

# 2006-2007 Weiss Urban Livability Fellows Community Projects

## Introduction

We are the fourteenth class of the Weiss Urban Livability Program. We are a group of graduate students from various fields including public policy, public administration, city and regional planning, and education. During the 2006-2007, we meet about twice a month to explore the concept of urban livability. We invited guest speakers from local organizations to speak at our meetings and we have also volunteered our time with some of these organizations.

At the beginning of the year, the fellows unanimously decided to design and implement short-term volunteer projects with local community organizations. The fellows worked in teams of two to select and coordinate the projects. Our goal was to learn about the organizations, achieve tangible results in the limited time available, and to use the diverse experiences of our fellows.

This final report documents our experiences with and reflections on our service projects. We worked with five different community organizations. These organizations are: Blue Urban Bikes, Friends of Bolin Creek, the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocate Program, and Durham Congregations, Associations, and Neighborhoods. For each project, the fellow(s) responsible for selecting and coordinating the project has prepared a short overview of the community organization and our particular service project. The coordinating fellow(s) also explains how the organization and the project relate to urban livability. Then, each fellow participating in the service project also writes about the project from his or her perspective and from the perspective of his or her discipline. The purpose of this final report is to explore each project through a diversity of lenses and to advance the concept of urban livability.

## Blue Urban Bikes

Project Coordinated by Anne Patrone (City and Regional Planning) and Michael Schwartz (City and Regional Planning + Health Behavior Health Education)

The curriculum in City and Regional Planning emphasizes sustainable solutions. One way to increase sustainability is the provision of options for alternative modes of transportation (e.g., walking and bicycling) that encourage a reduction in the number of vehicles on the road, limit harmful emissions, and encourage physical activity. The increase in physical activity is where Health Behavior and Health Education's curriculum overlaps with that of City and Regional Planning. The synergies between these two fields can create avenues for collaboration amongst researchers and practitioners.

SURGE (Students United for a Responsible Global Environment) was founded in 1998 by students at UNC-Chapel Hill. According to the mission statement on their website ([www.surgenetwork.org](http://www.surgenetwork.org)), “SURGE is a diverse network of student groups at high schools, colleges, community colleges, and universities that strive to empower its members to build a strong and cohesive movement for progressive political change in North Carolina and beyond.” Project interests include sustainable energy, recycling/composting, and alternative transportation.

In 2005, SURGE started working on a community bike sharing initiative. The idea of the project is that community members in Chapel Hill and Carrboro could pay a nominal fee to have access to bicycles that can be checked out for a limited amount of time from various hubs around town as if they were checking books out of a library. The hubs are local establishments that keep the bicycles locked to racks on their property. The project became known as Blue Urban Bikes, and it “aims to provide community members with a reliable, low-cost and healthy transportation alternative.” On September 11, 2006, SURGE had a ribbon cutting ceremony for Blue Urban Bikes, and officially opened two hubs containing a combined ten bicycles.

We invited Alison Carpenter, SURGE Field Coordinator, to speak with the Weiss Fellows about Blue Urban Bikes. She said that the program has been successful, but SURGE wanted to increase their membership and to expand their hub network to include four more local establishments by the end of 2007. One of SURGE’s prioritized goals is to provide Blue Urban Bikes for underserved populations, such as immigrants and low-income residents, who may not be able to buy a bicycle, but may still need a transportation alternative to supplement bus or car trips.

The Weiss Fellows collaborated with Ms. Carpenter to design a project to pursue potential bicycle hubs in underserved areas. From November 2006 to January 2007, the Fellows visited apartment complexes that have a number of immigrants living in them, such as Carolina Apartments, Abby Court, and Estes Park, and talked with six property managers about the possibility of hosting a bicycle hub. In addition, the Fellows approached four Carrboro/Chapel Hill business owners that tend to serve these same populations. Finally, one Fellow also translated some of the promotional materials into Spanish in order to reach out to non-English speakers. Following a suggestion of the Weiss Fellows, Ms. Carpenter met with CALDO (Orange County Latino Issues Committee) to better prepare SURGE to serve the Latino community.

Most service providers were excited about the idea of having a hub at their business, seeing it as a win-win situation (the bikes serve as a selling point for the property managers and as a customer draw for business owners). The Fellows passed on contact information at the initial meetings, and Ms. Carpenter is now working with some service providers towards reaching agreements.

### **Personal Reflection: Weiping Yang (Public Administration)**

The first guest speaker to come to our regular meeting was Alison Carpenter. She worked for Students United for a Responsible Global Environment (SURGE). She talked with us about a community bike sharing initiative called Blue Urban Bikes Program. The program was just getting off the ground, and she asked the fellows to help her publicize the project and to recruit participants. The general idea is to help Chapel Hill and Carrboro residents gain access to community bikes that can be checked out at hubs around town.

