

# COMMUNITY UCONNECTIONS

*Office of Community Outreach, University of Connecticut*

## Students Combat the Homelessness Epidemic in Boston



**Volunteers on the Boston Alternative Break trip pose for a group picture**

by Andrew Wicks  
*Economics '09*

On the weekend of October 26-28, thirteen students, one Community Outreach staff member, and I travelled to Boston to learn about homelessness and to do our part in the struggle to shelter, feed, and clothe the

homeless community. The goal of this trip was to facilitate interested students with an opportunity to engage in community service work and to provide quality learning experiences in a non-traditional way.

Since space was limited, the students submitted applications months in advance and had to go through an

interview process. Those students who were selected went to five pre-trip meetings to learn more before their experience.

During these meetings, we bonded as a group, talked about pertinent social issues, and examined the stereotypes that we each

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*please see, BOSTON, PAGE 2*

## “Homeless to Harvard” Comes to UConn

by Josh Habansky  
*Business '11*

On October 24th, inspirational speaker Liz Murray visited UConn as a special guest lecturer. She spoke about the hardships she overcame as an impoverished

child living in New York City under the care of two drug-abusing parents. Murray's truly uplifting story, which has recently been adapted into a Lifetime Channel Original film entitled *From Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story*, left the audience both moved and

speechless.

Since birth, Liz Murray knew nothing except poverty and struggle. Her parents, who battled heroin and cocaine addictions as well as HIV, “supported” the family

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*please see, MURRAY, PAGE 3*

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### **Call for Action,**

a weekly email bulletin, provides information on new service opportunities and related events occurring in the greater Storrs community.

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### *Inside this issue:*

Kappa Alpha Theta Philanthropy	2
New York City Alternative Break	3
Student Spotlight	4
Volunteer of the Month	5

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## Kappa Alpha Theta Committed to Philanthropic Efforts

by Emily Hall  
ACES '10

Each year, there are a number of fundraising events that are organized by a fraternity or sorority. Thousands of dollars are donated to the philanthropy of their choice ranging from Breast Cancer Awareness to Support to the Children's Miracle Network. Each one holds a special place in our heart.



**Winners from Zeta Beta Tau pose with the hosts after the tournament**

The national philanthropy of Kappa Alpha Theta is Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). CASA positively impacts the lives of abused and neglected foster children in our community by providing trained advocates to represent children in court.

CASA is the only volunteer organization that empowers everyday citizens as appointed members of the court. In an overburdened social welfare system, abused and neglected children often slip through the cracks among hundreds of current cases. CASA volunteers work towards changing the system. Appointed by judges, CASA volunteers typically handle just one case at a time—and commit to staying on that case until the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. While others may come and go, CASA volunteers provide that one constant person that children need in order to thrive.

CASA is particularly important to our chapter at the University of Connecticut because we were children ourselves not too long ago and remember how difficult it was at times to have our own voices heard. In order to share the passion we have for our philanthropy and to help strengthen this cause, we organize one event each semester to support CASA: Kats & Bats in the fall and 5KAΘ in the spring.

Our annual Kats & Bats Softball Tournament was held on November 11<sup>th</sup>,



**Members of the Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority staffing the sign-in table at the charity 5K race**

2007. The event was a huge success in that we were able to raise a record high of \$900! There were 14 registered teams from the male and female brackets with support from both Greek and non-Greek community members. This year the winners were Zeta Beta Tau Fraternity and Delta Zeta Sorority.

The 5KAΘ Road Race/Walk which was held on April 1<sup>st</sup> of last spring was an even bigger success. With the help of over 200 people consisting of other Greek affiliates as well as UConn and local community members we were able to raise a total of \$2,500 to support CASA!

## Boston Participants Look to Continue Involvement

*cont'd from page 1*

held. The ultimate goal was to create an open-minded and outgoing group of students who would be open to learn about a different sort of lifestyle. In one meeting we broke down stereotypes and discussed the reality of the homeless situation. In another, we talked about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as approved by the United Nations, and the right to affordable housing. We also discussed the topic of violence against the homeless and the social and cultural problems which create a society where homelessness can exist. Our final meeting was a panel of homeless speakers, presented by ConnPIRG, who told their life stories. The speakers had different backgrounds, different experiences and different problems, but their lives resonated with our group.

