The Graduate School salutes graduate student community service volunteers in this issue of The Graduate Post. Graduate students must balance multiple obligations as students, researchers, and teachers—some are also spouses, partners or parents—yet they find the time and make the commitment to bettering the communities around them.

The Graduate School staff observed this commitment firsthand in December when Toys for Tots placed a drop box outside its offices. “A Medical student came in with boxes and bags of toys to contribute,” said Office Assistant Judy Ward. “He told me that he and a group of graduate students all contributed money and took a trip to Meijer to do some shopping,” Judy said. Said Dean Klomparens: “We don’t know their names, but what a great demonstration of a warm bedside manner in the making.”

The Graduate Post spoke with several graduate students who are volunteering with area organizations. We asked these volunteers to describe what they do and how they got started with their volunteer work; what they found gratifying about their experiences; what they may have learned from their experiences; how they may have connected their volunteer work with their academic work; and how they were able to carve out time to volunteer, given their busy schedules.

Several graduate students volunteer with MSU Student Food Bank, which distributes supplies biweekly to MSU students having trouble making ends meet. The organization is sponsored by the Council of Graduate Students and ASMSU and serves more than 150 families. Dean Karen Klomparens serves on the organization’s advisory board, since about 75 percent of the clients served are graduate students. “This organization and activity is a wonderful example of graduate students looking out for the welfare of other graduate students,” she said.

Higher Education doctoral student Allyn Shaw has volunteered with MSU Student Food Bank for six years and served as past president. He said his involvement with the Food Bank came naturally. “I’ve always done volunteer work,” he said. “I wanted to give something back to the community and the university. We’ve been able to keep people in school and help families in crisis.”

Allyn admits that the time commitment of 10 to 15 hours each week as president was at times difficult to reconcile with his additional commitments as a housing director and as a student teacher, but he would do it all again. “The educator part of me enjoys seeing them (clients) grow and change,” he said. Allyn said he has watched one family through three births, and saw the father earn a bachelor’s and then a master’s degree. “And now he’s working on his Ph.D.,” Allyn said.

Material Sciences and Mechanics Doctoral Student Hua Tang Chen first heard of MSU Student Food Bank from The State News and has volunteered at every Thursday night Olin Health Center distribution since 1997, serving as a food bagger, interviewer, and front counter manager (where clients pick up food items and household supplies). “It’s always nice to help fellow students in need,” Hua Tang said. “Through conversations with clients, I feel there are many needy students at MSU—I’m glad the MSU Student Food Bank is here to help.”

Contact: MSU Student Food Bank, 152 Olin Health Center, East Lansing, MI 48825. (517) 432-5136. foodbank@msu.edu

Microbiology doctoral student Julie Hotopp volunteers with Science Theatre, an organization run by MSU students that brings entertaining science demonstrations to the general public through visits to schools and public events. Some of Science Theatre’s goals are to show the relevance of science to everyday life, demystify science and scientists and discourage stereotypes, and provide positive role models for students. Science Theatre has grown since 1991 to include scientists and engineers from many branches and has developed into separate department groups of Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Engineering and Physics and Astronomy.

“As about two years ago a friend mentioned that Science Theatre was having problems getting volunteers for their show at the Michigan Festival, so I decided to volunteer,” Julie said. “I’ve been doing shows with Science Theatre ever since. “We generally do two types of shows. The first is a stage show where volunteers present large principles of science in front of larger audiences. The second type of show is a hands-on show.
“The look on someone’s face when they isolate DNA from a banana or when an everyday experience is explained to them is what encourages me to do a show even when I may be short on time or patience that day or week.”

-Julie Hotopp

We set up stations and the children (and adults) come by and ‘try out science.’ These are my favorite shows because you get to connect with a student one-on-one. The look on someone’s face when they isolate DNA from a banana or when an everyday experience is explained to them is what encourages me to do a show even when I may be short on time or patience that day or week. I also enjoy what the students have to say to me during these shows. It is wonderful when students ask an insightful question or when they give you a hypothesis you could actually test with them.

“The demos we show are designed and/or researched by MSU graduate and undergraduate students. Some demos are labs that are done in the introductory science labs. Other demos seem to have been inspired by the projects that graduate students have worked on in their studies or classes. Other demos have been researched from education journals. In class or in the lab, I am constantly looking for new or better ways to present something with Science Theatre.

