Late last spring, a colleague forwarded me a job announcement for an opening at the University’s Bonner Center for Civic Engagement. The CCE was new to me, but as I explored its history and work and met the CCE staff and other UR colleagues in visits last summer, I began to realize this was a special place.

So what is it that makes the CCE, and UR, stand out?

As the University’s hub for community engagement, the CCE helps coordinate cross-campus, collaborative, sustained responses to community-identified needs. At the core of our work is a two-fold commitment: expanding educational opportunities for UR students, faculty and staff and meeting actual needs in our greater community.

Holding up both ends of this commitment is not easy. It is one thing to send students out into the community to enhance their learning. It is another to do so in ways that integrate experiential learning with academic foundations while keeping our community partners’ specific and changing needs in view. Developing and sustaining relationships that are dynamic enough to be mutually beneficial takes the talent and skill of our exceptional staff.

And we have found that it is when community needs and educational foundations are integrated and in balance that truly transformative learning takes place.

This is evident in the academic reflections our student Civic Fellows complete after their 10-week summer internships. It is evident in the experiences of students and faculty who connect theory and practice through community-based learning classes, whether by working directly with clients served by community partners, or by compiling real data analysis for Richmond-area nonprofits, or by hearing from community leaders in study trips and through classroom visits. It is evident in the experiences of students who, because they want to “get involved,” start volunteering with the CCE’s Richmond Families Initiative to support the development of healthy families in Richmond and then find themselves seeking coursework to better understand disparities in urban public education.

At the CCE, we believe that connecting to the Richmond region and beyond is not an add-on to a UR education. It is at the very foundation of a UR education.

And we support this vision within a University that has, in the words of the UR strategic plan—The Richmond Promise—a “determination to engage as a meaningful part of the Richmond community, of the nation and of the world.”

I cannot imagine a better place to come to work.

Dr. Sylvia Gale is the associate director of the CCE.

Bonners Flock to Congress at UR

The phone rang relentlessly in the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement on Friday, Oct. 23, 2010, as Bonner Scholar Josh Flynn, ’10, deftly fielded call after call from Bonners travelling from campuses across the country to attend the annual Bonner Congress, hosted for the first time by the University of Richmond Bonner Scholars Program (BSP).

“Your flight has been delayed?” Flynn asked. “No problem. We have another airport pick-up at 3:00 p.m. today. Just look for the blue van with the University of Richmond logo.”

Flynn’s steady, capable handling of numerous inquiries was representative of the strong student support that went into the planning and implementation of the Bonner Congress. A committee of 10 Bonner Scholars spent months working closely with the University’s BSP staff preparing for the congress, which ran from Oct. 23-25 and hosted 160 Bonners and 10 Bonner staff members from as far away as California.

For UR BSP director Kim Dean, ’97, and BSP coordinator Bryan Figura, the congress presented the perfect opportunity to showcase the student-development model they have been perfecting with UR Bonner Scholars for the past two years. “We could take our campus perspective on student development and leadership and share it with the larger Bonner network,” Dean said, “while also letting the network inform our perspective.”

The congress, which focused on student-submitted proposals about ways to improve Bonner programs on campuses throughout the country, certainly provided plenty of leadership opportunities for UR Bonner Scholars. Take, for example, Bonner senior intern Zach Ferguson, who undertook coordination of housing, one of the biggest logistical challenges of the congress.

Ferguson made arrangements for attendees to room with UR Bonner Scholars, and in some cases with Nonners, Ferguson’s affectionate term for UR students not in the BSP. “Everyone said how great it was to stay with other Bonners and UR students,” Ferguson said.

Ferguson also facilitated a workshop on orientation and retention strategies for a group of about 30 Bonners. “I led them through a mapping process, starting with the big idea in the center,” Ferguson said.

“Then all around we listed the resources you would need to implement this idea and how these resources related to each other. At the end of the exercise, we had developed a plan.”

Although Bonners led most of the workshops themselves, UR staff led some, including a workshop on how to encourage more community-
Ties That Bind: Food, Community

Carly Vendegna loves good food. Especially fresh, organic produce—leafy lettuces, crispy cucumbers, juicy tomatoes and crunchy peppers. Vendegna, ’10, traces her love affair with food back to her parents.