The fellows split up into teams of two people each, and went to different businesses around Chapel Hill and Carrboro to try to set up potential bicycle hub sites. Tamara was my partner. The two places we talked to was El Mercado Central, a Mexican grocery store in Carrboro, and Kingswood Apartments, an apartment complex in Carrboro. The owner of the grocery store seemed interested, and asked to keep a flyer. The office lady from the apartment complex was similarly interested, and also asked for Alison's contact information. In fact, she seemed interested in using the bikes for herself and her children.

This community project is closely related to topics I have been studying in my field, public administration. Public administrators seek to provide services to citizens and to improve their quality of life. It seems the Blue Bikes Program provides a good, alternative form of transportation to residents in Chapel Hill and Carrboro that was both beneficial to residents and beneficial for the environment.

### **Personal Reflection: Jennifer Miller (Public Policy)**

Our first project of the year was in partnership with SURGE. We learned about their Blue Urban Bikes program, specifically helping them publicize it to the Latino community through apartment complexes and cultural organizations. My contribution to the project was to translate the promotional flyer into Spanish.

Using the definition "things governments do" to define public policy, the BUB program is defined by omission; providing bicycles for community use is something government does not do. A government could be motivated to do this by a policy objective, such as reducing motor vehicle transport or providing transportation to residents who lack transportation and could make use of bicycles to meet their transport needs. My impression, though, is that Chapel Hill is not the type of community where these policy objectives would be compelling when compared with alternative approaches and competing demands for resources. Thus, it seems the program is appropriately situated in a community nonprofit. The ability of residents to organize and cooperate to create an organization based on shared values is an excellent example of urban livability.

## Personal Reflection: Tamara Mittman (Geography)

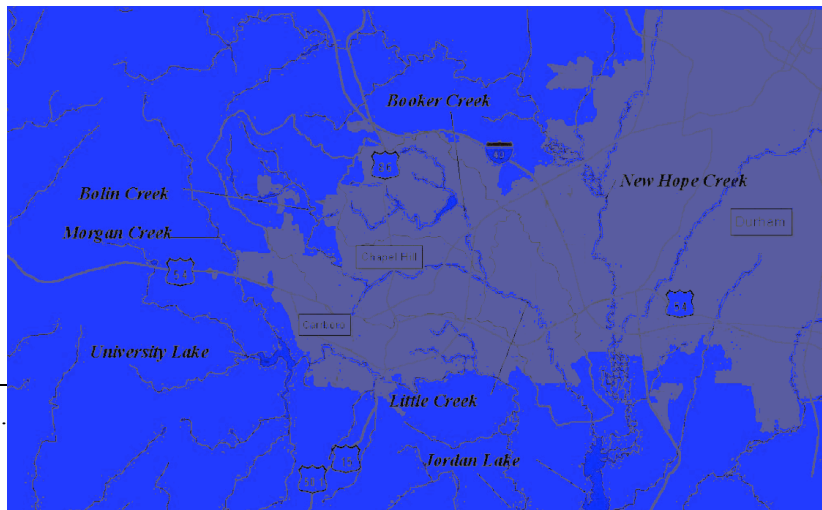
The Blue Urban Bikes project through the lens of a hydrologist / urban ecologist.

In addition to encouraging a reduction in the number of vehicles on the road, a reduction in harmful tailpipe emissions, and an increase in physical activity, a transition to alternate modes of transportation would also benefit the local water quality and local ecology. The quality of our streams and reservoirs is largely determined by the surrounding land uses. The more land is covered with impervious surface (such as asphalt, concrete, and roofs), the more water will pour into our streams after each storm, instead of infiltrating into the soil. As storm flows increase in volume and velocity, stream habitat is lost, banks are eroded, and large volumes of cloudy water are delivered to the receiving waters (often a drinking water reservoir, and sometimes the bay). By encouraging a transition to alternative transportation, we may be able to reduce the proportion of our landscape consumed by roads and parking lots, and thus reduce the amount of impervious surface and the damage to streams and water quality. Though a real transition will take the coordinated efforts of lots of groups like SURGE, as well as individuals and government bodies, I feel we have made a small step in the right direction. With an expanded network of hubs offering more bikes in more locations, perhaps biking will become a real option for more people in the Carrboro/Chapel Hill community.