With presenting demos, demo development, and many of our other activities, Science Theatre can require a large amount of time for our most active volunteers. But some volunteers do one show (4 hours) a year. We also have other activities besides shows. Some volunteers are currently working on writing a guide to our demos for school teachers called Recipes for Science.

“Volunteers do gain something for their experiences. All experiences allow volunteers to hone their writing, teaching, and communication skills. Also, science outreach organizations play an important role in educating the public about the importance and relevance of science. Our organization offers roles for anyone and a wide variety of commitments to accommodate most students’ schedules.”

Contact: MSU Science Theatre, Abrams Planetarium, East Lansing, MI 48824-1324. (517) 432-3680. scientet@pa.msu.edu

The MSU chapter of Habitat for Humanity International was founded in 1991 with a mission to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness from the Greater Lansing Area. Agricultural Economics master’s student Corey Risch got involved with Habitat for Humanity when she saw a poster for a Habitat work crew her senior year at MSU. “I was looking for a new activity, and building houses sounded fun,” she said. “It also turned out that they were in need of a treasurer to coordinate the funding of the various Habitat activities. Since I had quite a lot of treasurer experience, I felt I had a lot to contribute.

“I’ve worked on four different houses in the Lansing area, as well as one in Charleston, South Carolina. I’ve also been active in some of the fundraising and local neighborhood activities, from cleaning the Breslin Center to working at a Christmas party for some Lansing neighborhood kids. And I recently coordinated our Winter Break trip to Charleston.

“My favorite activity is working on the houses. I’ve met some of the Habitat homeowners, so I know how much we’re making a difference for them. These projects need a lot of volunteers, and I like being one of those people. Not to mention that I enjoy working outdoors, and I’ve learned a lot about building and construction. Also, the other MSU Habitat volunteers are absolutely great to work with.

“Our recent trip to Charleston was really fun. A group of 20 of us spent our last week of Christmas Break working on a house in Charleston. My little brother was one of the other participants—he’s an MSU Agricultural Technology dairy student. Chad and I worked together to put sheathing up around the top story of the house. I must have had some serious trust in his overhead hammering abilities! In the three days our group worked on this particular house, we built and put up all the 2nd story walls and sheeted most of the house. And we made a lot of friends in the process.

“Since I’ve started graduate school, I just remain as involved as I can, considering the increased time demands of graduate school. I participate in the various Habitat activities as my schedule permits, although my schedule this semester hasn’t permitted nearly as much as I would like. I still coordinate a few activities in a pinch, and as one of the older, more experienced members, I help out the younger members as they plan new activities.

“Habitat is an ideal organization for a graduate student. There are activities going on all the time, so I just take my schedule week by week and get involved in whatever I can. A lot of activities are broken into few hour shifts, so they serve as a nice study break—a change of pace, working with a lot of great people, doing something productive. I really can’t say enough great things about Habitat!”

Contact: http://www.msu.edu/user/habitatindex.html

Volunteers feature continues on next page
...VOLUNTEERS  
Continued from previous page

Literacy Volunteers of America-Capital Area Literacy Coalition (LVA-CALC) is directed by an MSU professor and has many MSU graduate students among its volunteer corps. The organization, also known as “The Reading People,” has more than 75 tutoring locations in Clinton, Eaton and Ingham counties.

“We have a number of graduate students who have been wonderful tutors for children and adults in reading and other basic skills, and English-as-a-second-language,” said volunteer Executive Director of LVA-CALC Dr. Lois Bader of the College of Education. “Our graduate students have also helped in instructional materials development and other areas. They have worked in migrant camps, public housing and various tutoring locations,” she said.

Dr. Bader is a literacy specialist, and her own volunteerism with LVA-CALC began in 1975. “I wanted to see if I could help out,” she said. “Then I became interim Executive Director, and I’m still here!” She said. She said without committed volunteers it would not have been possible to develop and expand the organization and its programs the way she has. “You can’t have a program this large without a large number of volunteers—good volunteers.”

All literacy volunteers are trained before they enter the field as tutors. Dr. Bader said while many of her own students naturally become involved in tutoring and helping develop programs at LVA-CALC, the MSU graduate student and faculty volunteers over the years have ranged from a retired Entomology professor to medical students.

