

# Civic Matters

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*A Catalyst for Community Dialogue*

David R. Ross  
Richard Stahnke  
Page Walker Buck  
Vanessa Christman  
Chris MacDonald-Dennis  
Nell Anderson  
Dawn Bruton  
Mary Florence Sullivan  
Megan Bailey  
Rebecca Woodruff  
Laura Blankenship

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## Contents

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<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Policy Analysis and Economic Advocacy</i> by David R. Ross and Richard Stahnke	5
<i>Learning to Listen: A Speech about Love and Social Justice</i> by Page Walker Buck	9
<i>“There is No Hierarchy of Oppression”: Excerpts from an Interview about Understanding Social Justice</i> by Vanessa Christman and Chris MacDonald-Dennis	12
<i>Networking and Knitworking: Social Change That’s Warm and Fuzzy</i> by Nell Anderson	15
<i>Photo Essay</i> by Dawn Bruton	20
<i>Mi Experiencia en Perú: Living and Learning in Tacna</i> by Mary Florence Sullivan	23
<i>From Bryn Mawr College to the Philly Fellows Program: An Interview with Two Alumnae</i> by Megan Bailey and Rebecca Woodruff	29
<i>Being on the Political Sidelines</i> by Laura Blankenship	36

## *Mission*

*Civic Matters* uses a wide-angle lens to view civic engagement at Bryn Mawr College and creates a public space for members of our campus community to tell the stories of their civic involvement and to reflect on the learning, challenges, and ideas that emerge from it. It is our hope that this publication sparks conversation and becomes a catalyst for a more dynamic integration of civic engagement within the life of this academic institution.

## *Introduction*

The *Civic Matters* editorial team is pleased to present to the Bryn Mawr College community its third issue. Readers may notice that this issue has a different look and feel than previous issues. Last summer, members of the editorial team convened a small group of students, staff, and faculty to hear feedback and solicit suggestions for the journal. This group brought insightful perspectives, creative ideas, and a great deal of enthusiasm to the editorial team, which resulted in a number of changes to this issue.

Readers will, we hope, notice the color center spread, designed to increase the journal's visual appeal. Another goal for this issue was to include a wider variety of articles as part of an effort to open the journal to a broader range of contributors. This is reflected in a number of pieces: excerpts from Page Walker Buck's convocation speech and its companion piece, excerpts from a conversation that took place between Vanessa Christman and Chris MacDonald-Dennis on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2008; a photo essay by Dawn Bruton; and excerpts from an interview with Megan Bailey '08 and Rebecca Woodruff '08 about their experiences as Philly Fellows this year. Readers can now access *Civic Matters* online at <http://www.brynmawr.edu/ceo/civcmatters/> to find the articles that appear in this issue and related audio recordings, photos, and links to further information. With these changes, the editorial team hopes to reach additional readers and encourage new contributions, inspiring broader thought and deeper conversation about the rich variety of civic engagement activities occurring in our community every day.

Editorial Team:  
Gail Hemmeter  
Julie Zaebst '03

Julia Lustick '09 assisted with copy editing for this issue.

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## *Policy Analysis and Economic Advocacy*

by David R. Ross and Richard Stahnke

An important element in most service-learning or civic engagement programs like Bryn Mawr College's Praxis program is the application of academic skills in a manner useful to stakeholders outside the academy. Writing for "outsiders" raises the stakes for students and instructors alike.

In most cases, such public writing is very different from the published works that dominate academic disciplines, e.g., research articles or critical essays. Mastering the demands of disciplinary writing is crucial for the successful completion of a major and for pursuing graduate study in an academic field, but it ill prepares graduates for the sort of writing they are likely to encounter in jobs and civic engagement.

To address this need for the 2007-2008 academic year, we formed a team to design and implement a seminar for senior economics majors called "Policy Analysis and Economic Advocacy." We shared lead instructor responsibilities. Alla Myrvoda '09, as teaching fellow, supported the course design and worked with Susan Turkel, the outreach and information technology librarian, to facilitate data gathering. Liza Bernard, the director of the Bi-College Career Development Office, and Julie Zaebst, the training and programming coordinator of the Civic Engagement Office, assisted in lining up and working with partner organizations. Gail Hemmeter, director of writing support services, commented on details of the writing assignments and participated in reflection sessions halfway through.

The primary objective for the seminar was to bring students to the point where they could produce a publishable piece of advocacy (publishable meaning that it would be useful to a non-governmental organization (NGO), congressional office, or business or that it would be on a par with opinion articles in influential newspapers). The economics department offered the course both semesters (with six students in the fall and nine in the spring), creating an immediate opportunity to build on successes and to learn from mistakes. The department will offer the seminar again in spring 2009.

We began each semester with a three-week advocacy “boot camp” to draw distinctions between effective and ineffective advocacy, highlight common pitfalls, and help students escape the academic mindset. In doing so, we benefited enormously from the participation of a number of visitors: Congressman Joe Sestak; Chris Satullo and John Timpane, from the editorial board of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*; Cynthia Eyakuze’94 and Susan Wood, Hepburn fellows; Joanna Underwood ’62, president of Energy Vision; and Steven Wray, executive director of the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia.

The remainder of the semester was divided into two five-week paper-drafting modules, with an evaluation week in-between. Students used the period immediately following the end of classes to make final revisions before submitting their final module papers to the target organization, office, or publication. Additional visitors joined us for that week between the modules for a discussion of lessons learned. In all, 16 visitors joined us in the fall and spring, and we were able to leverage some of their visits into public presentations or discussions for the community. We had designed the course to draw students out into the larger community. The engagement of partners with the campus community was an unexpected benefit.

During each of the five-week paper modules we asked students to craft a piece of effective advocacy on a topic a) that mattered to them, b) that generated a call to change existing policies, and c) for which an understanding of economics would inform the argument likely to emerge. The first two weeks of each module were devoted to producing a 10-page background paper, with the goal of gathering all the information needed to execute the appropriate advocacy strategy. Students found it challenging to shift gears from summarizing the relevant information for the background paper to drafting the advocacy paper due at the end of week three. To address this difficulty, we added a “pre-draft” memo between the background paper and advocacy paper first draft. The memo could be a set of notes in outline form, a stream of consciousness, or a combination of draft excerpts and key points – anything that would help the student pull the first draft together. During week four, each student wrote peer

reviews for two classmates and the seminar discussed each draft. The final piece was due at the end of week five.

Our goal was for students to learn to produce work that would be useful to outside stakeholders. In addition to expressing economic ideas in clear and understandable lay language, students needed to connect to the intended audience and focus on selling their analysis. One student, for example, in a letter to Governor Rendell against the immediate funding of “liquid coal” (a gasoline alternative), improved her communication with the governor by realizing he was a busy politician and would prefer to know immediately what the letter writer wanted. She revised her letter to express the main point in the opening paragraph, dropping compliments about the governor’s environmental record and other preliminaries.

