First Link: Connecting College with the Community

By Hanna Meghji, ‘11

More than sixty different women of more than four ethnic backgrounds from more than fifteen different states. One room. One motive. One pre-orientation program. One goal: To serve together.

Combining community service with insightful discussions and newly found friends, First Link, according to many participants, was “an amazing experience.” As first year students arrived on campus in the early morning of August 27th, a variety of emotions filled the atmosphere ranging from excitement and relief to anxiety and apprehension. In the afternoon, as students said farewell to their parents and made their way to the Cutter living room, the intensity of emotions rose. Some made their way to First Link without looking back while others wiped misty eyes as they said goodbye to their families. No one really knew what to expect.

“I was afraid I was going to be the only one who didn’t know anyone else! I’m so glad that’s not how it turned out ... I think, so far, First Link is by far my favorite memory from Smith. Well, my favorite memory from Smith.”

Lasting three days, the activities were facilitated by SOS (Service Organizations of Smith), the director of community services, the college chaplains, and many energetic student leaders. The group of organizers and participants ate dinner together each of the three nights, promoting a sense of community and allowing time for first years to build their first friendships, networks, and mentors at Smith.

After splitting into small groups to smooth the process of introductions on a smaller scale, the new Smithies made journals. Amidst red and yellow...

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Community Service Fair Report
By Caredwen Foley, ’09

S.O.S held its semi-annual Community Service Fair on September 25, an event that seeks to provide Smith students with the opportunity to meet and speak with representatives from area non-profit organizations to learn about volunteer opportunities and internships in the Pioneer Valley. Despite competition from the beautiful weather and the Study Abroad fair on Chapin Lawn, turnout was impressive for our pizza lunch in the Carroll Room with agency representatives. Also in attendance were SOS Board members, who answered students’ questions about van use, short-term projects, and other functions of SOS. Agency representatives were pleased with the student response and the structure of the fair. “I think it was nice to see so many agencies/programs represented,” said Margery Heyl from Nonotuck Community School. “The students I met were great.”

CSS is Community Service and Sustainability
It is a program to encourage house communities to engage in community service and sustainability projects to strengthen house communities by working together on a house project or initiatives throughout the year. It can be a one-time, an on-going, or multi-faceted project. There is recognition of $2500 in prize money awarded to the top outstanding houses to donate to the non-profit of their choice at the end of the year (07/08). For info: http://www.smith.edu/sao/reslife/hcsp.php, contact Hannah Durrant, Assistant Director of Residential Life, x2248, hdurrant@email.smith.edu, or Tierza-leah Schwartz, Director of Voluntary Services x2758 tschwart@email.smith.edu.

Short-Term Project: Food Bank Farm
By Rachel Finklestein, ’08

Our first short term project of the year, a morning at the Food Bank Farm, went extremely well this past September! Despite the rain and cold weather (hard to believe because we’ve had a great fall otherwise!), a total of 20 students spent over three hours cutting thick, prickly vine, and windrowing squash on a plot of land owned by the Food Bank Farm in Hadley, one of the largest Community Supported Agriculture farms in the country. We got really wet and dirty, worked out our muscles (who knew harvesting squash was such a workout?), and brought home some squash - in fact, some of us even had the pleasure of eating freshly picked cooked squash soon after! All in all, we had a lot of fun and were able to see and feel the productivity of our work upon leaving early in the afternoon.

The Food Bank Farm works to reduce hunger and increase food security in the valley by partnering with soup kitchens, food pantries, homeless shelters, childcare centers and elder programs to provide food to those in need. Each year, the Food Bank Farm of Western Massachusetts distributes more than 6 million pounds of food! The Food Bank farm relies on the support and work of volunteers and interns to help them operate smoothly and efficiently. Whether you choose to stop by for a day to harvest vegetables, or work as a Nutrition Education Coordinator, you are helping to fight hunger in the valley! For more information about getting involved, contact SOS at sos@email.smith.edu. We would love to help you coordinate a group work day at the farm.
Fit Together

By Sarah Anne Kam, ‘10J

Looking for a workout buddy? Check out Fit Together. Fit Together is a program that pairs you up with an exercise partner with mental or emotional challenges who wants to get and stay fit, just like you! Fit Together owns a full wellness center in Hadley, along bus-accessible Russell Street.