Dr. Bader said it is the individual success stories that make the work at LVA-CALC all worthwhile. She said a 7-year-old girl stands out from last summer. She said the girl used a combination of letters and numbers when asked in a diagnostic test to write “cat.” She was assigned to a volunteer tutor—an MSU student. “By the end of the summer she was writing short sentences and reading from a primer,” Dr. Bader said. “You can’t imagine the joy of seeing that in what otherwise was a bleak future.” Dr. Bader said another success story that stands out is a 40-year-old man who had been keeping his illiteracy a secret all his life until he was injured at work and had to address his problem (he couldn’t read his insurance papers). He was assigned an adult literacy tutor and learned very quickly. “He said learning to read was like coming out of a dark room,” Dr. Bader said. In what might seem like a strange twist of fate, the man is now reading to his former tutor, who was disabled after suffering a stroke.

Community Services master’s student Luis Broines participated in LVA-CALC’s Summer Migrant Literacy program. These volunteers carpool out to area migrant camps to tutor the workers. Dr. Bader said Luis was especially valuable because he is bilingual in Spanish and English. Luis helped to establish new contacts with farm foremen and LVA-CALC was able to expand its migrant program. Luis, who was born in Mexico and whose father was a migrant worker, said he easily connected with the farmers and understood how important it was to them to become proficient in English. “They were tired after working all day,” Luis said. “It was so beautiful to see that these young men still wanted to learn.”

Food Science master’s student Robyn Reynolds is volunteering in LVA-CALC’s Read to Succeed program, which provides specialized reading, writing and math instruction for children in area schools. “I chose Read to Succeed because I wanted to have a positive effect on young elementary school children at a critical point in their lives,” Robyn said.

“Last semester, I was a tutor for one 3rd grader named Lauren every Wednesday and Friday morning an hour before school. We worked together on reading with fluency and reading comprehension. Other students at the site were at all different levels, so some even started with letters of the alphabet. The most challenging task I had was to try to make reading fun at 8 a.m. in the morning. I’m a scientist, not an elementary school educator, so this was an opportunity to use my creativity again.

“I knew that tutoring was very rewarding every time I left Pinecrest Elementary School on my way to school. I just felt like I had a part in starting Lauren’s day off on the right foot, even if we didn’t accomplish all the reading that we probably should have. I felt as though just having interaction with her was really beneficial to both of us.

“As far as fitting this into my busy graduate school schedule, I am lucky enough to squeeze it in two mornings a week before I even get to campus. If I weren’t tutoring at 8 a.m., I would probably just get an extra hour of sleep. However, I am just starting to focus more on my research so I know that I may have re-evaluate my schedule next year.

“This semester I’m the site coordinator for Pinecrest, so I am in charge of the tutors and students at the site. I miss the one-on-one interaction with the students, so I’ll probably leave the leadership role to someone else next year and just stick with the tutoring.”

Contact: LVA-Capital Area Literacy Coalition, 1028 E. Saginaw, Lansing, MI 48906, (517) 485-4949 or MSU Student Literacy Corps, 245 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, (517) 432-3926
The Friendship Clinic is operated by MSU medical students at the Ingham Community Health Center two Saturday mornings each month. Ten to 20 medical students and two supervising physicians volunteer their time to see patients who typically don’t have health insurance and can’t afford to pay for medical attention. Medical student Stephanie Phelps is the lead coordinator responsible for the health clinic’s staffing and maintenance. “We could do this four weekends a month, there’s so much interest,” she said. “For most of the volunteers this is a reminder of why they went to medical school. “You can see your effects when you take someone who might not otherwise receive medical care, and you make them better and send them on their way,” she said. Stephanie said the patients appreciate the personal attention and respect they receive from the volunteers. She said when there are enough volunteers, some students will spend as much as two hours with a patient. She said the clinic gets repeat visitors who prefer see the student volunteers because they know they will receive personal and careful attention. She said her volunteer experience with the clinic have renewed her interest in practicing medicine in an urban environment. 