Students varied greatly in their abilities to write for a lay audience during module one. Some common early problems included the use of economic jargon that ordinary people would not be able to understand, a lack of clarity as to what was desired from the audience, and an ineffective hook for an opinion-editorial piece or persuasive letter. Nonetheless, each student who struggled during this first part made great strides in completing the second module and is now better prepared to write in a work environment and advocate for specific policies.

Connecting the problem at hand to a relevant economic principle sometimes proved to be a challenge. For example, in order to make a strong case for government action, a student advocating for a federal response to tainted imported drugs had to begin by recognizing the failure of the market to yield adequate information for prospective buyers.

After justifying the need for action, identifying an optimal policy response usually requires weighing incremental costs against benefits. It is easy to miss an important cost or benefit in working through an economic accounting exercise, especially when the core argument behind a proposal is non-economic in nature. For example, by focusing on humanitarian arguments for encouraging restaurants to participate in a free UNICEF program to bring clean water to developing countries, one student initially failed to notice that participation could also have a marketing benefit for

the restaurants. This ultimately became a central argument in her trade magazine opinion-editorial piece. We've encouraged the economics department to consider how it can better prepare students in foundational courses to apply the tools they've learned to the complex policy problems that engage them.

Virtually all the final papers in the fall and spring were received well by their targets. One set of talking points was used with only minor alteration in lobbying for revisions to teacher certification requirements in Missouri. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* accepted an opinion-editorial piece on the impact of ethanol-driven price increases on local bakeries (only to bump it at deadline for other content). Another advocacy piece, promoting Philadelphia as a great place to go to college, ran in the fall 2008 issue of *Campus Visit Philadelphia*. Useful, indeed!

All the student course evaluations were positive, some describing it as the best course they'd taken at Bryn Mawr. Strictly speaking, this seminar fit none of the course templates defined under Bryn Mawr's Praxis program, in which fieldwork visits (ranging from one to three times per week) enrich or lie at the heart of disciplinary, interdepartmental, or independent learning. But by challenging students and faculty to produce work that is useful to an organization outside the College, the course focused on issues of audience and civic engagement which are at the heart of the Praxis program and what it means to be an educated citizen.

**David R. Ross** is an associate professor of economics. He became so interested in bridging the gap between academia and public policy that he convinced his neighbors to elect him a supervisor for West Nottingham Township.

**Richard Stahnke** is a visiting assistant professor of economics. He enjoys teaching public policy-related courses. In part inspired by his experience in this seminar, he added public finance to his teaching portfolio for the fall semester.

### *Learning to Listen: A Speech about Love and Social Justice*

by Page Walker Buck

Editors' Note

*Below is an excerpt from Page Walker Buck's convocation speech, delivered at Bryn Mawr College's 2008 convocation ceremony. Page spoke as a representative of the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, where she completed her master's and doctoral work. Page began her speech by acknowledging graduates' friends and family members in the audience, including her grandmother.*

**M**y kids are incredibly lucky to have a great-grandmother in their lives for all of the obvious reasons, but even more so, because she is the daughter of a Bryn Mawr alumna. My great-grandmother graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1902 with a double major in history and political science!

What I would give to have known her and asked her what it was like to be a college-educated woman from Bryn Mawr during the Progressive Era. What I would give to have been able to listen to her stories. However, had we crossed paths when I was younger, I wonder whether I really would have listened to her, whether I would have honestly known how to. I say this because listening is not something that we are taught to do in this society. It is not something that we value. We tend to think that listening automatically happens when you're not talking. If you're quiet, then you must be listening. The most we teach about listening when you're young is that you need to sit still and wait your turn. As an adult, it's even worse—we don't even pretend to be listening. We have all of these talk shows now where the guests actually sit there shaking their heads and smirking while their counterparts are talking. You know, I expect some eye-rolling from my 11-year-old, but when obvious disregard for other perspectives becomes the standard form of engagement on national television, I get worried.

Listening is a difficult skill that takes time to develop. And it is also an art. As social workers, we are taught to actively engage with the people we are

with. Sometimes they are talking, other times they are not—but we are always listening because we know that to understand someone's life story, to really understand how they came to embody their beliefs and values, we need to listen to them. This is especially true for the most vulnerable members of our society, those whose stories are so rarely heard—and when they are, they are deemed invalid.

Too often we stop listening when we hear things that we disagree with or don't understand. We can't seem to tolerate difference across so many different issues—how we live, where we pray, and whom we love. And this is a pretty scary thing because there is a lot of difference in this world—even among those of us gathered here today. If the best we can do is to turn our ears off every time we hear something we don't like or understand, we are in serious trouble.

We formed this democracy specifically to account for difference; that's the basis of a representative system. And yet somehow, we have come to believe that our differences are a liability, that they are what is wrong with our society today. In large part, I think this has happened because we live vastly different lives in this country and often do not have the opportunity to understand the basis for our differences.

I am not here to suggest that I have mastered the skill of listening. But I am here to tell you that I am committed to joining a growing number of social activists who believe that if we are to be truly engaged in the pursuit of social justice, we must first find a way to nurture our collective listening skills.

So I'd like you to consider the following. Change often happens incrementally, although sometimes in radical ways. And today, I hope that you will join me in taking a radical stance on listening. I'm hoping that you'll start by inviting someone you know to tell you a story about their life—something about themselves that you never knew or that they have never shared. Listen to their story as if you were running a marathon—with all of your energy and might. Take in the sadness and joy; revel in the success and experience the pain.

And I hope that you will consider recording your stories through StoryCorps. If you haven't heard of it, StoryCorps is a non-profit, national oral history project dedicated to creating social change through the art of listening. With recording booths all over the United States, you can make a reservation and invite someone to sit and tell you their story, a copy of which is archived in the Library of Congress.

By inviting someone to tell you a story about his or her life, you would be not only honoring and celebrating this person, but also preserving a piece of his or her life history that might otherwise go unrecorded—like that of my great-grandmother. But perhaps more importantly, you would be joining something much larger. If we understand listening to be a true act of love (and I do), and if we believe that we can build on the momentum that StoryCorps has started, we have a chance to be a part of tangible social change. So many times I have heard students ask what they can do to make a difference when we seem to be facing such daunting social issues. So I'm here to suggest that this is something that we can do together.

StoryCorps invites us to interview someone we know as a way to bring attention to the love that rests within us individually and collectively. And I hope you will. But I am asking you to take this one step further and to make the time to listen to someone whom you don't know, whose life story may otherwise never be heard, much less celebrated. And then do it again. Because, in the end, we know that a just society is a natural consequence of appreciation for our shared humanity.