## Friends of Bolin Creek

Project Coordinated by Tamara Mittman (Geography)

Between 1990 and 2003, Chapel Hill's population grew by 12,613 persons at an average annual rate of 2.2%.<sup>1</sup> If the town sustains this rate of growth, Chapel Hill's population will nearly double in the next 30 years. These new residents will cause dramatic changes in the physical landscape, as forests and farms are converted to housing developments, roads, strip malls, and parking lots. How will these changes in the landscape affect water quality and ecology in our streams and reservoirs? How will they affect people's access to pleasant natural environments? To engage with these and other questions, our group completed a project with Friends of Bolin Creek.



<sup>1</sup> <http://www.>

DID=558



Bolin Creek flows east through Carrboro and Chapel Hill, converging with Booker Creek to form Little Creek, which eventually flows into Jordan Lake, a drinking water reservoir for many towns in the Triangle area (see map above). The health of Bolin Creek is therefore important not only on a local scale, but on a regional scale as well. On the local scale, a healthy creek is important to provide habitat for aquatic organisms, while a stable creek is important to convey stormwater downstream. If the creek becomes unstable and its banks erode too much when it rains, the moving banks could cause loss of property or damage to infrastructure (including sewer lines and roads). On the regional scale, a healthy creek is important to provide clean water to the receiving reservoir. If too much erosion occurs, the stream will carry large quantities of sediment into the reservoir, increasing turbidity (the cloudiness of the water), and increasing the probability of hypoxia (lack of oxygen in the water). Also, if not enough filtering occurs (by the movement of runoff through soil), the stream may carry large quantities of nutrients into the reservoir, increasing the probability of algal blooms. Neither algal blooms nor hypoxia are good things to have in your drinking water reservoir!

To protect the quality of its streams and reservoirs, the Chapel Hill Land Use Management Ordinance prohibits development within 150 feet of streams. The land along streams must be preserved as “riparian buffers” to slow the movement of stormwater (thus reducing the velocity of flow and minimizing erosion), and to filter pollutants from stormwater. This regulation has the added benefit of preserving natural areas in the heart of an urbanizing landscape. Chapel Hill has built the Bolin Creek Greenway within the buffer along Bolin Creek, providing access to neighbors and visitors to walk, run, and bike through the trees beside the stream. Perhaps inspired by the Bolin Creek Greenway, a group of local citizens have formed a small nonprofit called the “Friends of Bolin Creek.” This nonprofit aims to expand the riparian buffer along Bolin Creek into a large park of several hundred acres, simultaneously protecting water quality and providing opportunities for experiencing nature in the midst of a growing urban center.

Our project consisted of joining a group of community volunteers in maintaining the Bolin Creek greenway. Each month, Bill Bracey of the UNC Botanical Gardens leads a group of volunteers in removing invasive exotic species from the swath of forest along the greenway. Invasive species tend to overwhelm the plants native to a region, and can transform a diverse and open landscape with habitat for a variety of native species into a dense monoculture of invasives with little room for anything else. When we arrived at the Bolin Creek Greenway, Bill Bracey introduced us to the enemy: thickets of Chinese privet choking up the underbrush and even twisting itself around the native trees. Our six Weiss volunteers joined five community volunteers in clearing a sizable swath of the greenway of Chinese privet. Though one outing alone cannot restore the Bolin Creek Greenway, and our work would vanish beneath a new thicket of privet in the absence of future volunteers, our outing provided a valuable opportunity to learn about stream ecology and access to natural resources in an urbanizing environment. We observed the quality of the stream, observed the uses people were making of the greenway, and met

other community members interested in preserving the natural environment. And last, but not least, we had fun (see pictures below).







### **Personal Reflection: Weiping Yang (Public Administration)**

Before this project was proposed, I was already familiar with Bolin Creek. When I first moved from Los Angeles to Chapel Hill last August, I was struck with its natural beauty. I looked up walking paths on the town's Parks and Recreation website, and the nearest trail to my apartment was the Bolin Creek trail running from the intersection of Hillsborough St. and Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. I have been there a few times to walk around before our service project.

One Saturday morning, the fellows (myself included) met with one of the Friends of Bolin Creek. He showed us the different plants that grew along the creek and explained that some non-native species was pushing out the native species. We brought tools to remove the invasive plants, including shovels, trowels, and even these lever-like tools I have never seen. We all put on our gardening gloves (and in some cases, mittens) and plunged into our work. At first, we did not seem to be making much of an impact. But,

by the end of a few hours, we had cleared a small area of the invasive plants. This project was hard work, but it felt very rewarding to be part of maintaining such a beautiful part of Chapel Hill.