On a quiet Sunday morning, I caught up with Megan Morrow, a Smith alumna working at the center as a fitness mentor. “I wanted to become a dance therapist but I also wanted to get a feel of what it was like to contribute towards community growth. I found this job, and have found it extremely rewarding ever since,” she spoke animatedly, as she called out words of encouragement to participants working out in the gym.

The center officially opened in June 2007, in a one-storey building which was once a dance studio. It has a fully-equipped gym, a yoga studio, a meeting room, and a locker room. The center offers acupuncture and reiki workshops as well. According to Elaine, a staff at Shay’s House, this newly-opened center creates a safe space for participants of the program. “Everyone is accepted here. Here, you don’t feel the pressure of having to dress up to go the gym or to keep up with other participants. We’re a very close community that supports everyone regardless of looks and abilities,” she said. Megan and Elaine both stressed that this wellness center is for everyone in the community looking for a supportive environment to stay fit.

Lynn Brocher, a participant of the program was happy to announce that she has lost twelve pounds since she first joined the program in May. She currently does not have an exercise partner but would love to be paired with one. She believes that having a partner would further motivate her to attain her wellness goals. She goes to the center from five to six times a week to take part in classes offered by the center, her favorite one being Mindful Munchies. Mindful Munchies is a program held every Friday at the center to educate participants about healthy eating.

“Adults living with persistent mental illness, developmental disability, or traumatic brain injury have an expected lifespan of 15 to 20 years shorter than their counterparts in the larger society. Diabetes, hypertension, obesity, limited economic resources, and social segregation combine to shorten and lower the quality of these people’s lives. Regular exercise and healthy good choices can reverse these effects,” writes Brit Rhue, director of Fit Together, in a statement to future volunteers. Fit Together strives to combat discouragement involved in integrating fitness and healthy living activities into the lives of these adults, knowing how hard it is to stick to an exercise program. Volunteer exercise partners are the heart and soul of Fit Together: they introduce fitness to their partners and provide encouragement and support when their partners are ready to move on to the next fitness level.

Participants of Fit Together join out of their own free will, having recognized the benefits of keeping a healthy lifestyle. Before they begin the program, they receive medical clearance and a health assessment. A volunteer personal trainer will help them develop wellness goals and an appropriate plan to reach those goals. Your job, if you decide to volunteer, will be to help them attain their goals while having a lot of fun in return!

Fit Together currently has 180 registered members, excluding volunteers. According to Megan, the program is always looking for volunteer exercise partners. “People are more likely to join the program if they know exercise partners are available for them,” Megan said, stressing the role volunteers play in encouraging participants to take the very first step. “We would love for a house from Smith to take us up as their Community Service and Sustainability Project every year, if possible. I know it will be rewarding; it is a lot of fun, and you get to meet people from your community in the Pioneer Valley at the same time.” Fit together would also be delighted to place individual buddies willing to volunteer throughout the semester.

Fit Together is looking for everyone, from exercise junkies to the more sedentary. Develop a lifelong relationship with your exercise partner and be a positive influence in someone’s life through Fit Together. Interested in getting involved, or have more questions? Get in touch with Britt Rhue or Megan Morrow by phone at 413-584-1508 or email: fittogether@servicenetinc.org. For those of you interested in getting involved but looking for a shorter-term commitment, check out Jolly Jaunt in the Classifieds section.
First Link
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On Sunday, all 62 participants stood in a circle in the Cutter courtyard and threw a ball of yarn around to each other to form a web of memories, friendships, and commitments. Each person picked one word or phrase to describe their experience over the past three days. It was the beginning of a journey – one everyone had embarked on together. And, at the end of it all, they had made connections. They had created this web of friendship, trust, and met other women from all around the country with one common interest in mind: to serve the world and make it an environment in which many, if not all, people can live comfortably and in peace.