**Page Walker Buck M.S.S. '04, Ph.D. '08** is an assistant professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania in the department of graduate social work. She teaches courses in oppression and liberation, social work practice with groups, and human behavior in the social environment. Her current research focuses on the psychosocial implications of brain injury.

*“There is No Hierarchy of Oppression”:*

*Excerpts from an Interview about Understanding Social Justice*

by Vanessa Christman and Chris MacDonald-Dennis

Editors’ Note

*Bryn Mawr College held its own Community StoryCorps session on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2008. Students, faculty, and staff had the opportunity to interview each other in front of a small audience of community members about any aspect of their lives that they wished. Though not coordinated through the national StoryCorps project, organizers of the Bryn Mawr event had similar goals of honoring individuals’ experiences and building community through the sharing of personal stories.*

*Vanessa Christman, coordinator of Intercultural Affairs, interviewed Chris MacDonald-Dennis, assistant dean and director of Intercultural Affairs. Below is an excerpt from that interview.*

Vanessa: [W]here have your ideas about social justice come from?

Chris: I actually would like to talk about a specific experience that really put me on my path to what I believe today. Audre Lorde, who is a black poet who died twenty years ago, came out with this piece in which she said, “There is no hierarchy of oppression.” It’s one of those adages that in the world of social justice we say a lot, but I don’t know that a lot of us always think that and live that in a way that is very true.

For me, something that happened eleven years ago really showed to me what that meant. I lived in New Hampshire, [and] I worked at a small rural college outside of Concord, New Hampshire. Twelve years ago I was also diagnosed with HIV. At that time I was kind of figuring out, “What does this mean for me? As a person with a disability, a person with HIV, how does that change my life?” and ... HIV wasn’t as big then so there weren’t the same type of resources. So the doctor that I went to [was] at the clinic in Manchester, New Hampshire, and there was a support group every Tuesday—I’ll never forget it. And I remember saying, “Oh, I should

go, I should go,” and I said, “Well finally, I’m going to go and just talk about it, like, ‘What does this mean?’”

I remember walking in and being struck by how diverse it was. There was—I’ll never forget—there was a white man who was very wealthy who was a lawyer and had just been infected, [and] there was a black woman whose husband had just gotten out of jail, and he had gotten HIV. There was a Latina who had been a sex worker; there was another woman who was an IV [intravenous] drug user, and ... she was poor. You know, it really sounded kind of like what you picture the face of diversity. I remember sitting there thinking and looking at all those people, and although I believed, you know, that there was no hierarchy of oppression, thinking, “I have nothing in common with these people.” There were a couple of us who were gay, a couple of us who were straight, but I was like, “We have nothing in common.”

But as we talked, [I thought about] that whole idea that there is no hierarchy of oppression, and more importantly that when injustice anywhere happens, it’s a threat to justice everywhere. Then I saw how linked we were, because what I realized with all of our stories is that we were all people who the society told that we didn’t [matter]. I heard over and over and over again the stories about people feeling shamed and not loving themselves, over our own race, over our sexual orientation, over our own class, always being the throwaways. And I just remember thinking, “We have a lot more in common than I ever thought.”

Yeah, I especially remember the white man who was a lawyer. He had gone to Dartmouth and he had been from money, and I was like ... “Yeah, we may be both gay, but that means we have nothing in common.” But when we both got into deep stuff like how we live and the shame that we felt, it was like, “Yup, I know that, I hear that,” and I just remember that that experience really made me believe that we had to fight all forms of oppression. And that doesn’t mean that they ... all impact us equally ... but oppression minimizes us as human beings and does not allow us to fly. It was that moment sitting there that this disease brought me closer to my common humanity.



**Vanessa Christman** is coordinator of Intercultural Affairs and the Leadership Empowerment and Advancement Program (LEAP). She learns a lot from other people’s stories.

**Chris MacDonald-Dennis** is assistant dean and director of Intercultural Affairs. He describes himself as a realistic radical and believes that we are always moving toward a more just world.

*Networking and Knitworking:  
Social Change That’s Warm and Fuzzy*

by Nell Anderson

Last semester, a diversity conversation at the Bryn Mawr College Multicultural Center focused on how to move from conversations about diversity to actual social change. One of the students asked, “Maybe we should ask ourselves what social change would look like in our campus community?” It occurs to me that we might also want to ask ourselves, “Where is social change already happening on this campus?” Maybe we can learn about what social change *could* look like by paying some attention to the places where it is already happening and by learning from those who are involved.

From my point of view in the Praxis Office, I see signs of social change when academics are linked with community-building initiatives on and off campus. I have also noticed the way the Empowering Learners Program has made progress toward altering our notion of who is a teacher and who is a learner and have been impressed with the organizing efforts and the results of the Social Justice Pilot Program. From a distance, I have also been quite curious about another campus initiative ... the Knitting Club, which meets every Tuesday in the Campus Center.

I haven’t knit for years ... and couldn’t imagine finding an hour in the middle of the day to knit and converse. But I have been intrigued by the diverse composition of the group, which I heard about through two of my colleagues, Ellie Esmond and Ruth Strickland, who are members. Where else on campus do women from different employment levels and different departments, including housekeepers, secretaries, managers, faculty, mid-level and senior administrators (including the provost and the president), as well as retirees, alumnae, and current students, cross the boundaries that normally keep them apart and get together on a regular basis?

Historically, women gathering to do crafts have often had a social change agenda, as in Chile, where during times of martial law in the 1960s and 1970s, women from the shantytowns, who were prohibited by the government from meeting in groups for almost any reason, were permitted to

gather to make *arpilleras*, folk-art wall hangings that depicted scenes from their communities. Through the *arpillera* craft making, women subtly portrayed political perspectives on their communities and covertly continued political organizing activities. I wondered if the Knitting Club had its own social change agenda. From the outside, the boundary-crossing I observed seemed pretty revolutionary and suggested to me that this was another place on campus that social change was happening already. I decided to learn about this group from the members themselves.

I borrowed knitting needles and yarn from my daughter and showed up at the club one Tuesday in November. A small group of women was present when I arrived, some of whom I recognized and others I didn't. Ann Ogle and Melvina Taylor seemed quite used to getting novices started, and before long I was knitting my practice scarf. I knit and listened. There were clearly experts in the group, who were called upon for guidance with particular patterns and stitches. Knitting projects were taken seriously here, clearly not just an excuse to get together and talk. Yet at the same time, while knitting needles clicked rapidly, pictures of grandchildren were circulated and news about colleagues who were out sick was shared. Everyone was interested in the progress of the knitting projects, even mine, which progressed slowly row by row. Women whose lunchtimes started later on came in as others went back to work, so I was introduced many times. There was a buzz of friendly camaraderie and a very relaxed atmosphere. For a social action movement, this seemed very mellow; but I was still curious and, by now, also wanted to learn how to knit again.