It is easy to relate our service project to the discipline of public administration: public administrators are always interested in maintaining the quality of life for their citizens, and maintaining the environment is part of that mission.

**Personal Reflection: Michael Schwartz (City and Regional Planning + Health Behavior Health Education)**

In the Department of City and Regional Planning, trails, like children, are considered an inherently good thing. They provide a respite in the middle of big cities, encourage emission reducing forms of transportation (walking and bicycling), and protect native species from development. Many public health practitioners see the benefits of trails through the lens of an increase in physical activity, thought to reduce many chronic diseases. For this reason, there are few public health researchers or practitioners that would speak against trails.

As Chapel Hill and Carrboro continue their explosive growth, it is important for people to understand that the nature of the town will change. Some want to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that they can fight the growth. Others, like the “Friends of Bolin Creek” understand the need for nature in the middle of the cities that Chapel Hill and Carrboro will likely become. By planning ahead of the development, this group will hopefully be able to achieve a more desirable vision for the future of the area.

Once the trails are built it is important to maintain them. They must be safe and pretty so people will want to use them. However, resources often go into construction rather than upkeep, because opening trails is much more politically popular than their maintenance. Thus, passionate people like Bill Bracey work to make Bolin Creek Trail resemble original primary forest. While it felt counterintuitive to kill plants in order to protect others, Bill explained the importance of removing invasive species. It was an invigorating morning of weed whacking, root pulling, and utilization of the “jaws of doom.”

**Personal Reflection: Kate Shem (Public Administration)**

From the perspective of public administration, the organizational structure and services provided to the Town of Chapel Hill and Carrboro by Friends of Bolin Creek are invaluable to its leaders and citizens.

Friends of Bolin Creek is administered by an active community of Chapel Hill and Carrboro residents. Strictly a volunteer organization, this nonprofit creates opportunities for citizen engagement through advocacy, raising awareness, and volunteerism. The Weiss Fellows were able to join many community members in our volunteer activity to shape the physical landscape surrounding Bolin Creek. Our outdoor labor came free and

saved the local government the costs to maintain the physical surroundings near Bolin Creek. Additionally, this organization encourages individuals to attend town council meetings to advocate on behalf of Bolin Creek. A list serve keeps citizens aware of upcoming events that could negatively impact the site. Through these activities, the nonprofit is creating environmental awareness and providing services that the Towns of Chapel Hill and Carrboro would not be able to accomplish on their own.

### **Personal Reflection: Anne Patrone (City and Regional Planning)**

I was a little reluctant to get out of bed on the Saturday we were slated to clean Bolin Creek – the morning was cold and gray and I wasn't too sure I had the appropriate creek-cleaning apparel. I appeared, decked out in my new rain boots and oldest jeans, only to find a guy with a safari-type hat, and some scary looking large metal implements. I looked down at my “work gloves” (my \$2 pink wool gloves) and felt somewhat inadequate.

But killing weeds (or the more appropriate “clearing invasive species”) actually turned out to be a lot of fun. After learning what was good and what was invasive (and what was poison ivy), we pitched straight in. Clearing the area of the invasive Chinese privet plants, while hard work, was really satisfying. We waged war on the thicket, teaming up for a couple of the big ones, and cheering when we managed to uproot a particularly difficult one.

And as we cleared more and more weeds, we learned more and more about each other. The work offered many opportunities for conversation, and we were able to casually talk in a way we never had at scheduled fellowship meetings. By the end of the morning (and cemented by a trip to Breadman's for breakfast), I felt that I had finally gotten the chance to get to know some of my fellow fellows a lot better. Promoting urban livability through both improving open space and creating new social networks - all in a day's work for a Weiss Fellow.

## **Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina**

Project Coordinated by Kate Shem (Public Administration)

Public administration focuses on the collection and allocation of public goods and services, emphasizing the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of programs and developing relationships to accomplish an organization's mission. With these aspects in mind, the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina was selected as a project for the Weiss Urban Livability fellows. Our main goals for this project were to learn about hunger issues in North Carolina and how this nonprofit organization provides food to people at risk of hunger in thirty-four counties in central and eastern North Carolina.





Jane Cox, the executive director of the Food Bank, came to speak with the fellows regarding her work. Jane explained the importance of developing partner agencies in the community, including soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters, and after school programs for children. She spoke about the importance of volunteers to the Food Bank's mission, with more than 2000 volunteer hours each month helping them to reach their mission of alleviating hunger in North Carolina's communities. A discussion ensued regarding how efficiency is measured at the Food Bank, and why pounds of food distributed to clients is a better measure of success than the number of hungry persons in the population. For additional

background information regarding hunger issues in North Carolina, fellows read the report, "Hunger in America 2006: State Report Prepared for North Carolina."