One participant offered a snippet of what she wrote in her journal on the 30th, after it was all over. “I always knew this, but, now, I am absolutely sure of Dean Mahoney’s words: The admissions office really doesn’t ever make a mistake. The people here have been great. Great people have great minds. Great minds think alike. Those who think alike go a long, long way in life. This is going to be an unforgettable four years. I can’t think of a better way to have started it than with First Link.”

After receiving their assignments and discussing them in groups, the first years headed to dinner followed by a good night’s rest as they were required to rise early the next morning. Everyone was excited. Some were going to be working with the Prison Book project, an organization which answered the requests of and wrote back to prisoners around the country. Others worked with the AIDS Care facility at Cooley Dickinson Hospital where they fine-tuned the garden in the area and learned not-so-widely-known facts about HIV and AIDS. Another group of first years weeded and harvested produce at the Food Bank while a similar group went to Nuestras Raices, a nearby facility that needed assistance in the garden, but also with the animals housed there. The fifth and final group were spending the day as part of Habitat for Humanity where they would be weeding and reinforcing the internal structure of a home being built for a low-income family in Holyoke.

Most groups were back on campus by 3 or 4 o’clock in the afternoon. A first year from Baldwin house was very excited about receiving so much exposure to nearby community service opportunities. “I’m so psyched!” she exclaimed. “I’ve met so many people that I know I will see during the rest of year. This has been incredible. We even met kids from other schools in the area, which was really nice. The best part, though, was the service. I have this feel good feeling inside and I love it. I helped a family today. I helped build them a home. Nothing. Not a Porsche. Not a diamond ring. Not a full scholarship. Nothing could be more meaningful to me right now. And the beauty of it is that everyone here feels the same way. It’s just beautiful.”

That Wednesday evening, everyone wrote in their journals and put together a presentation for their fellow First-Linkers. Some put together skits. Others came up with creative games to play with the rest of the group. Some made figurines to represent how they felt or what they had done. Even though each had a different method of expressing how their day had been, each student had one thing in common: they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves because they had made someone else’s life easier. They had helped.

“This experience has been so physically intense – with all the picking and the bending and the whacking,” mentioned one of the team leaders. “I still feel like I need a shower, and I’m tired. But it was so much fun ... I wouldn’t have traded it for anything. No way.”

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Board Profiles

Elizabeth Wolfsen, ’08
Chairwoman
My favorite community service was tutoring at the Gerena School in Springfield last year. I taught two first graders ballet and they performed at the end of year celebration. It was a lot of fun!

Sara Bolduc, ’08
Community Ed Chair
For me, community service means working with members of the community. This connection between volunteer and community facilitates trust, friendship, education, and respect. Community service is not just an activity; it’s a passion.

Rachel Finklestein, ’08
Short-Term Co-Chair
My favorite community service project has been working at Friends of the Homeless Shelter downtown, for 2 out of the past 3 years. I really enjoy this work because it gives me a chance to step outside of the Smith “bubble” and talk with a variety of different people about their life and listen to their words of wisdom, which, in many cases, provide me with a whole new perspective on the greater community we are a part of and the world in which we live.

Kat Freeman, ’10
Short-Term Co-Chair
I love volunteering that involves working with kids. The energy and life that children have makes me feel hopeful and happy. My best experience was tutoring middle schoolers in Springfield at Chestnut Ridge Middle School.

Dylan Barnett, ’10
Fund Drive Co-Chair
My absolute favorite community service project is Habitat for Humanity. You are able to get down and dirty and help people start a life. The best part is meeting the family who will be living in the house you helped to build at the end of the day or project!

Samin Green, ’08
Fund Drive Co-Chair
My favorite community service project was probably volunteering at the Chocolate Buffet for AIDS Care my first year. Besides stuffing my face with glorious chocolate treats the whole night, we got to leave with our own box filled with goodies.