During the following weeks, I learned about the history of the group. Everyone seemed to agree that Ann Ogle, secretary for the psychology department and a Staff Association representative, had been the energizer and organizer for this initiative. Ann started the club as a Staff Association-sponsored enrichment class in 2006 and invited expert knitters and McBride alumnae Helen Rehl and Elaine Ewing to teach the class. Ann contributed the focus on service-learning. Her idea was to learn about knitting and to engage in service through knitting. The club has made chemo caps for cancer patients at Bryn Mawr Hospital, blankets and ponchos for the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, and sweaters and scarves for Laurel House, a domestic violence shelter in Norristown.

However, the members alternate between service knitting projects and individual knitting projects. When I was there, many members were knitting presents for family members and friends. A faculty member stopped by for some last-minute advice on a sweater she was working on for her grandchild. My colleague Ellie has been working on a bunny-blanket for a friend's new baby. Helen was working on some beautiful fingerless gloves that I would later see for sale at the Staff Association Holiday Fair. Ann was working on a new handbag project with yarn that had been donated. I loved the way individual projects were appreciated and supported as much as the group service projects.

Ann Ogle proudly pointed out that this group is the only one of the initial enrichment classes that kept going; and although she claims that it is not an activist group, she also mentioned that her inspiration for the group came from her involvement years earlier in the Green Plan Committee, an initiative for environmental action that included participation from all College constituencies. Ann noticed the way that coming together with a shared interest in environmental sustainability enabled people to cut across boundaries and hoped that coming together with common interest in knitting would do the same.

Within the group, there is clearly a sense that boundaries are a problem to be overcome here at Bryn Mawr. Though a state of martial law has not taken away our right to meet in groups as it did with our Chilean "sisters," we face other social networking obstacles. Here are some of those identified in my conversations with the Knitting Club:

You only know each other through phone or email. We would never know each other without this group. Some departments and therefore some staff never interact. (Diane McLaughlin)

The original goal of the Friday morning coffee hour was fellowship, but even there, people tend to stay in their own cliques. Even at coffee hour, people stay in their own cliques. (Ann Ogle)

As a recent graduate who just started working here, I see the campus boundaries very clearly now. Social connections don't

happen easily for staff with each other or between students and staff. (Catherine Farman)

I joined the club just to sit with people I didn't know. As a student, you don't get to meet many staff. Other than the Teaching and Learning Initiative, there aren't many opportunities to meet staff. (Becca Rebhuhn-Glanz)

Before joining this group, I didn't know any people at work who shared my passion for art. It's an amazing feeling to be with these other artists and to see what they are creating from week to week. (Dawn Bruton)

For this group, social networking across boundaries is as important as the knitting needles. Most of the members were invited by others or heard about the group by word of mouth. Some have known each other for years. Ann Ogle and Helen Rehl worked together at the Shipley School before coming to Bryn Mawr. Helen and Norma Fabian met as young women in New York City. Eileen Cassidy was invited by Helen; Dawn Bruton invited her student partner in the Empowering Learners Program, Caroline Goldstein. Kim Cassidy and Leslie Rescorla know Ann through the psychology department and were eager to seek out the knitting expertise of the group. Ellie Esmond invited Ruth Strickland, etc. There is an emphasis on actively conveying the message that everyone is welcome. The group goes beyond an open-door policy. Their meetings are actually on the Campus Center balcony, where there is no door at all. One of the student members, Becca Rebhuhn-Glanz, was downstairs in the Campus Center knitting by herself when Melvina Taylor saw her and went down to invite her upstairs. Becca has been a member ever since. Since she happens to be the head of the student knitting club, her involvement has provided a great link between student and employee knitting projects.

When newly-appointed president Jane McAuliffe visited campus last summer, Dawn Bruton told her about the club, having read in a newspaper article that she was an avid knitter. The new president expressed an interest in joining, which set into motion a new Knitting Club project, a presidential afghan, to welcome the new member. This afghan was truly a work of art, designed by Helen Rehl. Each woman knit a unique square

and they sewed it all together as a group at Helen's house, a process that was chronicled by Dawn in a beautiful scrapbook. The afghan and the scrapbook were presented to President McAuliffe at the first Staff Association meeting last fall.

In addition to job and age diversity, the multicultural diversity of the group is striking. The women pointed out to me that they have members from Ireland, England, Norway, and Jamaica and that two kinds of knitting, Continental and English, are practiced.

It is not surprising that this knitters' network has become meaningful to the members' experiences at Bryn Mawr. The relationships between the women as individuals and the connections created within the network constitute tangible social capital. In their words:

This is unique for a workplace and contributes to morale. There is a place you belong. I look forward to this every week. I catch up, gossip, keep in touch. News from other departments is shared when it might not have been known otherwise. (Ann Ogle)

We are real with each other in this group and able to connect on a personal level. I love it that there are no agendas. It's very unusual at this college for a meeting not to have an agenda. (Ellie Esmond)

We come together in our group to make things with our hands—to wear, to give away to those in need. We plan projects together, talk, show one another “how-to,” share our lives, and learn together. Much like the Norns of Norse mythology and Spiderwoman of Native American lore, we weave the web that holds us all together—something women have done through the ages. (Helen Rehl)

We have all formed cherished friendships that are warm and enduring through working together on common goals. Every one of us treasures this time. (Elaine Ewing)

(continued on page 22)



Good friends are like sweaters – they age with you, yet never lose their warmth.



Yarn is the thread that binds us.



Give a gal a scarf and she has an accessory. Teach her to knit and she'll be in stitches the rest of her life.



A life lesson we learn from knitting is that it is okay to rip things out and try again.

I am just getting started with my knitting. I know the women think I just infiltrated their group to be able to write this article, but I really do want to knit. I have a lot to learn and can't think of a better environment to learn in. I don't know if all social change takes place through acceptance and inclusion, working side by side on projects with people you didn't know before, giving to others, and taking time for oneself ... but there is no doubt in my mind that more of this kind of social change would be beneficial to Bryn Mawr College and to me.

**Nell Anderson** is the co-director of the Civic Engagement Office, where she provides support to the Praxis program and to a variety of campus-community partnerships.

*Mi Experiencia en Perú: Living and Learning in Tacna*

by Mary Florence Sullivan

As my flight pulled into Tacna's little airport, I pressed my nose against the airplane window to catch my first nocturnal glimpse of the desert city. Exhaustion from the long journey turned into adrenaline as I gathered my bags from the overhead compartment and proceeded down the airplane's stairs into the arrival gate. With the help of some Peruvian friends I'd made on the plane, I clumsily arranged my heavy bags onto a cart and wheeled my way outside where the families and friends of the passengers were waiting to greet them. My nerves melted away as I gazed at the restless crowd: two women, one in her fifties and one much younger, were standing at the very front of the crowd, beaming and holding a small cardboard sign that read, "Bienvenida Florencia." Before I could make out the words on the sign, I knew who they were. After hugs and warm smiles were exchanged, they introduced themselves as Hermana Zaida and Hermana Martha.

