It’s nearing noon at the Diana H. Jones Senior Center in Bushwick, a working-class neighborhood in North Brooklyn. The center mostly attracts African-American, Latino, and Chinese community members, and on this warm July day, several dozen seniors are taking their seats for lunch after a morning spent socializing.

But first—a cooking lesson. Ee Khoo ’17 and Yvonne Huang ’16, enrolled in Cornell’s Urban Semester Program, move to the front of the room, where they’ve set up bowls, utensils, and ingredients. In previous weeks, Khoo, a nutritional sciences major, and Huang, a biological sciences major, demonstrated how to prepare low-cost, healthy salads and appetizers. Now they’re serving up a main course: cold buckwheat noodles with chicken. As Khoo and Huang prepare the meal, they share details of the dish’s nutritional components and stress the importance of regulating sugar and salt intake.

“This is exactly the kind of work I want to do in my career as a registered dietitian,” says Khoo after plating samples. “We want to correct the misconception that healthy food is not appetizing, and for me personally, it’s exciting to take what we’re learning in class and apply it to people’s lives.”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the cafeteria, Nicholas Malchione ’18, a pre-med student majoring in food science, dishes out a different form of support. Placing a blood pressure monitor around an older woman’s wrist, he waits for a reading while asking about her medical history. A volunteer emergency medical technician on campus, Malchione will do 15 screenings by morning’s end, advising hypertensive seniors to follow up with their doctors, and compiling public health data for New York City’s Department for the Aging.

“The patient interaction is the best part,” says Malchione. “I like talking to people about their health and just having conversations to find out what’s going on in their lives.”

As valuable it is for these Urban Semester students to speak about health and nutrition, nothing surpasses the bonds they establish with the 160 or so seniors who drop into the center daily for meals.

“It’s hard to describe how powerful the connection is between the students and seniors here,” says center director Narcisa Ruiz. “It’s a genuine sharing by both sides.”

“We want to correct the misconception that healthy food is not appetizing, and for me personally, it’s exciting to take what we’re learning in class and apply it to people’s lives.”

— Ee Khoo ’17
Beyond the Comfort Zone

This same spirit persists throughout Urban Semester, a College of Human Ecology experiential learning program that enrolls about 100 Cornell undergraduates pursuing internships, service, and research in New York City across the fall, spring, and summer terms. Directed by anthropologist Sam Beck, a senior lecturer in human development, Urban Semester thrusts undergraduates into low-income neighborhoods of color in Brooklyn and the Bronx, where they aid social justice nonprofits addressing disparities in housing, education, and health. Partners at community-based organizations not only work alongside students, but are embedded in the Urban Semester curriculum, giving lectures on the history of their neighborhoods and the nature of service.

Selecting pre-medicine and pre-professional tracks, students also complete internships with a variety of hospitals, banks, design firms, law practices, entertainment companies, and other institutions across the city. Beck and lecturer Marianne Cocchini assign readings covering professional ethics, community engagement, social and economic inequality, and related topics. Students reflect on their work and service placements in journals and meet weekly to lead a dialogue...
on their experiences and the course material. At the end of the term, they are graded on oral reports and term papers.

Importantly, Beck says, students live together in dormitories at Long Island University Brooklyn. Most take mass transit to and from their work and service sites, and they’re encouraged to explore New York City culture. “Learning is a social activity,” Beck says. “We want our students to grow not just intellectually, but sharpen their communication, teamwork, and relationship-building skills while working with a wide range of people and organizations and adapting to a range of unknown environments.”

In bridging worlds and populations that are often far apart—the Ithaca campus bubble and multicultural urban neighborhoods; mostly suburban middle- and upper-class Cornellians and disadvantaged city dwellers—Beck has designed the program to instill ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, and cultural relativism in students, many of whom are bound for careers in medicine, law, policy, academia, and other influential fields.