When asked about how the fellows could best serve the Food Bank with their time and talents, the Food Bank requested the fellows volunteer their time at the Durham branch, located in downtown Durham. After receiving an initial tour of the building, fellows spent a beautiful March afternoon sorting through food donations from a recently closed-down supermarket and bagging fresh peppers to be distributed to needy organizations. The Food Bank obtains goods from supermarkets, sorts and packages usable goods by volunteers, and distributes food to community organizations. Their work exemplifies a goal that the public administration field is all about: to obtain and distribute goods in the most efficient and practical ways possible.



### **Personal Reflection: Tamara Mittman (Geography)**

Our visit from Jane Cox and our afternoon at the Durham Food Bank certainly did impress me with the quantity of goods a single organization could collect and distribute to a large population. The visit also prompted some reflections on efforts to alleviate hunger, and on other applications of the food bank model. We were informed during our tour of the warehouse that almost all of the food that the bank distributed was packaged and non-perishable. While this makes quite a lot of sense from a logistical perspective, it would not provide for a very balanced diet in the absence of fresher supplements. This demonstrates the importance of local agencies in alleviating hunger. While the provision of fresh produce seems just as important as the provision of grains, meat, and other staples, it is a task ill suited to a central distributor, which may take so much time moving produce back and forth it may well rot in transit.

The hierarchical operations of the food bank also reminded me of the hierarchical distribution of streams and rivers. Small rivers feed larger rivers, which feed larger rivers still, until the largest rivers empty into the ocean. Emerging efforts to manage watersheds in the last decade or so are often plagued by a lack of coordination among small scale projects to achieve regional improvement. The coordinated distribution of limited resources is therefore as important to water quality improvement as it is to the alleviation of hunger, and it is possible that the government bodies charged with managing water quality could learn a thing or two from a system like the Food Bank's.

### **Personal Reflection: Holly Colon (School Psychology)**

In 2004 there were 2,079,608 children living in North Carolina. It is estimated that 21.9% of those children live in poverty ([www.frac.org/State\\_Of\\_States/2006/states/NC.pdf](http://www.frac.org/State_Of_States/2006/states/NC.pdf)). A three-year average of food insecurity among households spanning from 2002-2004 indicates that there has been a statistically significant increase in the number of households with insecure food (13.9%) and the number of households with insecure hunger (4.9%) ([www.frac.org/State\\_Of\\_States/2006/states/NC.pdf](http://www.frac.org/State_Of_States/2006/states/NC.pdf)). Ecological factors endemic among impoverished students inevitably impact learning on a daily basis. Though food security and hunger are not the typical discussions had about education, physical nourishment sets the foundation for a child's preparedness to learn. The strong focus on academic achievement in recent years has revealed that the large proportion of children considered 'economically disadvantaged' also fail to meet state and federal standards for adequate academic achievement. In 2005-2006 only 57.9% of economically disadvantaged students received passing scores on the North Carolina ABC's End-of-Course Tests ([www.ncreportcards.org/src/stateDetails.jsp?Page=1&pYear=2005-2006](http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/stateDetails.jsp?Page=1&pYear=2005-2006)). As an educator, I quickly realized the extent to which roadblocks outside the scope of the academic lens hinder the achievement of diverse learners in my effort to determine the wide range of predictors, both personal and systemic, which indicate the likelihood of success in the school setting. Organizations such as the Food Bank however, help meet

the needs of children and families confronting poverty, directly servicing schools in which a large percentage of the students qualify for free and reduced price lunch everyday. In addition, the Food Bank offers after-school programs which provide “tutoring, nutrition, education, mentoring, and nutritious meals to children at risk of hunger” ([www.foodbanknc.org/education/poverty.asp](http://www.foodbanknc.org/education/poverty.asp)). The Food Bank’s Kids Café gives students hands-on opportunities to make healthier food choices, presenting and teaching interactive lessons on nutrition, food safety, and recipes. In the face of a growing epidemic of obesity among North Carolina’s children and the imminent need to provide food, this organization’s multifaceted combination of services go a long way toward helping children begin the road to long, healthy lives.

### **Personal Reflection: Andy Sharma (Public Policy)**

The Food Bank project was truly a “physical” experience. Although I was only there for an hour, working under the hot sun revealed the strenuous and laborious tasks necessary to provide the needy with essentials. Equally important, I was inspired by the many volunteers who assist the food bank on a regular basis. However, I was dismayed at the amount of food that could not be used due to expiration, safety concerns, or damage. As an economist, there has to be a more efficient way to gather and distribute food items. Possibly, future Weiss Fellows can undertake some aspect of my concern.

