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THE REJECTION OF SILENCE: PUBLIC EXPRESSIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH CRITICAL UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

Carline Bennett

“Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveler who has been attacked. But, it is justice’s role to prevent the attacks.”

As students enter into the Ozanam Scholars Program, they are confronted with this quote from program namesake, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, and charged with actualizing this sentiment. The Ozanam Scholars Program provides a platform for students to critically examine the systems that perpetuate poverty and take action to advance social justice through academic scholarship, Vincentian service, and global citizenship throughout college and beyond. In their role as scholars, students are tasked with serving as social justice advocates and responsible citizens in their local and global communities.

Ozanam Scholars draw inspiration for their capstone research from varied academic, service and personal experiences. A research question may be borne from a student’s junior year trip to Ecuador and their desire for authentic partnership with the communities encountered. One capstone project may stem from a student’s all too personal encounter with topics such as suicide and fatal drug overdose. Still another student’s research may have roots in scholarly and career pursuits, thus allowing them to leverage and apply knowledge gained through academic coursework. Wherever inspiration resides, Ozanam Scholars – over the course of four years, and in partnership with a faculty mentor – create a capstone project that seeks to practically address a social justice issue, informed by the research they conduct.

Gwyneth Swinburne’s case study focuses on two New York City daycares that differ along

socioeconomic lines and their personnel’s understanding of developmental milestones. Her findings indicate the importance of developing a resource that would allow daycare personnel to express developmental milestones to parents in an accessible format.

Joohyun Lee assesses the health literacy rates of college students on the St. John’s University campus and proposes the development and implementation of a health literacy curriculum to address information gaps.

Zoe Sheppard investigates low-resource treatment methods to combat water contamination within the Shuar community of Miguel Chiriap in Morona Santiago, Ecuador. Her capstone project, a slow sand filter, seeks to reduce the risks associated with the consumption of contaminated water.

Steffi Romero examines the media’s role in influencing the quality of education in Toco, Trinidad. To mitigate the sense of isolation and combat the lack of mainstream media representation expressed by rural Toco residents, Romero proposes the implementation of a digital blog focused on daily happenings, community highlights and upcoming events.

Katherine Ross’ contribution explores the dearth of practical and accessible information available to adolescents on the topics of fatal drug overdose and adolescent suicide. Ross’ capstone project aims to equip adolescents with comprehensible

resources that allow effective access to information on an array of topics, including mental health, substance abuse, addiction and bullying.

Megan Wolyniec's research considers the benefits that knitting, crocheting, and crafting pose to community members at St. John's Bread and Life in Brooklyn, NY. Her capstone research – an informational exchange website – promotes mentorship and community through knitting.

Joanna Padgett Herz sheds light on the barriers to volunteering faced by college students in New York City. Her research aims to educate students on the socioeconomic dynamics of volunteerism, various social issues encountered while volunteering, and ethical dynamics in the non-profit industry.

As we continue to evolve the standard for undergraduate research, we appreciate the opportunity to highlight student research and showcase the contributions of community stakeholders in the process. This special issue owes a significant debt of gratitude to the cadre of faculty mentors, Faculty Advisory Committee members and Graduate Assistants who have guided students on their research journey throughout the years. Thank you to editors Marc Gillespie and Anthony Marziliano for your thoughtful feedback to our students during the revision process. Most importantly, we owe profound thanks to the community members who made this research possible. Thank you for granting us access to your communities and allowing our students to share your stories through research.

Inspired by the ideas of political theorist Hannah Arendt, Paul Loeb (2010) in *Soul of a Citizen* proposes that our propensity to become overwhelmed by the scope of the social injustices we face often leaves us “privately outraged at our society's directions, but publicly silent” (p.18). As you review the articles within this journal issue, we hope you are encouraged by our students' rejection of silence and their public expression of social justice through critical research.

REFERENCES

Loeb, P. R. (2010). *Soul of a citizen: Living with conviction in challenging times*.
St. Martin's Griffin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carline Bennett serves as the Director of the Ozanam Scholars program within the Vincentian Institute for Social Action at St. John's University.

Former roles include co-founder of the Telem Center for the African Child and Vice President of Education at GenerationOn, the youth and education division of the Points of Light Institute. Carline holds a Masters in International Educational Administration and Policy Analysis from Stanford University and has extensive experience in service-learning, positive youth development, curricula design and education. Carline also holds a Masters in Childhood and Special Education from St. John's University.