

Girls → meet ← world

The Religion III Praxis Project
inspires students to take on
a social injustice in the world.

BY MARY CUNNINGHAM

FOR NINE YEARS, Visitation juniors have been changing the world, little by little, thanks to the Praxis Project.

In Religion III, juniors study Catholic social teaching, which has two branches, service and justice. Starting as freshmen, students engage in Christian service and become well-versed in volunteer work, but it's not until junior year that the Praxis Project introduces them to the justice aspect.

The cycle and concept of praxis has been around for centuries and discussed by the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Marx. The exact definition varies based on the field and philosopher, but praxis is always a process of realization and action, often related to well-being and righteousness.

At Visitation through the circle of praxis—awareness, analysis, and action—students working in small groups research, evaluate, and act to combat a social injustice.

At a conference nine years ago, Ann Marie Brennan-Zelenka '69 heard about an Ohio school's yearlong Praxis Project that put Catholic social teachings into action. Being in Washington, D.C., the center of so much cultural and political action, Ann Marie felt that this was an especially great project for Visitation. She shortened the project to a semester, added in Salesian spirituality, and began assigning it. Soon after, her fellow junior Religion teachers—Dr. Jane Deren and Elizabeth "Biz" Wittschen—added the project to their curriculum, too.

"Students are able to see how their faith lives are relevant in the world," says Biz of why she finds the project important. Many girls start off dismayed by the task ahead, but throughout the process, juniors learn that, even at 17, they can make a difference.



1 Awareness

BEFORE LEAVING THEIR MARK on the world, girls must learn about their topic. Juniors take on injustices such as sexual assault, human trafficking, endangered species, mental health, homosexuality and bullying, women in Afghanistan, fair trade, the gender wage gap, and many more.

Each girl is touched by a social injustice for her own reasons. For many, the issues have a direct correlation to their life or future.

"I try to be environmentally conscious, but wanted to know more," says Natalie Soler '15, who studied habitat destruction for her Praxis Project this past year. Allie Figueroa '15 chose to study sexual assault on college campuses, explaining, "it's a really relevant issue for girls our age because we'll be applying to college next year."

Other juniors selected more worldly topics that lacked a direct personal connection, but still intrigued them.

Mairen Hilary '15, whose group focused on veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, says, "We're called to give back to them because they did so much for us." The movie "Blood Diamond" inspired Kate Delaney '15 to learn about child soldiers. She elaborates, "I thought it was an interesting and complex topic, and I wanted to see what I could do."

2 Analysis

AFTER WEEKS OF RESEARCH, the girls are well-informed about their situation's history, status, and who's trying to help. This leads groups to an interviewee, who provides a firsthand look at the work required to create social change.

"Girls reflect and say the interview is the best part because they find people who are passionate," says Biz. Groups have scored a variety of notable interviews including representatives from Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, Veterans Affairs, Catholic Charities, national parks, and countless nonprofits championing a specific cause.

"What can we do to help?" is one question every group asks. Interviewees always provide realistic ideas for high schoolers. This knowledge, along with everything the girls have already learned, grows into a solid action-plan.

3 Action

THE PROJECT MOVES FAITH and Catholic social teaching out of the classroom and into the real world.

"Students see that cultural norms are at the root of a lot of problems and they try to shift the norm," says Biz. "The girls have such great ideas. It's great for me to see them become enthusiastic and be vehicles for social injustice." Groups often start with grand plans, then realize it's OK to begin with a small, realistic goal.

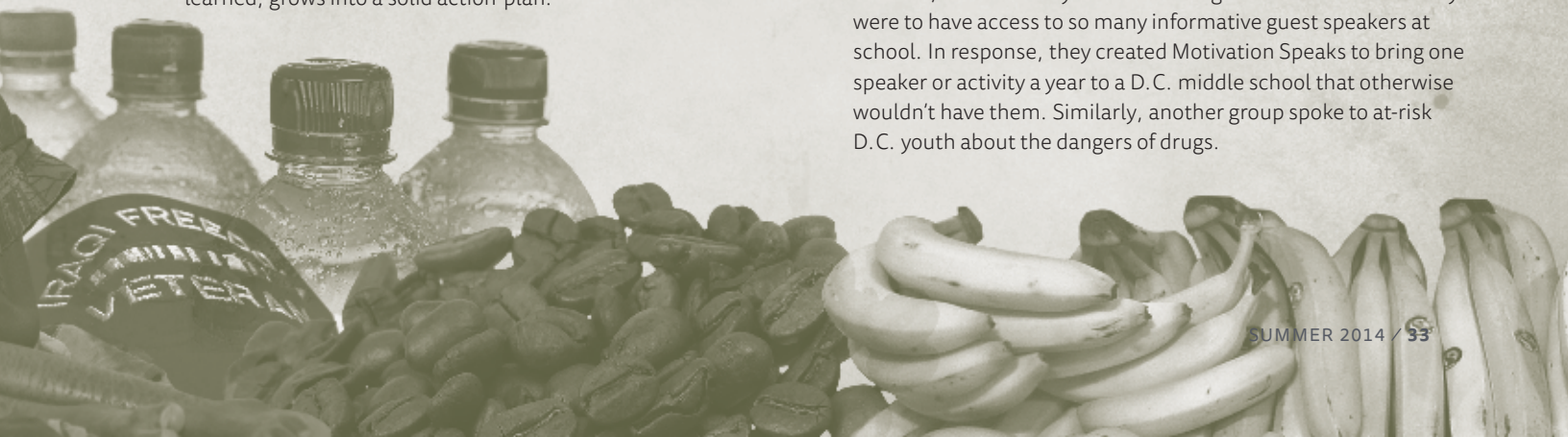
"Advocacy doesn't have to be a large thing," says Adri Corriveau '15. "It can be just our community; it can be less daunting than the world." Groupmate Adriana Dropulic '15 continues, "Child labor is such a large task, if we can aid the effort in any way by making people aware, it helps." Their group created informational flyers, then called upon their peers to turn those flyers into pinwheels—the international symbol against child labor. Pinwheels also twirled along the Nolan Center for two weeks in May as a daily reminder of the cause. Several Class of 2014 projects also focused on awareness drives, including one that promoted reusable water bottles and another meant to dispel mental health stigmas.