Weeks later in my journey I found out they also knew who I was—one of the few clearly American-looking people on the plane—the moment they saw me. They told me they could tell by the excitement and youthfulness of my energy that I was the one coming to live with them. Our taxi ride home was filled with "no comprendo" and "como se dice," as my Spanish was sub-par during my first few weeks in Tacna. Yet despite the misunderstandings and silences as I racked my brain for the Spanish phrases I knew, the warmth and gentleness radiating from the patient smiles of these Sisters of St. Joseph were extraordinary. I knew at that moment that volunteering at the school of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondolet Fe y Alegria San José would be an incredible, life-changing summer.

My first week in Tacna was a slow and gradual orientation to the life I would be living for the coming months. I was shown my duties in the house: the weekly chores and breakfast duty and how to wash my clothes by hand on the roof. I was instructed that all drinking water must be boiled before it was safe to consume. The sisters advised me to rest my first few mornings there, not to rise at 5:30 a.m. as would become my custom later on in the trip. Simultaneously, I was introduced to the customs of

the school, following the sisters around like a shadow as they were pulled one way and then another, trying to complete their daily tasks but having to respond to every other issue at school that day.

The first day I walked through the cement courtyard, trailing the sisters nervously, I was followed by pressing eyes and soft whispers from the students. With my skin color and purple hair I invited questions and shy “Hola señorita” greetings from the bolder students. I will never forget Loida who walked straight up to me on my second day of school. With her best friend in tow, she greeted me with the customary kiss on the cheek, all the while asking in cryptic, rapid Spanish where I was from and whether or not New York was beautiful. Her enthusiasm welcomed me into this new, unfamiliar world. Every day following, I looked for her among the sea of children making their way to class in between marble games and jump rope. She similarly sought me out, greeting me with her wide smile and calling, “¡Maria Florencia! ¿Como está?”

I joined Hermana Martha in her first-grade class during my second week in Tacna. She was the teacher’s assistant and left to tend to other work in the school after I caught on to the job’s responsibilities. I was swarmed with questions on my first day in the class, like, “Why do you speak English?” and “Why is your hair purple?” and “Why do you live in the States?” I tried to answer the best I could, all the while trying to keep the 5- and 6-year-olds focused on practicing their cursive and learning addition. I fell in love with the class, the genuine happiness and excitement they felt over the simplest things, and the love and compassion that radiated from them as they greeted me with hugs and kisses each morning and, later, when they begged me to stay after my two months there were over.

It was a taxing job, in that the children in the class needed so much help. The class held 26 first-graders, all of them under the supervision of one teacher. She was excellent, and they listened to her with the utmost respect. It was difficult, though, seeing as the school has no special education classes or services for children with learning disabilities. I was there to help and work as much as I could one-on-one with the children who needed special attention. But they needed so much more than that. The frustration behind the eyes of the children burned each time they made a mistake or “couldn’t do it.” I sat down with patience and understand-

ing, yet it was very difficult most days to keep them after the bell rang at the close of school to finish their work and ensure they understood it. In the afternoons I would help Profesora Fortunada with her daily tutoring sessions for second graders. They were the children with the greatest behavioral issues who also had trouble with reading and math. We worked strenuously from two in the afternoon until four, practicing addition, spelling, and pronunciation.

Throughout the second half of my stay in Tacna, I began to help out in the English classes of the middle school-aged students in the evening. The class needed help with pronunciation, so I would go over lists of English words for family members, the class repeating each word after me in unison. Sometimes we had to repeat certain words more than once, and they would giggle at the difference between my thick American-English pronunciation and their Peruvian-Spanish. I began a unit “Parts of the Body” while I was there, teaching the entire class the song “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” standing on an empty desk in the front of the room. They were so excited to learn this elementary school classic, wanting to stay after the closing bell rang to make sure they knew it perfectly. A few of the students ran up to me after the class ended to hear me pronounce “ear” a few times more.

At the Sisters’ house, I lived communally with five Peruvian Sisters of St. Joseph: Hermana Zaida, Hermana Gloria, Hermana Rosa, Hermana Martha, and Hermana Sonia. Each weekday morning we would awake for prayer and meditation at 6:20, and immediately following we would enjoy breakfast together. That was one of my favorite times of day—the calm, reflective start to the day, everyone enjoying a meal together, all gathering before what was certainly going to be a busy day. Each afternoon we would somehow manage to meet for a large lunch around one, taking a little break from the 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. school day. Then at dinnertime, we would be together again to relax, sometimes by playing games or watching movies in the evenings. On weekends, weekly chores and lunch duty were shared among the house. Weekends were also the time for laundry (by hand), an extremely humbling and meditative experience for me as I wrung out my sheets and jeans deep in thought about the cross-cultural differences and similarities.

Living in a city where I was one of very few non-Peruvians, I learned more about their culture and lifestyle than I would have ever imagined. Where I lived there were no supermarkets or movie theaters. We bought fresh bread each morning from the corner bakery and fresh vegetables and meat each weekend from the open-air markets, and our dry or canned goods came from one of the hundreds of *tiendas* in the city. Poverty was apparent everywhere. All of the students at the school came from poor families, and most merchants were selling their wares to buy food for dinner that night. We didn't live in the wealthiest part of town. At the bottom of my street, a family owned a tire business. They would wake early each morning, carry all of the tires outside for display on the street, clean them several times when they became dirty with all of the dust, and put them away again each night after dark. My street ended with an unpaved road, surrounded by small city farms on rooftops and by houses that resembled sunken shacks. The simplicity of their lives was met with gratefulness instead of anger and discontent. Very few material possessions and opportunities were taken for granted. It was something different and refreshing to observe from what I've been used to in the United States.

My final day in the first-grade classroom was one of the most special days I have experienced in my life. That morning when I walked in the classroom, Profesora Ines signaled for each of them to close their notebooks for a little while because it was time to say goodbye to Florencia. They quickly put away their notebooks into their desks, and stared at Prof. Ines; my mother, who had arrived the night before and was taking pictures; and me. She told them that I would be going home and asked if they had anything to say to me. Many raised their hands and sheepishly told me, "Thank you, Maria Florencia, for all you have done for us. I love you!" My eyes filled up as they began a song they had prepared as a parting gift, the close of which opened the floor for little David to present me with a small present and thank you note from the class. I gave him a huge hug and kiss, at which point the entire class ran over and turned our hug into a group hug. Afterwards, I handed out three new pencils and one eraser to each of the students to remember me by. They were so pleased to receive the gifts, and the smiles that lit up their faces made every minute worth it. The sad "goodbye's" and "I'll miss you's" that morning made it extremely difficult to leave Fe y Alegria. I promised I would come back.