### **Personal Reflection: Weiping Yang (Public Administration)**

I was very interested when Jane Cox, the executive director of the Food Bank, came to speak at one of our regular meetings. I think hunger is an issue that people can relate to, and the mission of the food bank definitely fit right in with my discipline. Public administration is a field that seeks to serve the community and fulfill people’s basic needs. The need for food is clearly one of people’s the most fundamental needs, and I was glad the fellows chose to volunteer at the Food Bank.

As Jane explained, the Food Bank receives food from all different sources. The Food Bank relies heavily on volunteers to help sort the food and arrange the warehouse so that community groups can come in and “shop.” The morning we volunteered, we got a tour of the warehouse. I was impressed at the amount and variety of food that was available to community groups. There was fruit juice, canned goods, frozen meat, gourmet cookies, and even matzo balls! Most memorably for the fellows was probably the boxes and boxes of jalapeno peppers. We spent about an hour sorting the peppers. We threw away the bad, moldy peppers and bagged the fresh, firm peppers.

Volunteering at the Food Bank that one Saturday made me realize the sheer amount of food that the organization moves through. Clearly, the work they do at the Food Bank impacts the community in a meaningful and significant way.



## **Personal Reflection: Michael Schwartz (City and Regional Planning + Health Behavior Health Education)**

The fact that people go to sleep hungry in the richest country in the world is a tragedy. Much of this problem can be attributed to a wasting of resources – so much food goes to waste everyday unnecessarily. Food Banks address issues of sustainability and recycling (key terms in City and Regional Planning) by getting the most out of the food that has already been produced. In addition, the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina has made significant efforts to provide healthy foods, which can be very difficult for low income populations to access. The importance of this contribution in reducing health disparities across racial and income divides (a key tenet of public health) cannot be overlooked.

Our volunteer experience helped reinforce how much effort and money goes into giving away free food. It felt good to be part of this effort for a few hours, especially since volunteers are clearly a key source of labor for the Food Bank. Plus, I got introduced to Bachelor Brand's Mushy®. The use of Nickelodeon® green slime on the can's label taught me a valuable lesson in marketing; sometimes it is best not to show the actual product inside the can if you want it to sell.

## **Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocate-Program** Project Coordinated by Holly Colon (School Psychology)

In 1992 Neil Pedersen, superintendent of Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, commissioned the Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF) on the Achievement of African American Students to address data from End-of-Grade testing which revealed that while over 90% of White students in grades 3-8 demonstrated proficiency in reading and math that year, only 45% of African American students met or exceeded these standards. In the face of this achievement gap, the BRTF was commissioned to promote educational equity by: 1.) "Raising the achievement of all students while"; 2.) "Narrowing the gaps between the highest and lowest students"; and 3.) "Eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student populations occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories" ([www.chccs.k12.nc.us/MinorityStudentAchievement/HistoricalPerspective\\_files/frame.htm](http://www.chccs.k12.nc.us/MinorityStudentAchievement/HistoricalPerspective_files/frame.htm)). In an effort to work toward these goals, BRTF implemented a mentoring program for African American students at all schools. In 1995 the Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocate Program was borne out of the initiative of the BRTD on African American Student Achievement.

After over ten years in existence, the BRMA Program fulfills its mission to facilitate supportive relationships between adults and children for well over 100 students. Students are identified by school counselors and teachers in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and many receive consistent mentoring and support from the BRMA Program throughout middle school and high school. Students are carefully matched with mentors that have the potential to expand the scope of their future endeavors and help them actualize their academic, physical,

emotional, and social potential. Mentors, a diverse array of community members, commit to spend two hours per week with their mentee over the course of a minimum of two years ([www.chccs.k12.nc.us/brma/](http://www.chccs.k12.nc.us/brma/)). In recent years, the BRMA program has expanded to provide not only mentorship, but also tutoring, advocacy, enrichment, leadership training, and scholarship support services. These additional supports are intended to provide students and mentors with the means to engender additional protective factors within the emergent young adult.

The Weiss Urban Livability Program identified the BRMA Program as an organization to foster a relationship and collaborate to meet a common end. Carrie Cook, BRMA Tutorial Coordinator, was contacted to identify a potential area of involvement. Ms. Cook was in the initial planning stages of a Career Exploration Panel and Discussion, titled “*I want to be a...*,” an event designed to help young adults navigate their transition into adulthood. In an effort to meet the needs of a growing district, the BRMA Program gathers together members of the community to increase the “social capital” of students who might not otherwise be exposed to such cultural, academic, and professional diversity. The Career Exploration Panel and Discussion provided an opportunity to not only expand student’s potential career horizons, but also generate connections with members of the community. Weiss ULP Fellows aided in the solicitation of potential career panelists. Fellows inquired within their own social, community, and professional networks, requesting a donation of time and professional knowledge and expertise.