Chathu Gammampila, ’08
Blood Drive Chair
My favorite community project is the Chocolate Buffet: A campaign for AIDS Awareness.

I got the opportunity to help out and educate myself while having a lot of fun!

Rachel Hanlon, ’10
Head of House Reps
I love working with the Prison Book Project! Even though you aren’t dealing directly with the people, you feel connected, because you get to read their stories and see the poems and artwork the prisoners send in when they are requesting books. And anything dealing with kids, too, because I love them.

Caredwen Foley, ’09
Recruitment Intern
I enjoy volunteering at the Food Bank Farm, because the results of work are so immediately visible, and at the Hitchcock Center’s Enchanted Forest, because I enjoy working with children.

Sarah Anne Kam, ’10J
Newsletter Chair
My favorite community service project is the SOS Blood Drive. I enjoy seeing people coming together and sharing a part of themselves to save a person’s life.
Classifieds

Save a Life
Bone Marrow Drive

Become a bone marrow donor November 9, 10:30 CC, Room 103/104, no appointments needed. It takes 10 minutes to fill out paperwork and do a cheek swab. Donors must be between 18 and 60 years old. The Bone Marrow Registry has urgent need for people of color to register and become donors. Questions? Call x2793 or email SOS@email.smith.edu.

The Jolly Jaunt

A 1-Mile Fun Walk to benefit Special Olympics Massachusetts, and it will take place in Springfield on December 1, 2007. ServiceNet Fit Together members are training hard for the event, and will need assistance raising money for their entry fees as well as someone to walk with them. Contact fittogether@servicenet.org for more information.

White Street School
Somali Refugee
Mentor/Tutor Program

SOS is looking for a team of 5 community fellows to tutor children of Somali background whose families have recently immigrated to the US. A small and specialized tutorial program at the White Street School in Springfield assists seeks to assist 5 families who have 12 children attending the White Street School. These children have many educational and transitional needs and would benefit from individual tutoring. Community fellows will assist them in Language Arts classes and vocabulary and reading skills. Transportation available. A team will tutor at White Street School every Friday morning from 9:00am to 12:00pm. Additional times can be arranged Monday—Friday 9 to 11:30 am or 1:30-3:30 pm. For more information, email Jessica Prodis at jprodis@email.smith.edu or Tierza-Leah Schwartz at schwart@email.smith.edu.

Homework House

SOS is looking for 4 to 6 people to volunteer at Homework House in Holyoke, MA. Homework House is a non-profit, free tutoring and mentoring program, seeking caring and dedicated volunteers to provide academic assistance and guidance to at-risk children in grades 1-8. Homework House provides a positive environment to students who are at risk for academic failure. Volunteers must provide basic skills and academic assistance, serve as positive role models, and be able to relate and communicate with school-age children.

The team will car-pool to Holyoke every Monday and Wednesday, leaving at 3:00pm and returning at 5:45pm. Placements can also be arranged for Tuesdays and Thursdays. For more information, please contact Hoa-Lan Vo, the Smith lead tutor at hv@email.smith.edu or Tierza-Leah Schwartz, director of voluntary services at tschwart@email.smith.edu x2758 or the agency directly at hpedroholyoke@aol.com Maureen Broughan ssj.

Performance Project

This unique non-profit organization creates compelling and original performance pieces incorporating theater, poetry, music, and movement, based on life experiences, ideas, and beliefs of those who have been released from jail in collaboration with other artists in the community. There is a great need for help with grant-writing, as well as volunteers for stage managers, tech support for the productions, support at rehearsals, and more. For more information, go to www.performanceproject.org or contact Julie Lichtenberg, Artistic Director, 586-4960 or info@performanceproject.org.

THANK YOU BLOOD DRIVE DONORS & VOLUNTEERS!

House Winners were Tyler House (highest participation) and and Hubbard House (highest percentage)