Helping Those Who Help the Community

Interior design students revamp local nonprofits

BY SHERI HALL

Lecturer Rhonda Gilmore’s sophomore interior design studio has been redesigning Ithaca—one nonprofit organization at a time—for over a decade.

Each spring, Gilmore chooses a local nonprofit organization that needs help improving their facility, and then sends her students to work. The class initially got involved in the community with help from the Cornell Public Service Center—a campus office that helps connect faculty members and students to local organizations.

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“There are some very basic problems that are pervasive throughout the nonprofit world,” said Gilmore, who teaches in design and environmental analysis. “These organizations are all about their services for their clients, and they don’t think of their facilities as components of the services they provide. They’re often in a donated building, and they’re just making do.”

Over the past 11 years, the class helped restore a historic building that is home to The Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes, used graphic design to establish identity in several buildings on the campus of George Junior Republic, and completely redesigned a room at the Recovery Center, a local facility for Alcoholics Anonymous.

“They gave us a level of knowledge and sophistication that we wouldn’t have been able to afford.”

— Bob Riter, associate director of The Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes

For each project, the students approach the facilities through the eyes of the clients,” Gilmore said. “They’re trying to determine what kind of message—what kind of first impression—a facility sends.”

Lobbies and reception areas tend to be important to organizations that provide a service, she said. They should make an explicit statement about the values of the organization. Entrances and waiting spaces should also have comfortable seating, lighting bright enough for reading, and a clear line of sight from the receptionist to the seating area.

Lecturer Rhonda Gilmore talks with students and Red Cross workers at a blood drive on campus.

The other major issue the students typically address is way-finding—giving people visual cues so they can navigate the interior. “It’s the little things like creating consistent signage and labeling offices that brings unity to these facilities that are dependent on serving a variety of end-users.”

The project nearly always involves the students doing the actual work—whether that means designing signs, painting rooms, or reconfiguring spaces.

This spring, the class is taking on a new kind of project—designing a mobile space the American Red Cross can use for local blood drives. The class will work with another class—“Human Factors” taught by assistant professor David Feathers—to understand the ergonomic demands of drawing blood, as well as creating a relaxing space for blood donors.

“This will be a different kind of project for the students because it’s a mobile space,” Gilmore said. “I’m excited to see what they come up with.”

Agencies served by Gilmore’s students

• Family and Children’s Services
• Challenge Industries
• Women’s Opportunity Center (two years)
• George Junior Republic (three years)
• Alcohol and Drug Council of Tompkins County
• Cayuga Heights Elementary School
• Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes
• Ithaca Recovery Center