I was struck by the realization that no matter how different two cultures may seem, certain things always stay the same. In a country where it isn't customary for an adult to live far away from their family home, a country where children help their parents sell their goods in the marketplace (whether by holding a towel to protect their for-sale chocolates from the sun or by giving a sales pitch for their tired mother), a country where a rich, ancient culture is vastly embedded within the customs of modern life, a country where, despite how bad a state one may think the government is in, patriotism still runs strong, children are the same.

They still play tag and pretend games during recess. They argue over who gets to sit on the pillows in the library. They goof off in class while the teacher isn't looking. The boys tease the girls by stealing their pencils, and the girls tell on them. Middle school-aged teens are shy and confused about themselves. Mothers scold their children in the streets for straying too far from sight while playing, and children beg their parents for an ice cream or a sweet dessert from the street vendors.

I was frustrated when I returned home, trying to figure out how my plans to become a classics major had anything to do with solving the problems of today's world. Through much thought and reflection about my trip, I began to realize that we can solve problems by looking to the past, as a classics major does, and by looking at how certain issues from ancient history may have influenced developing issues today. Among the cultures of the world there are aspects that are similar universally, whether they are games between children, the acknowledgement of certain human rights, or the importance of a peaceful society. Quite obviously there are also innumerable differences between different cultures and within specific cultures—some people may not identify with the dominant, or accepted, culture. As one who studies ancient societies and researches the history of these cultures to understand where certain values held by society stem from, where we come from, and why we are the way we are, I am able to gain a deeper and unique perspective about the workings of the world. I am able to understand the differences that diversify us as well as the similarities that unite us and use these findings to resolve conflicts and rectify injustices that plague certain societies in our global community. It is crucial to take in a society's culture before attempting to understand the origins

of a conflict or the source of an injustice present within that society. We can use this insight to solve the social justice issues of today's world.

This experience has totally transformed my life, and I will never lose what I have learned nor the love and the warmth that I have gained from the incredible people I met throughout my entire journey: the students, the family of Fe y Alegria, other friends I made along the way, and, of course, the Sisters of St. Joseph.

*Con mucho cariño, muchísimas gracias.*

**Mary Florence Sullivan '11** is currently working toward a classical languages major with a concentration in peace and conflict studies. She is a member of the student activist group One World and the student-run theater group People in Color. She will be studying abroad in Europe next fall.

*From Bryn Mawr College to the Philly Fellows Program:  
An Interview with Two Alumnae*

by Megan Bailey and Rebecca Woodruff

Megan Bailey and Rebecca Woodruff didn't go far when they left Bryn Mawr College last May for the Philly Fellows program, and yet as fellows this year, they have had experiences they might not have imagined as students. Philly Fellows is a year-long fellowship program that offers recent college graduates the opportunity to work in capacity-building positions in a range of non-profit organizations in the city. Fellows receive housing, a living stipend, and various leadership and professional development opportunities. This year, Megan is working as a Finance and Development Associate at ACHIEVEability, which provides single-parent, formerly homeless families with housing and self-sufficiency services. Rebecca is a Financial Development Associate at the American Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania, where she is gaining general development experience in areas such as grant writing, special events, and donor cultivation and is working to reengage a younger generation in the work of the organization.

Recently, a member of the *Civic Matters* editorial team, Julie Zaebst, had an opportunity to talk with Megan and Rebecca about their experiences as Philly Fellows and to find out how a biology major becomes a grant writer and what the connections are between archaeology and civic engagement, among other things. Below is an excerpt from this interview.

Julie: I'm wondering what connections you see between your experiences at Bryn Mawr broadly speaking and the work that you're now doing?

Megan: Okay, well I would say first of all that I was very involved in the CEO [Civic Engagement Office] during my [undergraduate years] ... so everything I did was connected to non-profit work for the most part. And very specifically I took the Effective Grantsmanship seminar [a non-credit course in grant research and grant writing offered by the CEO in the fall 2006]. That was excellent preparation because now I do work on grant reports and things like that, and ... that's actually sort of what piqued my interest in the business side [of non-profits], in the fundrais-



ing, because all I really knew [before] was the direct service aspect from doing Saturdays of Service, from the [Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)] campaign, from working at Overbrook [High School]. I really didn't know anything about how the business side was actually run and how the fundraising happens, so that grant writing course was really valuable for that [reason].

As for courses and things, in my anthropology courses I focused on applied anthropology and public anthropology ... which really emphasized civic engagement and creating a link between academics and the public, so that sort of helped, too.

Julie: And what about you, Rebecca? What are the connections you see between what you did as a student and what you're doing now?

Rebecca: The connection that stands out first and foremost in my mind is having been a Praxis participant through one of my classes. I loved my Praxis experience. I was taking "The Sociology of AIDS" with Judy Porter, and I was placed at The Philadelphia AIDS Consortium [TPAC], which is a Center City HIV/AIDS organization, for the internship component of the course.

And, I mean, I had a great experience with Praxis, but ... it's funny to compare my experiences with Praxis and Philly Fellows, because they ... couldn't be more different in terms of size, mission, structure, and things like that. I would say that they're very much linked in that the basic work skills I took away from my Praxis experience at TPAC were useful in application and in practice at the Red Cross. In talking with other recent graduates, especially from liberal arts colleges, I find that most people struggle in their first year with understanding these cultural norms of the work place, and so, I think that although the skills that I developed at TPAC are very different than the skills that I need at the Red Cross, understanding work culture and other tacit knowledge is what I found to be the most useful.

Working at the Red Cross, I don't find that I'm day-to-day using the actual facts I picked up in my classes so much as ... critical thinking skills, the motivation to come up with and follow through with projects, and

competitive writing skills. I think that there's a tendency for liberal arts graduates to enter the work force and feel kind of like they've lost their bearings. But just sort of as a word of encouragement ... I think it's a lot easier to pick up on skills like accounting and finances and grant writing than it is to pick up on skills like writing well or thinking critically.

Julie: What do you think is the most valuable contribution that you are making to the community that you're serving right now and why?

Megan: Well unfortunately, I don't really have direct contact with any of our clients most of the time, which is the one thing that's sort of troubling about working with fundraising. So I guess I'm helping with development and fundraising so I'm helping to raise money that will eventually provide them with the services they need, but ... I do feel disconnected from the families we serve. ... And the other thing I could say is that a lot of my work has to do with internal operations, organization of databases, network systems, and things like that, which help the business run more efficiently, which will help serve the clients more efficiently.

