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Students visit staff members for sociology assignment



Sociology classes meet in Frank Nanney Hall. Photo courtesy of Gardner-Webb University.

A project assigned in the Department of Social Sciences required students to “sleep over” at the home of a GWU faculty or staff member.

Diane Sykes, associate professor of sociology, began this project in her course named The Community because of a book. She said that when she was prepping for the course she ran into a book that would fit the curriculum.

“In the Neighborhood’ by Peter Lovenheim is written by a journalist. He lived in a fairly prestigious neighborhood and one day he came home and found that one of his neighbors, a doctor, murdered his [the doctor’s] wife in front of her kids and then killed himself” Sykes explained.

Sykes noted that the author wondered what could have changed and how it could have been prevented. "It occurred to him that he didn't know any of his neighbors," she said. As a result, he started holding sleepovers in order to get to know his neighbors. She said that she wanted her students to do the same in the Gardner-Webb community.

She said that her goal was "to get people connected and understand what community really is." She told her students to find a faculty or staff member to visit and to interact with them in their homes.

"I know that asking is one of the harder things they had to do because it's awkward...but [I] wanted them to see that outside of these office buildings we are really quite normal people."

Students like Bethany Clayton, senior, and Devin Mines, sophomore, were both skeptical about the project at first. Mines said, "I was shocked, I had never had an assignment where I had to do something with a faculty member outside of school."

However, after their visits, Clayton and Mines both said that Sykes should assign this project in future courses. Mines explained that he wished to see this project in other classes because, "it was something different. I'll probably never have to do something so out there like that."

Clayton believed that the project was really fun and helped her get to know her Sodexo coworker. "I visited Lorena Katz, I got to know her and her family better and I feel like I know them on a more personal level."

Mines echoed some of the same feelings in his experience. He had known Jimmy Laughlin, graduate assistant of the football team, for more than a year but had never stayed at his home.

"It was awkward at first because I didn't really know what we would do. In the end I found that Jimmy and I were basically the same people."

Mines said that his perspective was changed after this experience. "At first, I only saw [faculty] as teachers but now it just makes me think about their lives outside of school. [Working] is not the only thing they do every day and they have things to do outside of school."

Both students mentioned that if it weren't for the sociology project, they would have never visited staff members. They also said that they would visit Katz and Laughlin in the future.