Medical student Celeste St. John-Larkin has been involved with a project to set up a blood pressure screening program at Advent House, a soup kitchen/community center in the Westminster Presbyterian Church. “Several students go on one Saturday per month to talk to the people there about health concerns and take blood pressures,” she said. “We have cards for them to keep track of their readings, which also have resources for free healthcare on the back. We are hoping to expand the program to include more health education. We usually screen between 25 and 40 people.” Celeste was also a leader for the Students of Tobacco Free Michigan Active Doctors program. “We gave anti-tobacco presentations to over 1,000 4th and 5th grade students in the Lansing area over the past year,” she said. 

Associate Dean of the College of Human Medicine Ruth Hoppe said many medical students enter medical school with a sense of social responsibility and an interest in caring for others. “Many of them have backgrounds, at entry to medical school, that are rich with a history of service to others—in their local communities, in their regions, and for many internationally,” Dr. Hoppe said. 

“The College of Human Medicine tries to nurture this interest in service for two reasons. First because increasingly, physicians and other health providers are challenged to understand, to measure and to intervene at the level of whole populations, rather than just with individual patients. Thinking about health and illness at the level of the community becomes important—the community becomes the ‘patient’ if you will. Community service fits into this notion nicely. 

“The second reason is probably more important: We wish to nurture our students’ professionalism. Physicians, like other professionals, are characterized by their responsibility to put service to others at a higher priority that service to self. At CHM we have articulated six professional virtues toward which both faculty and students strive. Social responsibility is one of these virtues. “I believe that CHM students take their social responsibilities very seriously, and for this reason, many of our student organizations have service to sectors of our community either as their reason for existing or as a major goal of the organization.”

The MBA Association’s Spring ’99 charity auction was so successful that the event was repeated this year. Last year the MBAA surpassed its goal of $500 and was able to present a check of $1500 to the Leukemia Society of America. “It is quite an achievement when a group of graduate students band together to raise money ($1500) to donate to a charitable organization. I guess I am so enthused about this because the proceeds will help with leukemia research, a disease that my son was diagnosed with four months ago,” said Career Placement and Services Secretary Stephania Ford. The MBA A presented the check to the executive director of the Leukemia Society in honor of Stephanie’s son. “I think many of the MBAA officers were pleasantly surprised with the effort and generosity of the students who participated,” said MBAA Vice President of Student Events Joe DiPonio. He said faculty and students donated the items that were auctioned. “I know that I did not expect to raise more than about $500,” Joe said. “Since we are all graduate students currently paying tuition without receiving an income, I figured the bidding might be a little low, but respectable for a first-time event. “Many of the students knew Stephanie from her work in our MBA Placement and Career Center. I think that having this personal tie to Stephanie and knowing that we could help her son and Family by contributing to the Leukemia Society helped the students be more generous in their bidding. Many told me that they remember thinking that they were bidding a little out of their range, but kept going because they knew it was for a good cause. “I was extremely happy with the outcome of the event. I know all who participated enjoyed a fun evening of camaraderie and food in the auction atmosphere.”

Volunteers feature continues on next page
Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Lansing provides mentoring to at-risk children in single-parent homes. Volunteers interview and are matched with a “little brother” or “little sister.” BBBS of Lansing’s Executive Director Mary Clark said MSU graduate students have been especially good role models and they typically bring some valuable life experiences to the relationship. She said both the adult and the child usually grow and learn. “It’s a win-win situation,” she said. “We feel very fortunate to have the university community here and we applaud those students who reach beyond their boarders and are willing to share a part of their life with a child.”

Social Work master’s student Jeffrey Fudesco said he learned about Big Brothers and Big Sisters 25 years ago but hadn’t considered them as an outlet for his own volunteerism until they kicked off a new advertising campaign.

“When their billboard went up in Lansing I saw it and thought BBBS would be a perfect place for me to address the things I care about in my community.”

“I live in a neighborhood in Lansing where there are kids without a lot of contact with adults. I wanted to share some of my resources (mostly intellectual and emotional, my knowledge about the city and about campus, how to swim, etc.) with younger people—not in a professional capacity but in a friendship capacity.

“My little brother and I get together about once every week, usually on Saturday afternoon. We like to go to the MSU campus to play racquetball and go swimming during free Family Hours at the IM West. Sometimes we’ll go over to the library after swimming and I’ll show him how to open a file on computer disk or look up a book he’s interested in on the library’s MAGIC system. A few weeks ago we had fun at my house putting together a birdhouse (a $2 kit—no sawing required!) and then we made tacos together. When we’re having fun together we learn a lot from each other.