The daughter of an ESL teacher with a penchant for gardening and a father who enjoyed cooking his native Colombian cuisine, Vendegna grew up in a Chicago suburb.

At age 15 Vendegna visited Colombia for the first time and met her extended family. She learned firsthand about living conditions in less-developed countries.

“I saw the conditions my family and friends were living in,” Vendegna said. “It hit me that I needed to do something important with my life. I decided to do something with international development.”

Vendegna became involved in civic issues during her sophomore year. Through Build It, a civic-engagement initiative coordinated by the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (CCE), she volunteered at Boaz and Ruth, a nonprofit in Northside Richmond dedicated to successful re-entry of ex-offenders.

She also joined the campus environmental organization RE-NEW in response to President Ayers’ signing of the Presidents’ Climate Commitment to reduce and eventually eliminate global-warming emissions on campus. “I could actually wrap my head around this,” Vendegna said. “It was a tangible way to make change.”

The inextricable link between human-rights issues and environmental issues soon became apparent to Vendegna. In fall 2008 she undertook a community-based research project for Dr. Elizabeth Ransom’s sociology course “Feast and Famine: Inequalities in the Global Food System.” Vendegna determined that the inner-city neighborhood where she volunteered with ex-offenders was a food desert, because the residents lacked access to affordable, high-quality fresh food.

Vendegna pursued her interest in the relationship between human rights and food accessibility during a study-abroad program in India in spring 2009. Through an internship with a nonprofit, she learned how the creation of seed banks in 50 Indian villages promoted sustainable agriculture by giving villagers control over the quality and quantity of seeds they had for sowing.

“Because of the success of the seed banks, villagers could buy better livestock, build better buildings and have better weddings,” Vendegna said.

A Weinstein grant enabled Vendegna to extend her stay in India through June 2009. She learned about organic agriculture when she lived and worked on a farm owned by a leading Indian environmentalist. “I harvested wheat, milked cows and worked with the chef,” Vendegna said.

Eager to apply what she had learned in India to a domestic context, Vendegna jumped into an internship with the Chicago-based Growing Power upon her return to the United States in June 2009. The CCE awarded Vendegna a competitive Burhans Civic Fellowship to fund her internship with Growing Power, a national nonprofit dedicated to the development of community-food systems.

Vendegna immersed herself in all aspects of the alternative food movement, from the compost phase; to the planting, weeding and harvesting phases; to the delivery of the food to urban farmers markets; to the marketing and sale of the food.

“You think gardening is an easy thing to do,” Vendegna said, “but it’s not. I really pushed myself this summer, working 60 hours a week.”

In addition to learning how physically exhausting farming can be, Vendegna learned about the racial and socioeconomic undercurrents associated with the organic-food movement in the United States.

“Because of slavery’s association with agriculture, some African-Americans may initially be reluctant to embrace community gardening, especially when a lot of the alternative-food movement leaders are white,” Vendegna explained. “Price can also be a deterrent. Low-income families can’t afford to buy organic tomatoes at $4.25 a pound.”

During her senior year, Vendegna is applying her newfound knowledge on sustainable agriculture and community gardening to projects both on and off campus. In her role as co-president of Green UR (the new name for the student environmental club), Vendegna is working with other students to create a compost pile and community garden in the center of the campus apartments.

“After my internship experiences,” Vendegna said, “I think I really could start a garden on a piece of asphalt.”

Vendegna has shared her enthusiasm for community gardens with Boaz and Ruth participants. She worked with Backyard Farmer, a business dedicated to promoting local food production, to build a compost unit and develop a kitchen garden on a plot of land owned by Boaz and Ruth. The garden will educate neighborhood residents on the value of good nutrition while simultaneously supplying fresh produce to a restaurant operated by Boaz and Ruth.

Vendegna, who enjoys cooking in her off-campus apartment, knows what a difference fresh ingredients can make in creating a good meal. She also knows what a difference an individual can make when she is passionate about social and environmental issues.