For most topics, lack of public awareness is a key part of the problem, so many groups seek to educate the school and greater communities. In the project's early years, flyers routinely appeared around campus to achieve this goal. Now, many groups create Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and websites, to spread knowledge beyond the school.

After being shocked by their findings about sexual assault on college campuses, Alee Burke '15, Courtney Clark '15, Allie Figueroa, and Emma Kilcullen '15 held a self-defense demonstration, exhibiting multiple protective moves that anyone can do. The team has lots of other ideas for continuing to spread its message.

Each year, several groups send their message all the way to Capitol Hill. In an effort to alter congressional policy, girls solicit the community to sign letters of concern and then mail letters by the dozen to their representative or senator.

Other groups choose actions that have more tangible results. After studying education and poverty, Ellen Sanin '14, Sarah Wolf '14, and Steffaney Wood '14 recognized how fortunate they were to have access to so many informative guest speakers at school. In response, they created Motivation Speaks to bring one speaker or activity a year to a D.C. middle school that otherwise wouldn't have them. Similarly, another group spoke to at-risk D.C. youth about the dangers of drugs.





Harriet Fink '15, Adriana Dropulic '15, Kelly Palazzo '15, and Adri Corriveau '15

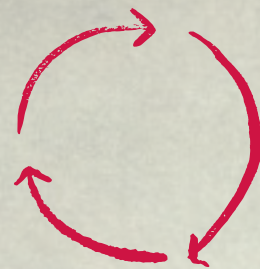
Nia Moore '15, Natalie Soler, and Lauren Sport '15 were eager to bring a beehive to campus because bees are important pollinators whose habitat is

being destroyed. Additional research told them that a butterfly bush can provide similar benefits. In the 2014–2015 school year, the trio will lead the Social Butterfly Club to plant such a bush and care for it.

The Praxis Project is officially complete once each group presents to the class and each girl submits a reflection paper. These final steps serve to further educate the entire class, and help girls individually reflect on the impact they have made on the world—and that it has made on them.

"It's helped me to see the big picture," says Lauren Sport. "Charity is short, [social justice] is longterm."

The Circle



AWARENESS, ANALYSIS, ACTION, REPEAT.

Praxis is a circle because once the plan is put into action, the situation changes, creating the need to start again. The project syllabus does not call for the girls to sustain the cycle; however, many students become so passionate that they extend their campaigns into their senior year.

And, through Biz, Jane, and new Religion III teacher Luke O'Connell, the project itself will continue to thrive even after creator Ann Marie's retirement this past summer.

"The project helps them to grow and feel 'I can make a difference,'" says Ann Marie. All three teachers agree that the project gives students confidence, experience, and faith-based guidance that can help them effect change in the future.

Though juniors haven't changed the entire world yet, they have created many small changes and in the process, have formed a new outlook on faith. As St. Francis de Sales often said, "doing little things with great love makes them truly great." //

Call & Response

For their Praxis Project, juniors were called to research a wide variety of social injustices and responded in diverse and individual ways that best helped effect positive change.

TOPIC

Veterans and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Women in Afghanistan

Fair Trade

Human Trafficking

Mental Health

Child Hunger

Equal Pay for Women

ACTION

Started a petition on change.org, created an app to give veterans easy access to resources; and created a Facebook page and website (educatingforempathy.webs.com).

Facilitated an activity with their class contrasting the aspirations of American young women with the harsh reality of many Afghani women's lives; wrote and sent letters to 25 Congressmen

Worked with the bookstore to try to get fair trade items on campus

Posted informational flyers at local businesses and bus stops; had peers take informational survey; and contacted FairGirls, an organization that helps survivors earn an independent wage through crafts, about possibly exhibiting at Esprit

Formed the Mental Health Awareness Club to dispel mental health stigmas

Wrote and sent letters to Congress and recruited peers, teachers, and family to sign additional letters

Created website (payequality.wordpress.com)