During the course of the weekend,

we worked at shelters, soup kitchens, and a healthcare clinic. We met people who were substance abusers, mentally ill, physically injured and just down on their luck. We also met people who had college educations, loving families, amazing artistic skills, and more warmth and compassion than you would find anywhere on this campus. You would probably be surprised to learn that many homeless people spend more time reading than college students. The homeless often spend their days in the library to get out of the cold or away from the public.

At night we would reflect on the day's activities and experiences. People were deeply, deeply moved by the things they had seen and the conversations they had with people. During our last reflection session in Boston, we were sitting on Boston Common when a young man we had fed at the soup kitchen walked by. He asked to join our circle

and he shared his story. He was 18 years old, from Connecticut, and recently left home to get some perspective on life. His story touched all of us, especially the fact that he was so young. After the trip we had one final meeting to examine how we had changed upon our return to UConn. Participants found that they were telling others about their experience and trying to get involved to help combat the problem.

Students who came on the trip are getting involved in such events as the Hunger Banquet, the Homelessness Sleep-out, and volunteering at local shelters. Some of them may be the next leaders in the Alternative Breaks program. We all came out of the experience finding a greater respect and compassion for others, no matter their place in society. There really is no other experience quite like an alternative break.

## Students Immersed in HIV/AIDS Education in New York

by Daniel McLennon  
*Political Science '08*

When you think of New York, you think of Broadway, Rudy Giuliani, and Times Square. Other thoughts that come to mind include the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. Did you think of HIV/AIDS?

This November, fifteen UConn students and staff took an Alternative Break with Community Outreach and spent a weekend in Manhattan learning about the monumental struggle being waged against HIV/AIDS. With 50,000 people living with HIV in New York, this struggle ought to be a high priority, but is all too often waged silently by a small but extremely dedicated network of non-profit organizations.

The goals of this Alternative Break/

Immersion trip were to gain a deeper understanding of the way HIV/AIDS threatens American citizens, and to educate participants through hands-on volunteering. A long-term goal was to deepen participants' commitments to fighting for social justice in their own communities.

Participants primed themselves for the trip with a presentation by Leigh Evans, a staff-woman from AIDS Project Hartford. She brought the group up to speed on the basics of HIV contraction and infection, and then discussed activities that AIDS Project Hartford does for the community. One of these is needle exchange- to reduce the threat of spreading HIV through drug needle use by swapping used needles for clean ones.

With this education in mind, the crew headed out to New York City and worked with Calvin Cleveland, a staff



**The group volunteering at God's Love We Deliver food kitchen**

member at the Lower East Side Harm Reduction Center (LESHRC). He explained the agency's activities: reducing the chance of HIV transmission in the activities which their clients are planning to do anyway, such as needle

*please see, PARTICIPANTS, PAGE 4*

## Murray Engages Audience with Spectacular Story

*continued from page 1*

on welfare checks that came once a month. The money they received, however, was primarily used for drugs, leaving Liz and her sister to scavenge for food anywhere they could find it.



**Liz Murray**

Murray's attendance at school was sporadic and education was the least of her worries. Eventually, Liz was sent to live in a home for children when her mother left and her father found refuge in a homeless shelter.

Murray ran away from the home

after sustaining physical and verbal abuse from peers and staff alike. She then called the city streets her home, even resorting to eating out of dumpsters.

Eventually she realized that she held the power to create her own destiny. At

age 17, Liz enrolled in the Humanities Preparatory School in Greenwich Village, New York. Upon entering school, Liz's entire outlook was transformed and she became a driven student with goals and expectations of herself. Amazingly, Liz graduated in two years as a result of doubling her work-load. From there, Liz applied and was the recipient of a *New York Times*-sponsored scholarship. Since, she has toured the country, speaking about her journey from homelessness to success. She has also written a memoir entitled *Breaking Night*.

The most engaging element of Murray's presentation is the fact that she recounts her story as if it's her first time telling it. Her voice trembles when she talks about the deaths of her parents and it is evident that she is still appreciative of the people who helped her get her life on track. Many times, when speakers tour and recite their stories on a regular basis, the authenticity fades and a dogmatic monologue-esque delivery replaces it. Liz's lack of contempt for her parents even after years of neglect is admirable. She holds no grudge against them for using

money on narcotics that could have been used to buy food and other necessities. Murray even defends them, asserting that although they could not escape their drug addictions, there was never a lack of love in the household.

