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Petersburg rising: The Phoenix Project impacts a city

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Petersburg mayor Mickens (l) and William and Mary President Nichol listen as students involved with the Phoenix Project make their reports.

Against fairly long odds, the pilot program of Phoenix Project connected in Petersburg, Va., this summer. The initiative, which seeks to create a long-term partnership between the College and non-profit service providers in the struggling city of 30,000 people, contributed more than \$190,000 in tangible labor to groups within the municipality during its first two months of operation. More important, the participating students built tenable bonds throughout the community.

“For the city, it was scary,” admitted Petersburg mayor Annie Mickens, as she recalled initial discussions about the project during a recent visit hosted by Project Phoenix staff members.

For the William and Mary students, who would face the “understandable skepticism” that confronts such outside groups, “it took a lot of guts” to risk involvement, said Gene Nichol, president of the College.

Mickens, who suggested that other “do-gooders” had come to the city and, in the end, contributed very little, explained, “The people in Petersburg are open to folks who are honest and who live up to what they say they can do. The issues are deep. On our own, we cannot come up. The issue for people who come in is that you’re not perceived as savior of the downtrodden.”

The mayor suggested the initial success of Project Phoenix was due to the attitudes toward service exhibited by the William and Mary volunteers. “Because of your enthusiasm to embrace who we are, and understanding that it is a learning process for you, we will give you as much as you give us,” she told the students. “We will give up who we are for the growth of the other person.”

The meeting hosted by Phoenix Project

was billed as an opportunity for participants to share their experiences with the president of the College and with city officials. In terms of the “tangible” numbers, Greg Werkheiser ('96), executive director, said that 13 organizations in Petersburg had been served, 34 separate projects had been completed and that 2,800 hours of service with an estimated value of and more than \$190,000 worth of labor.



Mayor Mickens (l, foreground) and President Nichol (l, rear) enjoy conversations with students who volunteered with The Phoenix Project.

Non-profit organizations with which the students worked included Rebuilding Together, the Tri-City Literacy Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Historic Petersburg Foundation, Sycamore Rouge, the Petersburg Community Development Corporation of Tabernacle Baptist Church and the Legal Aid Justice Center. During their individual reports to the group, the students provided specific accounts of activities in which they were involved, including creating signage for the historic Peter Jones Trading Post, helping the Chamber of Commerce create a Web presence, working with the literacy program to enlist greater numbers of volunteers, helping staff at the Baptist church write grant proposals for federal Faith-Based Initiative funds and helping to identify lead-based paint hazards.

Many of the students punctuated their accounts with descriptions revealing their sense of connectedness to the community. Those involved with conducting architectural surveys talked about being invited into back yards to listen as area residents told stories about their families that reached back to the Civil War. Others remarked on “all of the hugs” they received from members of Tabernacle Baptist Church after attending services there. Sarah Miller, who reported that she and the three other students from the law school who were involved helped in 22 cases involving, among other things, disputes between landlords and tenants, became increasingly animated as she described working on a

direct service project: “I learned to clean a gutter,” she boasted.

For many of the students, actually living in a house on West Wythe Street was integral to the positive experience they enjoyed. Explained Carolyn Fiddler, “It is a typical neighborhood surrounded by vacant lots and boarded-up houses. By being there, we were living Petersburg’s challenges. It is part of what we were this summer.”

Looking toward the future, staff members of the Phoenix Project predicted that the number and the value of service hours contributed to Petersburg organizations will more than double within a year. They envisioned tightening the bond between Petersburg and William and Mary by bringing city leaders to campus to share their expertise.

Among the students, Hannah Ayers ('08) spoke about her intention of encouraging faculty members to “integrate Petersburg into their course requirements.” Austin Pryor ('08) suggested that service trips involving rebuilding and clean-up efforts were being pursued within the College’s Office of Student Volunteer Services. Fiddler seemed to summarize the intent of the students. She said, “We are committed to not being fair-weather friends.”

During their remarks, Mickens and Nichol each expressed hope that the effort would continue as a resource for both the city and the students.

Nichol thanked the mayor for “taking a chance on these students,” then he congratulated the students by remarking, “The way you’re regarded here says a lot about you and a lot about what you’re able to do.”

Assessing the Project Phoenix pilot effort, he said, “One hopes this is an opening chapter. Opening chapters are risky, are fraught with peril, but if done right, they open doors to successes.” He later emphasized, “This is the sort of work I’ve hoped is at the heart of the public mission at a great university.”

For more information, visit the [Phoenix Project Web site](#).

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