Working with the Jamaica Plain New Economy Transition (JPNET) and other neighborhood groups, Professor Eduardo Siqueira and his students focused on the community of Jamaica Plain as a site for civic engagement. Culminating at the May 2 Wake up the Earth Festival, the students engaged in activities with several neighborhood groups to better understand community engagement at the neighborhood level. By working individually and in small groups, through observation and participation, the class shared their findings in a series of final presentations. Not only did they grow to understand civic engagement at the ground level, the class developed a sense of camaraderie, ownership and self-discovery. This spring, Civic Engagement students worked with JP NET’s Carlos Espinoza-Toro, a Community Organizer, and other groups to participate in a number of initiatives. These included JP Forum, the State of Our Neighborhood Annual Meeting, the Cancer–Free Economy initiative and the Wake up the Earth Festival. The State of Our Neighborhood forum involved the participation of over 250 neighbors, city councilors, state representatives, and the state senator for JP and was held at the Kennedy Elementary School. The Wake Up the Earth Festival began in 1979 when a group of neighbors and activists banded together to stop the expansion of Interstate 95 into Jamaica Plain. It has since grown into a multi-cultural festival that attracts over 10,000 individuals. Local artists, community groups and environmental activists pause to celebrate at the event every year on the first Saturday in May.

JP NET is a neighborhood effort to create a local economy that works for everyone in harmony with the planet. Given the challenges of a hurting economy, climate change, and more, we are co-creating a shared future vision for an equitable and sustainable JP to ensure that we all live well in the new economy.

Students Abigail Martin, Melanie Ivey and Kara Miles focused on their attending “State of the Neighborhood” event in February. This year’s theme was “Racial Equity through Housing Justice.” At the State of the Neighborhood, they observed that culture is imbedded, youth participation in local decision making is strong, and citizens rally to celebrate small victories. They also came to understand the influence of local journalism, especially though the Jamaica Plain Gazette’s role as a sounding board and voice of the community. The students decided to write a letter to its editor about their assessment of JP’s journey to becoming an “ideal” neighborhood: A Letter for Change: Jamaica Plain and Its Impact by Abigail Martin, Melanie Ivey, Kara Miles and the Civic Engagement Class. Kara noted that the Wake up the Earth Festival demonstrated what a neighborhood can do to begin the celebration for social justice. In their letter to the JP Gazette, they concluded “…Jamaica Plain binds together and attempts to stand (and walk and dance) through the streets shouting a battle cry of equality and community development.”
Brandon Shea, Mia Juliano and Moises Baez attended JP Forums. The Forums, founded by Chuck Collins, a local activist and Director of the Institute for Policy Studies, present lectures, films and workshops on topics related to the themes of peace, justice, the environment and civic engagement. The students collaborated with JP Forum coordinator Tracy Bindell to attend two of the forums and learn more about their planning process. They witnessed how the neighborhood collectively works together to engage in a broad range of social issues affecting the community. A talk on April 29, 2015, by psychologist and economist Per Espen Stoknes titled “Climate Guilt Doesn’t Help,” framed the topic of climate change in terms of responding to the issue by creating meaningful actions. Brandon observed at Espen’s presentation that the impact of trending behavior can cause influential citizens to get involved in social justice causes. Beth Roy, a San Francisco native, was featured in another forum on March 25, 2015 “Mediating Gentrification: How a Community Created Unity Out of Divisiveness.” Roy discussed her experience as a mediator arbitrating intense debates with polarized constituents. The forum attendees had an awareness of gentrification on various levels. Some were new to understanding the topic and other attendees were activists engaged in the cause. The presenter’s approach was to educate the public about issues of gentrification on a broader level. In addition, local businesses and individuals piggy-backed on the event by providing information about related topics such as sustainable food products and agriculture.

Abdul Hussein, another student in the class and a JP resident, has been involved in youth causes in the community and chose to present on his work at the nonprofit organization Bikes Not Bombs, where he is a founding member of Chain Reaction, a mobile bike shop. He described the history and mission of the organization and outlined their programs and initiatives, including their retail and job training programs for youth and their international outreach to countries like Nicaragua. As a full service shop, the retail entity helps support several community outreach and youth programs. Abdul is instrumental in training youth with leadership skills in the “Earn-A-Bike” program, where youth ages 12-18 learn to overhaul a bike and rebuild it and then take it home at the
end of the program. A partner program “Girls in Action” supports fitness, safety and empowerment for young women ages 12-18. “Strive,” a partnership with Madison Park High School that engages people with disabilities to learn about bike repair and safety are among programs Bikes Not Bombs implements and mobilizes local citizens in their mission to use the bicycle as a vehicle for social change.

Joanne Salazar presented her semester long project with JPNET’s Cancer-Free Economy, an initiative to reduce exposure to carcinogens. She assisted with publicizing an information session on how to reduce toxic materials for auto shop owners called “Invite Your Mechanic to Go Green and Prosper.” The session aimed to educate auto shop owners on how to lower operating costs and promote safer workplaces by using green chemicals. Along with the auto shop owners, environmental researchers from UMass Lowell attended the information session to talk about initiatives and grant programs designed to support the community, the industry as well as research funding on toxic alternatives to commercial solvents and other chemicals.

Many students stated in their presentations that the impact of their involvement in civic engagement initiatives in the Jamaica Plain community sparked a passion for ongoing community involvement. Abigail Martin reported that she was inspired to attend a town meeting with her father to express her concerns over a proposed chain restaurant opening in her neighborhood in Randolph, MA. Her understanding of housing inequities has broadened and caused her to educate members of her family about understanding tenants’ rights. With his developed leadership skills from Bike Not Bombs, Abdul has recently returned from the Youth Bike Summit in Seattle. There, he observed the city’s progressive attitude towards lane sharing and returned motivated to advocate for urban bike safety. Natasha DeLeon reported that attending a school committee meeting in Framingham, her home town, helped educate her on issues concerning shifts and changes in demographics as well as town funding and resources for underserved youth populations. Felisha Joseph felt compelled to get involved by writing a letter to her town’s superintendent in support of a beloved former teacher.

“As this course challenged my beliefs, challenged me to get involved and listen. We as a people can change the neighborhood; it’s on us to change.”

Felisha Joseph

As the semester drew to a close, Civic Engagement students reflected on their personal growth and recognized their part in transforming their communities. Abigail Martin concluded “This course challenged my beliefs, challenged me to get involved and listen. We as a people can change the neighborhood; it’s on us to change.”
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Wake up the Earth Festival photos courtesy of Chrissie Valencia & Yvonne Kwende
Classroom photos: Kaitlin Thurlow