“We all have to take care of each other,” Vendegna said. “Whatever issue you can find that will permit you to do that, good for you!”
University Sponsors Habitat Build in Northside Richmond

On Jan. 27, 2010, President Edward Ayers announced a University-sponsored Richmond Metropolitan Habitat for Humanity (RMHFH) house build running from 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m., Wednesday-Saturday, Feb. 24-April 24. He invited students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends of the University to volunteer on the nine-week build.

The University of Richmond Habitat for Humanity Campus Chapter and the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) through its Build It initiative are working closely with RMHFH to coordinate the house build in the Highland Park neighborhood of Northside Richmond.

Two years ago the University sponsored another Habitat build in Highland Park, underscoring its long-term commitment to this Northside neighborhood.

“More than 120 students are currently volunteering as tutors, mentors and administrative support in Highland Park schools and nonprofits through Build It, the University’s largest sustained community-engagement initiative” said Cassie Price, Build It program manager and staff advisor to the UR Habitat Chapter. “This build provides just one more way for the campus community to connect with our Northside community partners.”

It also provides an opportunity for the campus community to learn more about affordable-housing issues and the rich history of the Highland Park neighborhood, said Amy Howard, CCE executive director. To that end, the CCE is offering several educational programs, including a Brown Bag event, cosponsored by the Black History Month Committee, on the current mortgage crisis and a walking tour of historic Highland Park led by Valentine Richmond History Center director Bill Martin.

UR Habitat Chapter vice president Emily Bender, ’10, noted that the chapter is also sponsoring a number of educational programs, including a documentary film screening on the credit crisis and an informational poster blitz on housing, in the week leading up to the build kick-off.

Chapter members have been working hard on logistical planning and recruitment for the build. Soon they will have the chance to begin construction on what will be a green, Earthcraft-certified home.

“Students and other campus groups can come together to work on a common project that has significance for the larger Richmond community,” Bender said.

Clearly, the build means many things to many people: a chance to strengthen campus-community partnerships, a chance to raise affordable-housing awareness, a chance to bond with co-workers or fellow students.

But for UR Habitat Chapter president Matt Wentworth, ’11, the build represents a chance to right a social wrong. “I just want someone to have a decent house they can afford to live in,” he said. “Because we live in America, people shouldn’t be homeless. It’s that simple.”

Bonner Scholars: engage.richmond.edu/programs/bonner

Build details: engage.richmond.edu/habitat.html
cce brown bag discussion series

Fridays, 12:30-1:25 p.m., Tyler Haynes Commons Room 331

1/22  Racism and Sexual Repression: Struggles for Justice and Common Ground
Dr. Del McWhorter, professor of philosophy and women’s studies
Cosponsored by Common Ground and the MLK Day Planning Committee

2/12  The Purse Project: A Campaign Against Thailand’s Sexual Exploitation
Dr. Rick Mayes, associate professor of political science; Tran Doan, ’10, and Carter Quinley, ’11

1/29  CCE Civic Fellows: Past and Future
Kelly McDaniel, ’10, and Jason Levin, ’08, with CCE staff

2/5  Place Matters: Socioeconomic and Racial Inequities in Health, a documentary screening and conversation
Dr. Bedelia Richards, professor of sociology
Cosponsored by the Richmond Families Initiative

2/19  The Mortgage Crisis, Communities of Color and the Ways Forward
A panel of community leaders
*Location: Brown Alley Room*
Cosponsored by the Black History Month Committee

2/26  Bayard Rustin Is Turning 100: What Are We Going to Do About It?
Mandy Carter, an African-American lesbian activist
Cosponsored by Common Ground, the Office of the Chaplaincy, the Jepson School of Leadership Studies and WILL

3/19  Highland Park Walking Tour
Bill Martin, director, Valentine Richmond History Center
Cosponsored by Build It
*The walking tour will occur from 3:30-5 p.m. instead of in the usual Brown Bag time slot.
*Spots are limited. Please register by emailing engage@richmond.edu.

3/26  Community-Engagement Poster Session
UR students’ reflections on community engagement at home and abroad

Information about additional spring-semester programs is available at engage.richmond.edu.