Julie: How is that for you as someone who has traditionally done direct service? Is it tough ... does it feel less rewarding somehow, is it kind of a nice break from having constant client contact which can be really emotionally draining? How ... are you feeling about it so far?

Megan: Yeah, I would say all of those, actually. It's definitely been a big change. ... There are opportunities at ACHIEVEability and ... the volunteer manager said I could do tutoring or all of these other things. I was like, oh, that's great, I can have both direct and indirect service experience, but after working an eight-hour day, I just don't have the energy to spend two hours tutoring someone. Because I spend so much time at ACHIEVEability, I've been looking to do direct service outside of it. But I do enjoy the sort of development and organizational work and having these discrete projects that I work on that have a beginning and ending. That appeals to me.

Julie: What do you think is the most valuable thing that you're taking away or have taken away [from your experience as a Philly Fellow] so far?

Rebecca: Well, I definitely ... can tick off on my fingers the software that I didn't know how to use [before]. That's great, and those are skills I don't think I would have ever learned at Bryn Mawr.

Julie: Definitely not. You're not going to take a class on Raiser's Edge!

Rebecca: Exactly. This question sort of addresses my motivation for applying to Philly Fellows at all. Let me backtrack and explain myself. I knew at the time of graduation that what I wanted to do with my life was public health, which is a massive field, and I knew that I couldn't go to grad school for a couple of years. I wanted to get at least two years of work experience, a requirement for application at a lot of the graduate programs I'm interested in. So I thought, what better a way to spend my year before applying to grad school than to learn about how non-profits, which do a huge chunk of the public health work in this country, continue to exist year after year? So I went into the program fully aware that Philly Fellows would be a behind-the-scenes experience rather than a direct service experience, but I saw that as an asset. [Already] I feel like I met that goal, just in terms of having a greater, much deeper appreciation for all of the work that goes on to keep these non-profits going, for the work that they do and the people they serve.

Julie: So to make a jump to the other piece of the Philly Fellows program that I'm familiar with—I realize that there are probably additional facets of it that I don't really know a whole lot about—but I know that you live in a house with other fellows, and that you [two] actually live together, so ... in what ways has living with the fellows enhanced your experiences and what are the challenges that it's presented, if any?

Megan: Well, I would say first of all, one of the best things to me was it helped with the transition out of college. I can't imagine living in an apartment by myself, not that I would have been able to afford that anyway, but just the idea of living alone after having been surrounded by such a close community and roommates ... wouldn't have been a pleasant experience. So it just helped ease that transition from college into the real world. Also we share a lot of our experiences from work, and we let each other know when events are happening, and we invite each other to events, and so we're able to support each other that way. Not only within in the house,

but there are 20 [Philly Fellows], so that's a whole pool of ... resources and opportunities for volunteer work and events and things like that, so I really enjoy that aspect. And then challenges I would say ... we haven't really had any interpersonal conflict ... but just things like keeping the house clean is challenging. I don't really have too much to complain about, which is good.

Julie: What about you, Rebecca?

Rebecca: The residential component was a huge factor for me as well in deciding to apply to Philly Fellows at all. Like Megan, the idea of living on my own after college was not appealing. It just seemed like one too many adjustments to make, especially considering that for the majority of my life my primary identity had been as a student. I was anticipating graduating and no longer being in academia to be a huge, huge transition. So why add on managing your life alone? And what I found was sort of as could be expected. Although all of us in our house were working at very different agencies doing very different work in non-profits that addressed very different needs in the community, both the challenges and the rewards of working in the non-profit community are pretty consistent across the board. So to me, the value of this part of the program is having sort of that companionship and camaraderie you find in a residential, community-living situation. My housemates have been a sounding board, really sympathetic ears to help sort out all the stuff you're dealing with since you're in transition from school to the work place.

Julie: How do you think that you'll carry forward your civic engagement after your year of service with the program?

Megan: Well, actually I have thought about it a lot. I'm in the process of applying to graduate schools right now, so I plan to start in the fall of 2009 if all goes well. I read this book that was very influential for me called *Public Benefits of Archaeology*, and there was another one called *Archaeology as a Tool of Civic Engagement*, and then also another one called *Archaeology as Political Action*, so I'm very interested in ... how archaeology can be used as a tool of social justice, which is a very new field. For instance, archaeologists can use their findings to promote a more truthful, inclusive representation of the past or to address socially relevant topics such

as racism, heritage, and identity or to advocate on behalf of descendant or indigenous communities that have a stake in the sites and histories in which archaeologists are involved.

So after spending a year doing Philly Fellows, I'm sure that the program will give me a lot of experience, and up to this point now, I know for sure that I do want to keep in the direction of merging those two [interests]. So in my application I've been emphasizing that I'm doing this year of service now and I want to use graduate school as a way to figure out how to merge these two interests together. I'm really interested in public archaeology and in working with the public and in figuring out the best methods of presenting archaeological knowledge to the public.

Julie: Wow. I don't know that I would have seen those connections, but it's really a part of envisioning where you're headed.

Megan: Yes, all part of the master plan.

Julie: And what about you?

Rebecca: Well, like I said before, I'm planning on going into public health, and the two options that I see before me are either going into public service and working with local governments or working in the non-profit sector. And so I definitely see service in my future professionally. Public health and civic engagement pretty much go hand in hand.

By the way, I think that Megan's doing the coolest thing in the world, putting together archaeology and civic engagement. She was telling me about how looking back on her transcript and resumé and stuff, she's flip-flopped her whole life between community service and archaeology. I just think it's the coolest thing in the world, merging those skills.

Julie: So it really is part of the master plan, Megan.

Megan: Well, actually, it is and it isn't, because I only recently realized [this] when I was writing my personal statement for applications. I was looking through my resumé to see what I wanted to highlight, and I realized one summer I went to an archaeology field school, and then the next summer I got a grant from Bryn Mawr to work for a non-profit to do an

internship, and then the next summer I went back to the field school, and now I'm working for Philly Fellows. And so I've just been going back and forth, and it really hit home that this is what I want to do.

Rebecca: Just speaking more globally, I really think you can do that with any field. I mean, I don't think that there's any field that's off-limits when it comes to viewing what you do professionally through a responsible, civically engaged lens.

**Megan Bailey '08** earned her A.B. in anthropology. After completing her term of service with Philly Fellows, she intends to pursue graduate study in anthropology and historical archaeology.

**Rebecca Woodruff '08** earned her A.B. in biology with a concentration in neural and behavioral sciences. After her year as a Philly Fellow in the humanitarian services division of the American Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania, she plans to work for one more year and then apply to graduate school to study public health.