The event, “*I want to be a...*” took place on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Four Fellows were in attendance to greet and welcome students and panelists and encourage students to approach panelists and ask questions. Weiss Fellow Jennifer Miller’s efforts to acquire four panelists from the Bell Tower Toastmasters were well received. Students, mentors, and Weiss Fellows alike were inspired by the presentations made by Toastmasters participants in the respective fields of medicine, architecture, pharmaceutical and laboratory science, and translation services. Members of the BRMA Program were appreciative of these professionals’ generous donation of time and energy and the intriguing insight and exposure provided in the formative years of students’ professional and educational interests. The BRMA Program also expressed interest in collaborating with the Weiss ULP in future endeavors of unifying and common interest.

**Personal Reflection: Michael Schwartz (City and Regional Planning + Health Behavior Health Education)**

I was thoroughly impressed with the Blue Ribbon Mentors Advocate. Listening to Carrie Cook speak, I was reminded that often extra time, effort, and care are the only things standing in the way of the success of a child. This group has made its way into both of my fields of study. First, some of my colleagues from the Department of City and Regional Planning are tutors for BRMA, and one of them is going to be a mentor next year. Secondly, I have been performing a community health assessment on people from Burma living in Chapel Hill and Carrboro. One of the Karen (ethnic group of Burma) children is in the BRMA program, and I know that it has made an enormous difference

for her. Educational achievement and fulfilling careers for everyone are fundamental to successful cities and healthy people.

The career fair was thoroughly enjoyable. Adults and children alike got a kick out of the panel because of how much fun they had in presenting about their professions. They were creative, funny, and charismatic. Many presenters discussed non obvious aspects of their profession that make them appealing. For example, the dental student talked about the benefits of a four day work week in helping him pursue other hobbies and interests. It was also great to meet Graig Meyer, the coordinator of the program. His passion is clearly one of the main reasons for the success of the program.

### **Personal Reflection: Andy Sharma (Public Policy)**

Participating in the Blue Ribbon project was a pleasant surprise. Specifically, I was expecting to hear, “I work as an....” and “I spend the day...” or “Here is a list of my duties...” This was not the primary message sent by the panel; rather, the main message was “You can be *successful* if you...” and “Doing what you *like* is important and...” Another salient message was not just providing services, but “providing services that *enrich* human life.” I was captivated by the UNC dental student and UNC medical student and their work in urban centers of developing regions. Their studies were not just preparing them for a profession, but, in their words, a profession that gives the poorest of the poor basic medical services. Their presentations were touching—in fact, all the presentations were tear-jerkers that made me re-think “mentoring.”

### **Personal Reflection: Jennifer Miller (Public Policy)**

The career fair we participated in with Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocates was a very enjoyable event for me. I especially enjoyed inviting five of my fellow Toastmasters to share information about their varied careers in sales, translation services, medicine, pharmaceutical research, and architecture. Since these participants made up five of the nine speakers at the event, I feel confident that our participation made a meaningful contribution to the success of the event.

From a public policy perspective, a substantial investment is being made in these children by selecting them for mentoring in grade four and continuing the program through high school. I definitely support the overall policy objective of investing in low-income, minority, and otherwise disadvantaged students. Some policy questions were raised by this specific program, which is part of Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools but heavily dependent on individual donor support. For example, is the investment in these particular students a better policy choice than investing more broadly in students across North Carolina? I am delighted that we had the opportunity to learn about this program and contribute our efforts to the career fair event.

## Durham Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods

Project Coordinated by Jennifer Miller (Public Policy)

Durham Congregations, Associations and Neighborhoods (CAN) is first of all an organization of organizations. Durham CAN is a local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). The IAF is an international nonpartisan political organization devoted to empowering communities and creating social change.

Durham CAN seemed like an excellent organization to partner with to illustrate the connections between public policy and urban livability. The organization empowers local residents to address the issues that they perceive as barriers to livability in their urban environments. Past achievements by Durham CAN include addressing lead paint in low-income housing and lobbying the city to provide bilingual Spanish-speaking 911 operators. Currently CAN's work is organized into five action teams: Healthcare access, housing and neighborhoods, jobs and economic development, technology / communications, and youth/education. Our original project plan was to work with the healthcare access action team to write publicity materials promoting their efforts to improve access to healthcare for Durham's uninsured.

