Praxivists: Students partaking in global issues

By ROBIN MINITER
Photography Editor

In the midst of spring fever frenzy and debates over hot Tuesday night destinations, a small rumble of revolution brews in Fontaine 104: cue the Praxivists. With their inspired minds and determined hearts, this small group of students is changing the world one day at a time.

"College should not only teach you to think and to question," says Mike Napolitano, a sophomore political science major, "but also how to become a global citizen."

Founded in 1993 by Dr. Mar Peter-Raoul of the Religious Studies Department, and Resident Sociologist Dr. Bruce Luske, the Marist Public Praxis Project for Public Global Citizenship brings together course and public work in order to emulate Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of a common "beloved community" - one that, according to the co-project keepers, supports human dignity, socio-political and economic justice, and the well-being of each human being.

Through the interdisciplinary Public Praxis Minor, students are taught to think outside of the classroom via an academic-based integration of scholarship coupled with site experience. At the foundation lies the goal for social transformation. According to Peter-Raoul, "shifts in consciousness are both anticipated and a motivation [of the Project]."

Roughly 400 students participate in a praxis-oriented project or class (including the core Social Inequality with Dr. Luske) each semester, while between 10-15 students officially have the project declared as their minor. An even smaller group of praxis activists - the self-proclaimed "Praxivists" - meet on a regular basis to play out their visions and aspirations for a better world.

"Praxis is so powerful because it brings together active public work with intellectual curiosity, empathy, research, and critical reflection," says Peter-Raoul. "It is academically based and advocacy inspired. As Dr. Luske says, 'it's about heads, hearts, and hands.' Once brought together, it all explodes."

The Project offers over 20 local praxis sites, including soup kitchens, prisons, youth workshops, and homeless shelters. The Praxivists are also weekly participants in the Food Not Bombs campaign in downtown Poughkeepsie as well as ESL tutoring for college employees. Those participating in the minor are required to design and implement their own projects as part of their class.

"Textbooks matter, but they are from someone else's experience. It's all once removed. But coupled with Praxis, suddenly the statistics have a face," explains Peter-Raoul.

The reaches of these projects have reached the global level, most recently planting roots in Kolkata, India. After speaking at the 2005 International Philosophers for Peace conference in the city, Peter-Raoul invited her students to "adopt" the community living in the Sree-Durga dump across from the hotel in which she stayed. According to the Kolkotta Project Website, "the central thrust of this Project is to build community, help the children of Sree-Durga attend school, eat decent food, realize their abilities, and open their world to possibilities beyond their lives at the dump."

"This coming May, Peter-Raoul and student Alanna Hennessey will be returning to do further Praxis work."

Back home at Marist College, the Praxivists are hard at work. From April 30 to May 30 they will be sponsoring the campus-wide Praxis Events Week featuring local NGO tables, a mock refugee camp to be staged outside of Dyson, a dance program for the children in the Krieger after-school program, and the annual Public Praxis Forum featuring original student public works, a speaker, music, dance, poetry, and an open mic.

"This semester with the Public Praxis students has been like bringing a room full of Nobel Peace Prize recipients together," says Peter-Raoul. "It has been the most inspiring experience."

Anthony Antonacchia, a junior Praxivist, envisions that "the consciousness expansion Praxivists spread around Marist will be infectious. More students and teachers will unite to engage when they feel inspiration, readiness, the cries of the world, and urgency," he says. "We all have gifts and gems to share in contribution, for the cause."