

Crossing *la frontera* in St. Peter

Professor champions awareness of Latino community in Minnesota

by Barbara Fister

Gastón Alzate, director of the Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies program at Gustavus, is used to crossing borders. A native of Colombia, he crosses disciplinary boundaries every time he teaches students about the Latino community in Minnesota, borrowing not only from the social sciences and humanities but even using a concept from geometry: false invisibility.

“Mexicans are visible in St. Peter, objectively speaking,” he explains, “but not perceived—in the same way that a three-dimensional figure loses one dimension when seen in a two dimensional drawing or sketch.” A survey of



Steve Waldhauser '70

Gastón Alzate, associate professor of Spanish, reviews classwork with first-year student Sonia Hernandez. Sonia, whose family lives in St. Peter, participated in the AMIGOS program while in high school and is the first student from the program to enroll at Gustavus.

faculty and students conducted by his students in 2000 found that 80 percent of respondents were unaware that St. Peter had Latino residents. Since then, awareness has improved consid-

erably, thanks to the work of an innovative service-learning program, AMIGOS.

The program started in 2001 when two students, Christine Weber '02 and Emily Dale '02, designed an independent study under Alzate's guidance to uncover the reality of Latino life in St. Peter and to develop several projects to help young Latino students and their parents residing in the Green Valley trailer park. According to Alzate, “AMIGOS works mainly with after-school programs providing educational and recreational support for Mexican kids, teens, and adults. Our main goal is to accompany and support Mexicans in their adaptation to life in Minnesota and their daily struggle with language and cultural barriers.” As Gustavus students work to make these families visible, their efforts also help Anglo students and their teachers gain a greater understanding of their hometown in all its dimensions.

Apart from opportunities to

More opportunities to serve and learn

The Community Service Office works closely with faculty to design service-learning components for courses. Here is a sampling of the many projects underway:

- After encountering social justice issues during a Service Learning for Social Justice program in Guatemala, Deb Pitton decided to implement a program close to home. Education students in her course about middle school teaching methods are working with the St. Peter School District to develop programs that tackle the problem of bullying.
- In a Women's Studies course on healthcare issues facing marginalized people, Kay Moline's students worked with the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota to research children's healthcare issues in their home legislative districts and lobby their legislators on children's behalf.
- June Kloubec's health and exercise science students have developed a program to serve as fitness mentors to seniors in the St. Peter community.
- In a course on abnormal psychology, Marie Walker's students worked at the St. Peter Health Care Center's Special Care Unit to develop relationships with Alzheimer's patients so that they could create “memory books” for them.
- Michael Klimesh's accounting students worked with Nicollet County Environmental Services Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop a revolving loan program to update septic systems in the county. The League of Minnesota Counties is considering statewide adoption of this program. 



serve the community, the program also offers learning experiences for students. Their knowledge of standard Spanish is enriched as they encounter contemporary Mexican Spanish as it is spoken in the United States. Their understanding of cultural and social issues in Latin American studies is sharpened by seeing them applied in daily life. And, perhaps most importantly, students gain a personal experience that makes what they are learning real. “I found in service-learning the perfect pedagogical balance to bring to life the social and political problems of Latin America and Latinos in the

United States,” Alzate says. “The point of departure for me is that each student establishes a friendship, a personal and individual friendship with one member of the Mexican community. Once this is established, no matter how hard the topic is, the student will find a solution for the challenges the topic addresses.”

Such learning, while a departure from traditional classroom experiences, offers students opportunities to explore their own cultural and spiritual beliefs, to experience diversity in the heart of rural Minnesota, and to apply what they have learned in authentic ways. They get a head

start on the College’s mission to help students lead lives of leadership and service. They learn, on a local level, what it means to work toward a just and peaceful world. Though that seems a tall order for a single service-learning program, Alzate has a simpler way of describing it: “I hope that the AMIGOS experience will not be just another college experience but a lifelong desire to contribute in changing the world in which we *all* live.” 

Barbara Fister, an academic librarian at Gustavus since 1987, also serves as a coordinator of the Faculty Development Program.

Creating commitment

Service Learning for Social Justice program fosters faculty civic engagement

by Elizabeth Baer

The young woman in the trim green uniform furtively beckoned to us from a crumbling doorway. On this warm afternoon in Havana, we were casually exploring the city forbidden to most Americans. Nancy Hanway, associate professor of Spanish, translated the woman’s offer: for one American dollar, she would show us an antique pharmacy behind the door she appeared to be guarding. Intrigued, we paid and followed her. The tour of the beautifully intact turn-of-the-century store was hurried; at one point, the young woman fretted about her boss returning before she ushered us out.

This brief serendipitous exposure to pre-Castro Cuba turned out to be an epiphany about the



Priscilla Briggs

challenges confronting one of the few countries still espousing Communism. The young woman was an employee of the Castro government, protecting this historical site. As such, she

would be paid in pesos and would trade at the *bodegas*, government-sponsored stores where she could buy bulk products such as rice, beans, coffee, oil, and cigars. But she might desire

A view of beachfront Havana off the Malecon on a hot day.