It is remarkable that someone plagued by such adversity and dysfunction was able to so masterfully turn her life around and become an asset to our society. Liz Murray is an impeccable example that can be drawn upon for inspiration by anyone, homeless or not. She embodies perseverance and true modesty. Murray's sincerity is what makes her such an endearing speaker. Throughout her presentation, she assures the audience that she is not spectacular, just a human who dealt accordingly with the obstacles that came her way. At one lecture, Murray said, "It's not about Harvard, it's not about a prestigious school. It's not about that. It's about learning, about educating yourself and gathering enough knowledge to find your way through any little crack or crevice you possibly can so you can move up and escape from that trap you were born into."

## Participants Committed to Fighting HIV/AIDS Pandemic

*continued from page 3*

exchange and safer sex education. After a powerful presentation at LESHRC, the group headed over to Project Achieve.

John Bonelli introduced the volunteers to the mission of Project Achieve, which is to find a vaccine for the HIV virus. He gave an enlightening presentation on the tremendous logistical planning and legal work which goes into every vaccine study. The UConn students then hit the streets armed with recruitment information and left postcards at small businesses for clients to take. For many students, the chance to speak with small business owners and their patrons struck emotional chords. The depth of concern and gratitude these people showed to the students reflected the urgency New Yorkers accord to fighting HIV/AIDS.



**Volunteers take a break for a quick picture**

Rounding out the weekend, students engaged in strong direct service with God's Love We Deliver, a food kitchen which serves over 2,000 meals a day to people who are sick with a variety of diseases but primarily, those with HIV/AIDS. The scale of the operation and the heart of each volunteer that the students spoke with made the morning and early

afternoon go by too fast. By early Sunday evening, the whirlwind weekend was over, and students were left looking for ways to take their experiences and make a difference.

The Alternative Breaks program inspired thirteen UConn students to challenge themselves on their knowledge of pressing social problems. Each student rose to the challenge, and armed with better education, powerful experiences to fall back upon, and an unshakable resolve to make a difference, the group is currently planning to establish a service relationship with AIDS Project Hartford. The crew is looking forward to formulating a brand new partnership for Community Outreach in order to continue their commitment to fighting the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

## Student Spotlight: Emily Jensen

*Each month, we would like to spotlight the outstanding accomplishments of one of our student leaders.*

On November 13th, Emily Jensen, Program Director for the Collegiate Health Service Corps, spoke at the AHEC Annual Meeting in Norwich. She provided us with some information on the meeting and her role. A biology major, Emily will be graduating in December 2007.

### **What is the AHEC Annual Meeting?**

The Eastern Connecticut Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Annual Meeting is an annual opportunity for students and staff to present their community achievements. The meeting enables the individuals indirectly involved with AHEC to see what steps the organization has made to grow and improve.

Each yearly meeting has a particular focus and this year's concentration was Universal Health Care. Author James W. Russell, a professor of Sociology at Eastern Connecticut State University, pre-

sented his prior and ongoing research on the comprehensive welfare states of Western Europe and its advantages over the welfare system in our country.

A panel discussion then took place in which questions were proposed about Universal Health Care and how it affects each of the panelists. Representatives spoke about faith, business, and community.

### **Who attends the conference?**

All Eastern Connecticut AHEC staff and volunteers were invited, along with community health partners, local leaders, and the many support teams that provide resources to AHEC. Since the theme was Universal Health Care local small business owners were also invited.

### **How does the conference relate to your program?**

The topic of Universal Health Care is one I believe in passionately and bring into my program everyday. It was eye-opening to hear others opinions about Universal Health Care from their own

point of view. It was also amazing to see so many individuals believing in the same cause — health care as a right, NOT a privilege- in one room. The whole reason my program exists is to educate about health related issues and provide as much free health care as possible to those in need of it in the eastern Connecticut communities.



**Emily Jensen**

### **What topic did you speak about?**

I spoke about my program and what it has accomplished. I also discussed my role and responsibilities as the first Program Director for AHEC's Collegiate Health Service Corps. I touched on the links I have as a student in terms of Community Outreach and Dr. Kathryn Ratcliff's Sociology Fieldwork Experience class.