Ivan Parra, Durham CAN's Interim Organizer, visited our seminar and discussed CAN's mission and methods. He described several cases where CAN had successfully mobilized large numbers of Durham residents to demonstrate support for identified priorities. We were impressed by his persuasive negotiation and communication skills. We also saw examples of how conflict must sometimes be confronted and worked through in order to find a compromise or win-win solution that works for all parties.

Three of the fellows attended CAN's leadership retreat held at Union Baptist Church in Durham. We attended the retreat to learn more about CAN and especially the work of the healthcare access action team. The event was well attended by about 50 people from CAN's various member organizations. Some notable aspects of the event were the diversity of the attendees, the simultaneous translation that allowed Spanish-speakers to be full participants in the meeting, the presentation of a "power analysis" describing the key players and institutions in Durham politics, and lunch of homemade tamales.

At the retreat, we also learned that the healthcare access action team was in a period of rapid change. Just the day before, they had met with key stakeholders and realized that they would need to make substantial changes to their course of action. Because of the uncertainty of their specific plans, they were hesitant to launch a publicity campaign at this time. This was a valuable lesson for us about the roles of timing and dynamic change in a political context. We put the publicity project on hold. Additional fellows who would like to support or learn more about Durham CAN will have opportunities to participate in CAN's Delegate's Assembly and other events this spring.

### **Personal Reflection: Andy Sharma (Public Policy)**

The Durham CAN project highlights urban livability at its best—people from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds working together to promote economic well-being and financial security. I was awestruck by the organization, coordination, and participation by so many individuals working towards a common goal of better wages, health care services, and community recognition. Engaging in this project allowed insight into the difficult living conditions faced by so many individuals in an urban environment that does not necessarily translate to “Bright Lights and Big City.” In other words, the urban environment, much like the jungle, has its oasis, predatory glitches, and safe dens. Watching and listening to the Durham CAN organization leaders permitted to me to understand how underprivileged and under-represented groups can have a voice.

### **Personal Reflection: Anne Patrone (City and Regional Planning)**

As a planning student, the concept of Durham CAN really appeals to me. One of the greatest challenges a planner faces is discovering how to bring a diverse group of stakeholders into the public participation process. The coalition represented by Durham CAN is a rich cross-section of Durham’s population, and provides a way for citizens to get their opinions heard about the place where they live and the issues that affect them. Durham CAN’s united front also provides an otherwise fragmented collection of smaller groups with greater political power and influence.

Durham CAN succeeds where local government has failed to include members of the public. By encouraging individuals to make their voices heard through the group’s focus on leadership and issue campaigns, Durham CAN creates a proactive population which fully takes advantage of the democratic process. The group’s mission and achievements are laudable, and it is, at least to me, an example of urban livability at its best.

### **Personal Reflection: Holly Colon (School Psychology)**

On the morning of the Durham C.A.N. meeting held at Union Baptist Church I set out to learn about the process of transforming healthcare into an accessible reality for the citizens and families of Durham. As an educator, I emphasize the importance for this vital service, civil right, and quality of life issue for *families*. Though I will provide educational and mental health services to children and families in a school setting, the health and security of the children and families that I serve form are the foundation for their future success. The medical care of children and parents is central to their basic academic, social, and emotional prosperity. Thus, despite my distant professional knowledge of medicine and healthcare, I have a stake and interest in an integrated approach to meeting the needs of the whole child.

Attending the organization’s meeting was a moving experience in and of itself, however. Though we as Weiss Fellows attended the community meeting with the intent of gathering more information on healthcare reforms, much was learned from the unfolding of the regular contents of the meeting agenda and the exuberance of those in attendance.

Ivan Parra, interim organizer began with rounds of introductions that truly set a tone of acceptance for the valued perspective and contribution of each individual organization in attendance. It was enlightening to witness the reciprocation of this interaction. It came as no surprise that the much of the morning was dedicated to drumming up the financial support of member organizations. Mr. Parra emphasized the importance of becoming a self-sufficient organization, independent of the financial contributions of influencing bodies. Leadership capacity was another important item of discussion. Training was valued as a key component to building stronger core teams in every institution.

Needless to say, the nearly half of the day had passed with the focus on these two organizational items alone. Without having heard about the healthcare agenda and its connection to children and families, I was still able to walk away with a sense of the organization's connection to children and youth in the community. Organizers and community participants acknowledged the importance of training teenagers to be community organizers. Several organizations committed to leadership development training. This valuation intuited in youth spoke to the organization's and the city of Durham's future potential and the more immediate empowerment of young community members.