“We get undergraduates out of their comfort zone to where they can experience diversity and achieve greater intimacy with poor people of color,” Beck says. “Our students are interacting with people who most likely are very different from themselves, and it pushes students to ask some difficult and uncomfortable questions.

“They begin to wonder,” Beck continues, “Why is it that Latino kids from Williamsburg are not going to Cornell? What is it that prevents them from joining the upwardly mobile middle class? Why are there such bad schools here? Why don’t they have access to good health facilities? Why can’t they get jobs? Why is there a drug culture? Why is there violence in the neighborhood? Often they’ve heard about these topics in the classroom, but as an experiential learning program, we provide a chance to contend with these issues directly. Our program is right at home with

“Our students are interacting with people who most likely are very different from themselves, pushing them to ask some difficult and uncomfortable questions.”

— Sam Beck
Human Ecology and its focus on applying knowledge in real-world settings.”

Into the Streets

Bedford-Stuyvesant’s Reconnect Café, near Vernon Avenue, appears to be another sign of gentrification in a neighborhood once riddled with crime. Inside, baristas serve fresh-squeezed juices and specialty coffees, along with breakfast burritos and baked goods. (Its Infamous Bed-Stuy Cookie, billed as “rough on the outside, sweet on the inside,” is a local favorite.) Unlike many of the trendy shops and restaurants that have moved into the neighborhood, Reconnect Café has deep Brooklyn roots, just like the men who own and operate it.

The business is run by Father Jim O’Shea, a trained social worker and Catholic priest who came to Bed-Stuy in the late 1990s, and Efrain Hernandez, a former neighborhood drug dealer who went straight under O’Shea’s guidance. Founded in 2013 under the slogan “working to change lives one cup at a time,” Reconnect offers young men an alternative to violence, crime, and gangs. Since opening, Reconnect has employed about 40 Bed-Stuy males, some of whom have moved on to full-time work or school as the business has grown to include a bakery and graphics shop. “It’s a brotherhood,” Hernandez says. “We are a group of guys taking responsibility for each other and modeling how to act professionally and take pride in our work.”

Included in that family atmosphere are Urban Semester students, who visit frequently to talk with the staff and lend a hand around the shop. Some have gone even further, helping build the Reconnect website and organizing a t-shirt fundraiser. “This is a community where our young people have almost no interaction with the so-called outside world,” O’Shea says. “It’s a great benefit for these guys to hang out with Cornell students and see lives different from their own, and Urban Semester students experience issues facing urban environments and learn about shared community responsibilities.”

This mutual exchange is not accidental. In 20 years leading Urban Semester, Beck has become a fixture in North Brooklyn, where he also lives. He serves on four local nonprofit boards, helping unite Latino and other minority populations in the fight for social justice. Churches United for Fair Housing gave him its 2013 Daisy Lopez Leadership Award for his longstanding service. Where many universities fail at community engagement because they’re viewed as outsiders trying to rescue a local population, Urban Semester is a Brooklyn institution with continuous investment in residents’ lives. “Sam lives here, he’s one of us,” says Martin Needelman, co-executive director and chief counsel of Brooklyn Legal Services, which advocates for the rights of low-income...
residents and regularly hosts Urban Semester students to help raise awareness for affordable housing and research real estate trends in the borough.

Last summer, Derek Nie ’18, a biology and pre-med student aided Brooklyn Legal Services, seeking a clearer picture of how poverty and subpar housing influence health outcomes. “I wanted to do something from a broader ecological perspective,” Nie says. “Fair housing really resonated with me because the quality of your home is a key factor in individual and family well-being.”

At Save Our Streets Bedford-Stuyvesant, another Urban Semester partner, students see a different influence on community wellness. Located in a row house across from a community park, the organization leads conflict mediation workshops, teaching teens and young adults to resolve their differences without turning to violence. Founded by Juan Ramos, a former gang leader, SOS Bed-Stuy commits to holding rallies within 72 hours of a neighborhood shooting. “Otherwise, people will forget and move on,” says Ramos, who also employs “violence interrupters” in the streets to alleviate conflict.