## November Volunteers of the Month

Volunteers of the Month are selected by Program Directors based on their superb dedication and enthusiasm toward their service program.



**Carrie Flanagan**  
Generations Connect  
*Nursing '09*



**Christine Scialla**  
Campus Big Buddies  
*HDFS '08*



**Samantha Muzzulin**  
Homelessness Project  
*CLAS '11*



**Joshua Faucher**  
Campus Connections  
*CLAS '10*



**Daniel Marcoux**  
Horace Porter  
*Economics '09*



**Sebastian Morales**  
Windham Hospital  
*Biology '11*



**Melissa Marsh**  
Conversational  
Partners  
*Business '10*



**Amy Asteriades**  
Mansfield After  
School Program  
*Actuarial Science '09*



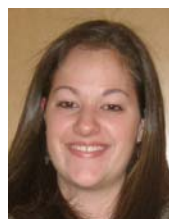
**Erin Zukis**  
Mansfield Middle  
School Tutoring  
*CLAS '10*



**Madeline Ward**  
Windham Area  
Interfaith Ministry  
*Journalism '10*



**Andrew Bailey**  
Nathan Hale  
Homework Club  
*ACES '11*



**Kathleen Flannery**  
Willington Center  
School  
*Psychology '09*



**Vishal Bhuva**  
Collegiate Health  
Service Corps  
*MCB '09*



**Emily Galanto**  
Generations Family  
Health Care  
*Psychology '10*



**Jon Nieves**  
Southeast  
Elementary School  
*Psychology '09*



**Caitlin Masopust**  
Kinsella Elementary  
School  
*NEAG '10*



**Meg Carley**  
Jumpstart  
*History '09*



**Kate Perduta**  
Community Service  
Days  
*CLAS '09*



**Allison Magdefrau**  
Natchaug School  
Tutoring  
*CLAS '08*



**Catherine Pomposi**  
Windham Center  
School  
*Statistics '10*



**Aimee Dietle**  
Southeast Elementary  
After School Program  
*ACES '10*



**Alex Dockray**  
Southeast Elementary  
After School Program  
*CLAS '09*



**Shirley Phung**  
America Reads  
Preschool



**Kim Tran**  
ESL Family  
Literacy

Office of Community Outreach,  
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Department of Student Activities  
2110 Hillside Road, U-3008 Storrs, CT  
06269-3008  
Phone: 860-486-1165



## Upcoming Service Opportunities

### **Do you like working with senior citizens?**

The Glen Ridge Cooperative Center is looking for enthusiastic college students to assist in teaching senior citizens basic computer skills such as using the internet. This amazing opportunity will allow you to interact with the elderly in our community, and help them to learn new and exciting skills that may improve their life. If you are interested in this participating in this new and exciting semester long-opportunity,

**Contact** Bob Kremer at 860-429-2202.

### **W.A.I.M Adopt-a-family**

Bring a family in crisis some cheer by adopting a family for the Holidays! Get together with your club or organization and provide food and gifts to a family in a need. Your donations will allow a family to have a holiday celebration that they might not have been able to afford. For more information,

**Contact** WAIM at (860)456-7270 or at [assistdir@waim.org](mailto:assistdir@waim.org). The donor application is available at [www.waimct.org](http://www.waimct.org).

### **Hillel Builds the Gulf 2008**

Join Jewish Students across the country to help rebuild New Orleans. This is a marvelous experience and it truly is a chance to help rebuild people's lives. This program offers hands on service, community interaction, social justice, and the ability to follow the teachings of Judaism. For more information,

**Contact** Jake through [jake@uconnhillel.org](mailto:jake@uconnhillel.org), or 860-429-4007.

### **Countdown to End Homelessness**

Join hundreds of volunteers for 4 hours on **January 30, 2008** as we canvass the state to gather information that will help us end long-term homelessness in Connecticut. Most local communities plan to conduct their count in the **evening between 7 p.m. – 11 p.m.** Please give us a few hours of your time to help us help homeless children and adults in your community. For more information on this program, please visit <http://www.cceh.org/pit.htm>. If you are interested in volunteering on the night of the count,

**Contact** Gretchen Upholt, Project Assistant, CT Counts 2008 at (860) 721-7678 or [gupholt@cceh.org](mailto:gupholt@cceh.org).

