a senior history major, lived democracy in one of the most historic communities in Alabama, Hobson City (pop. 771). Founded in 1899, Hobson City was the first all African American municipality in Alabama.

In part, Marian was on a mission to bring together a snapshot of Hobson City’s present through her work on a community needs assessment. However, by the end of the summer, her passion turned her toward a focus on one of the community’s greatest assets: history.

One of her projects involved collecting, sorting, and preserving stories of the community’s rich past, told in photographs and other historic documents.

Marian's community partners were Hobson City Community and Economic Development Corporation (HCCEDC) board members Eric Stringer, Charity Richey-Bentley, and Bernard Snow. Marian said one lesson she learned by spending time with citizens was that "building relationships may very well be the first and most important step in enacting change in a community."

Audrey Ross

Audrey Ross, a sophomore math major, started the Youth Leaders of Valley while living democracy in Valley (pop. 9,524), a town in east Alabama with a rich textile mill heritage. Youth Leaders grew into a team under Audrey's guidance as they helped with a police academy for youth, planned and staged a successful Community Day basketball tournament, spruced up the local Girl Scout hut, and attended city council meetings.

Audrey is confident that Youth Leaders will continue. "Rather than tell the kids what to do, we came together and discussed what we COULD do. As the kids became more comfortable in having a say in their community, the ideas came rolling in."

Audrey also helped out at the community farmers' market, tutored students of all ages, and learned more about mill restoration projects and community history. She worked closely with Valley police officer Sandra Crim and community partners Jim Jones and Martha Cato.

Audrey described Living Democracy as "an opportunity for a student to grow by watching the growth of others. It's a way to show someone that, while they are part of a much larger world, they can still have a big impact on many people."

She added, "I learned that good ideas will get support, and with the right support those ideas can be realized. It is in this way, not with one person doing all the work but with one idea sparking the work of everyone, that one person can bring about significant change."