Joshua Knight’s service-learning experience results in social and political activism for growing Latino community

BY PAT COLE

Birmingham-Southern junior Joshua Knight took a turn from his usual campus activities last fall to volunteer for the college’s Service Learning program. The project he took on was aimed at adults—some Asian, a few Indian, most Latino—wanting to learn English as a second language.

Drawing on a previous year’s church mission trip to the Dominican Republic and influenced by the attitude and commitment of fellow BSC student Virginia Dyson who was teaching in the program, Knight decided he would give it a shot.

With no formal training and sitting at a small desk each Monday evening with writing utensil and paper, Knight tutored one-on-one with a Latino adult, alongside other BSC students and community volunteers at Baptist Church of the Covenant on Birmingham’s Southside. “I prepared for my teaching sessions by studying and practicing on my own time,” says Knight. “Some of the men and women needed phonetics training and others were a little more advanced. Either way, it was not an easy thing to do.”

Knight continued tutoring up until May 2003, but it was long before then that he felt the urge to do more. Not only that, but he was beginning to notice the range of issues involved in serving diverse populations and the differences in the lives of those he worked with—particularly Latinos.

“Not only do they [Latinos] need help filling out job applications, but they come up short when pursuing other basic needs such as health care and family services,” observes Knight, who is a native of Alabaster and an interdisciplinary philosophy/political science/economics major. “Because of legality issues concerning U.S. immigration, many Latinos tend to stay ‘underneath the radar’ and are less likely to attract attention to themselves even though they are in need of police, government, or medical assistance.”

Taking a second overseas trip—this time to Guatemala during January 2003 Interim—for an individual study travel project to learn Spanish—enabled Knight to further understand the issues of Latin Americans. It also influenced him to want to do more study abroad projects in the future and to become a social and political advocate for issues similar to those involving Latinos. “Studying Spanish, along with my service-learning work, has become a doorway for me into the world of Latin America,” says Knight.

After returning from his trip to Guatemala, Knight added Spanish to his minor in religion. He had always viewed foreign language study as a sort of novelty and thought it would be something intriguing and fun, but certainly not very challenging. “That was before I stepped into Dr. [Barbara] Domcekova’s classroom!” comments Knight. “Her classroom forced me to break away from the playful attempt to learn Spanish and come to terms with the real work involved in memorizing literally thousands of foreign words and grammatical concepts.”

Domcekova, assistant professor of Spanish, encouraged Knight to reach further into his studies and practice speaking Spanish with international students on the campus. A Columbian student who often studied with Knight and became a close friend encouraged him to volunteer at the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (HICA), a social service organization newly headquartered in the local Woodlawn community.

Knight accepted his peer’s advice and spent the past summer working 15 hours a week at HICA researching and translating information into a book being written for the Latino community and other international residents new to the country.

The book, completed in August, contains general information about life in the U.S., as well as information on how to obtain a driver’s license, a marriage license, and health care. In addition, it provides listings such as English as a Second Language classes, basic U.S. laws, and churches. More than 10,000 copies of Bienvenidos a Birmingham, or “Welcome to Birmingham” have been circulated in the greater Birmingham community, particularly in public schools and stores.

In addition to Knight’s campus involvement this fall as a Resident Advisor, manager to the BSC women’s soccer team, and membership on the college’s Leadership Studies and Service Committee, he is busy making plans to form a coalition for organizations and groups who provide services to the international community.

Knight already has met with staff members at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham to discuss his plans. “I want to get started by talking to the leadership of about 10 local agencies and try to get them all coordinated to share their resources, provide better training for volunteers, and offer more quality services to the international community,” explains Knight. “I’ve also talked to some students on campus about helping.”

Knight has decided to enter the field of nonprofit service work after his graduation in 2003. In the future, he hopes to have a hand at influencing people and changing political systems and economic structures for the better. “I like to step back and observe where problems are rooted and how they happen,” notes Knight. “That’s what really interests me.”