With the support of Urban Semester students, the group is surveying local residents about the toll of shootings in their lives. “Society sees our neighborhood as perpetrators of gun violence, but the truth is we are victims as well,” Ramos says. Sherry Wang ’16, a biology major, helped analyze survey data for Ramos. An aspiring surgeon, she says her work showed how gun violence threatens communities in the same way as inadequate housing and lack of education. “I grew up in a suburban area with very little crime,” she says. “Working here I’ve seen how shootings are not much different than pollution or other environmental factors that lead to poor health.”

Like Needelman and O’Shea, Ramos is another Brooklyn mainstay who’s developed close ties with Beck. He aids student discussions on gangs and gun violence—a topic he’s spoken on nationally. “Urban Semester is a rich exchange for both sides,” Ramos says. “A lot of the students in the program are interested in medicine and health careers. What better prescription for helping someone than to understand them first?”

**Bronx Boosters**

An aspiring physician, Taylor Watts ’18, a human biology, health, and society major, long thought that medicine relied on all the details a doctor can gather “up close.” Examine a patient’s physical appearance and symptoms, ask about their family history, diet, exercise, and other lifestyle behaviors, and reach a diagnosis. After a summer in Urban Semester, Watts says outlying factors are just as important in gaining a picture of someone’s health.

“You can assess what the person presents up close, but food prices, poor housing, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, environmental pollutions, and other social and cultural factors play a big role in health,” she adds.
Watts, who grew up in rural New Hampshire, shadowed doctors in the city’s busiest emergency department at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx, where she also assisted a research project to aid physicians in detecting bullying in pediatric patients. As a Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research Iscol Summer Scholar, she and Grace Lin ’16, a biological sciences student, organized a health fair outside a Bronx taxi base.

Working with a physician, they screened cabbies—many of whom can’t make doctor’s visits due to irregular hours—for high blood pressure and passed on nutrition information.

“My favorite moments were when I got to tell someone that they had excellent blood pressure,” Watts says. “I began to anticipate that little smile that would spread across their face—that glimpse of self-love, belief in oneself to be healthy and thrive. Even when someone had high blood pressure, it was still empowering because I was able to help them realize that it wasn’t the end of the world, and that they could begin to eat more of their favorite vegetables, put a little less salt in their food, and get their heart pumping with a brisk walk.”

Above all, Watts valued her service with the Bronx Parents Housing Network (BPHN), where she and Lin joined a grassroots research team surveying residents of a geriatric public housing project near 183rd Street. Floor by floor, Watts, Lin, Rafael Cisneros ’16, and Zoe Maisel ’17, guided by BPHN staff, knocked on doors and asked about chronic disease and whether they had been admitted to the emergency room in the last six months. That research contributed to an ongoing Healthy Housing, Healthy Lives project that relies on connections Cocchini and Beck have built over many years in the Bronx, mirroring their approach in Brooklyn.

Joined by BPHN and Lincoln Hospital, project leaders hope to document how insufficient housing and other environmental factors contribute to poor health. Ultimately, they hope to organize tenants and lobby policymakers to secure more resources for impoverished areas.

The project is quintessentially Urban Semester—drawing on students’ research interests, professional internships, and service projects to make a difference alongside community partners. “For more than 20 years, Urban Semester has been coming into communities like ours that have next to nothing, and have worked with us to build something,” says Yolanda Rivera, a BPHN consultant. “It’s amazing to see what can be done when you get different disciplines and groups together to work for a broader cause.”

As for Watts, she’s now considering a medical career in New York City, where she might make a greater impression than in a rural area. She’s imagining a career where she can treat patients up close, while also addressing broader social determinants of health.

“Urban Semester showed me how public service works,” Watts says. “I’ve taken public health classes at Cornell and seen how there’s no formula or easy way to solve the problem. To be a team member in an organization like this, you have to see the whole picture.”

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