*Being on the Political Sidelines*

by Laura Blankenship

I have always had an interest in politics, but it has always been somewhat at a distance. In elementary school, when it was time to choose pen pals, I didn't want to write to just any person; I wanted to write to Amy Carter, the daughter of then-president Jimmy Carter, but Amy and I didn't discuss politics. When a local (Republican, gasp!) candidate lost an election, I wrote him a heartfelt letter where I said, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again," but didn't encourage my parents to vote for him. When inflation rose and there were lines at the gas station, and I was all of ten, I engaged in heated discussions at the dinner table but did nothing to campaign to save energy. When my grandfather, a long-standing Republican, declared that Ronald Reagan was the most evil man he knew, I giggled, and then we proceeded to have a conversation about his politics.

In college, during the 1988 election, I attended a rally for George H.W. Bush in the pouring rain as the features editor for my college newspaper. I wrote an article that commented more on my amazement at the fact that people would stand in the rain for a speech than on the substance of the speech. My impression was that there wasn't much substance. Later, I covered protests about apartheid and about the tearing down of the Lorraine Hotel, the location where Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. And while I felt passionate about these issues, I chose to stand on the sidelines and provide commentary, often tongue-in-cheek, about the events rather than get directly involved.

I have voted in every election since 1988, even the small local ones. Even during the Gore/Bush election of 2000, I chose to exercise this simple right rather than to get involved with the campaign itself. Instead of attending rallies or making phone calls or knocking on doors, I chose to express myself by talking with like-minded friends and neighbors or by yelling at the television. I feel more strongly, I think, about the process than I do about the politics. Although I've voted for the Democrats in every election, up until a couple of years ago, I was a registered Independent. I liked having that stamped on my voter registration card. To me,

it said that I could think for myself, that I reserved the right to change my mind, that I couldn't be swayed by pretty rhetoric or flashy ads. That all changed in 2004.

In late spring of 2004, my neighbor asked me to work inside the polls as the minority inspector on Election Day 2004. Given the contentiousness of the 2000 election and the nature of the campaign up to this point, I knew that this was going to be a historic but busy day, and I could feel a little tug of resistance in my gut as I agreed to work. It seemed too close to direct involvement. The minority inspector's job on Election Day is to help open the polls, to sign in voters, and to help the rest of the Election Board ensure that fairness prevails. Although the board should be balanced in terms of party affiliation, the positions themselves are supposed to be non-partisan. We are not there to advocate for a particular party; we are there to make sure that people can vote without being harassed or coerced or otherwise interfered with. It's our job to make sure candidates or their agents don't come into the polling place to campaign or leave literature. In other words, we try to keep the polling place non-partisan and fair. So I found myself pleasantly surprised that my involvement wasn't what I had imagined. I didn't have to take sides. I simply had to make sure the process was followed.

After just a few elections, our judge of elections, the man who oversees the whole operation, quit, moving to a retirement home outside of our precinct. My neighbor came to me again and asked if I'd be willing to fill in until we could elect a new one. I somewhat reluctantly agreed.

The polling place modernized. We got new record books that replaced the old ones that had looked like something out of a medieval library. The entries were even bar-coded for easy recording back at the Election Office. We also got new computerized voting machines. I had been somewhat uncomfortable with our ancient books and machines even though I'd been using them for years myself. It just seemed so inefficient and easy for mistakes to be made. But I felt confident about the new equipment. Since I worked in the technology field, I knew I could handle anything that came up with the machines. After my first election serving as judge, an off-election that included mostly school board and city accountant

elections, I got applauded by the workers and poll watchers. And every election after that, my work as judge garnered praise. I felt that I was making a significant contribution to process.

My newfound success as a judge of elections put me in the mind to get more involved in the political process. So in the run-up to the 2008 election, I signed up to volunteer. I thought I shouldn't sit on the sidelines or serve as referee anymore; I should play in the game. My first volunteer job was making phone calls on behalf of the Obama campaign. We were looking for volunteers over the coming weeks. I used to be a telemarketer for a greeting card company, making calls to gift shops to sell them our products. I was really good at that job and actually enjoyed it immensely, so I was excited about doing this for a cause I believed in. Sure enough, I quickly slipped back into the habits I developed as a salesperson. I was able to engage people in conversations, and I convinced quite a few people to volunteer. At the end of it, I was tired but energized.

Encouraged by my triumph in making phone calls, I decided to volunteer to canvass our township as part of a countywide push to reach everyone in the county in one weekend. I showed up at the appointed time at the local campaign office. I was handed a folder that contained a map, some talking points, and a list of names. We participated in a brief training session, were handed a pile of literature, and sent on our way. I piled everything in the car, swung by my house to pick up my daughter (who was going to help me), and then walked from there to the area I had been assigned. When I made phone calls, quite a few people didn't answer or pretended to be someone else when they did. Most people who answered talked to me for a while. I felt comfortable talking to them about Obama and our volunteer activities. Talking to people face-to-face was a completely different matter.

It was a gorgeous early fall day and many people were out, likely at kids' soccer games or at other fun outdoor activities. When I did reach someone, I found it more difficult to share ideas, even with people who agreed with me. The truly undecided made me stammer a little, and I felt a bit out of my league. When talking to one guy, who seemed perfectly intelligent and told me he liked both candidates and was looking to the debates to help him decide, I agreed with him that both candidates were good leaders and

that I understood how he felt. I didn't go on to convince him why Obama was better in my mind. I couldn't bring myself to participate in that confrontation. Instead I said that I thought Obama had a better economic strategy and was more likely to bring respect back to America. I fell into talking points. I probably sounded a little bit like Sarah Palin during her Katie Couric interview. It's one thing to sit around with friends and talk about the issues. It's quite another to be in a position to try to convince someone to vote for your candidate.

After my rather mediocre experience canvassing, I quit volunteering. My life got busier, but truth be told, I didn't want to force people to think one way or another. It comes down to believing that everyone has a right to an opinion, that Independent could be easily stamped on everyone's voter registration card, and that this might be okay. While I felt strongly about who should win the recent election, I don't like having to toe the party line to such an extent that I can't agree with someone that her candidate is an equally successful leader and that intelligent people can disagree on the issues. Politics has become so much about choosing sides, about supporting the person you think can win instead of the person who you feel most represents your perspective and whom you can believe in. It's about sound bites and talking points, and I don't want to be a part of that. I can think for myself, thank you. So I'm going back to the sidelines, choosing to ensure that the process goes smoothly and that everyone gets the right to vote fairly, regardless of whom they support.

**Laura Blankenship** is a former instructional technologist at Bryn Mawr College. She now works as a private consultant and is teaching "Gender and Technology" with Anne Dalke in the spring 2009 semester. She continues to serve as judge of elections in the 4th Ward, 4th Precinct in Haverford Township.