“I’ve learned a lot from my little brother about the emotional texture of these times and about the social forces shaping children’s experiences today. I’ve learned that no matter how much adults grouse and complain about ‘the kids these days,’ kids live in a world that adults create for them. Further, I’ve learned (happily) that kids today are not from outer space. My little brother gets excited about the things that got me excited as a kid: going to new places with a friend, arcade games (of course), long bike rides on the Lansing Riverwalk, adventures, jokes—the list goes on.

“I am in the social work program, so my BBBS experience has an almost direct connection. Social workers are concerned about vulnerable populations and about helping to create less stratified and more enriching communities. BBBS has provided me a context in which to put my personal and professional values to work. In other words, by the time a student gets to grad school, he or she has talked the talk for many years.

BBBS has given me the opportunity to walk the walk; to see if I really believe what I’ve been saying and reading in class all these years. Best of all I’ve made a new friend in the process.”

I need to set a few hours to an afternoon aside each week...But I think I come out ahead in that I get to be 12 for at least a few hours a week, get away from the stresses of work, and get a little better idea of what’s important.

-Marc Linderman

Fisheries and Wildlife doctoral student Marc Linderman said he heard of Big Brothers and Big Sisters in Madison, Wisconsin where he completed his master’s degree, and contacted the organization when he arrived in Lansing.

“There is a bit of a time commitment getting things started in that you have to go through a few training sessions, but they have made the process very accessible and I think the staff over at BBBS is very helpful and understanding of time limitations.

“The match with my little brother has certainly been interesting. The first time we hung out, we returned from the movies to the complete loss of his house from a fire. And, of course, we have gone through the various stages of establishing a relationship and still are. But, there have been great moments, too. We attended a batting practice with complimentary tickets and it was really neat to watch him go from uncertain about an unfamiliar situation to swinging away. And it has been nice to perceive him value our time together more as we have spent more time together.

“It has shifted some priorities for me in that I need to set a few hours a week to do something with him. But, I think I come out ahead in that I get to be 12 for at least a few hours a week, get away from the stresses of work, and get a little better idea of what’s important.

“Hopefully, some of my work here at MSU will help me interact with him better, too. For example, he is very interested in computers and I get to be 12 for at least a few hours a week, get away from the stresses of work, and get a little better idea of what’s important.

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Criminal Justice doctoral student Jessica Davis said she got started with Big Brothers and Big Sisters because she was interested in doing volunteer work and happen to see a commercial with Denzel Washington talking about his experiences as a ‘little.’

“Also, it was a way to volunteer where the structure of the activities was totally up to me and I liked that autonomy. BBBS does have structured activities but we are not required to participate in them.

“What I find gratifying is knowing that my ‘little’ really likes being with me. She really thinks of me as her ‘big sister.’ Also, I
know that I have expanded her world just by being me. She sees me as someone who is doing pretty well and I am entirely independent. She sees that I work hard for the things I have and I think that this is far from the reality that she was experiencing before we met.

“We go bowling a lot or to the arcade. Sometime we just hang out at my apartment and either bake or do some arts and crafts. We are both learning to do latch hook rugs right now. In the summer she likes to swim and I have a pool at my apartment complex. We’ve also gone to the African American museum in Detroit. Whatever we do, I try to give her the opportunity to open up and talk and just have her own space—she has a lot of younger brothers and sisters so it is sometimes hard for her to breathe and just be a kid.

“I try to give her advice based on the experiences in my life which I know are different from her life’s experiences. I think this gives her new options for dealing with certain situations.

“I have learned patience. I am not used to being around people who do not express how they feel right away or who do not readily articulate their wants and needs. So this has caused me to learn a great deal of patience. Sometimes she just needs time to express herself.

“It is hard to carve out time to do this. Recently I have had to cut down on getting her every Saturday but I get her every other week and that is working out better for me.

“I am interested in prevention and intervention programs for youth who are at risk to becoming delinquent so the BBBS program gives me an opportunity to be directly involved in a prevention program. The evaluation work of prevention/intervention programs that I do tends to keep on the periphery of such programs, so it’s nice to be much more involved than I have in the past.”

**Fisheries and Wildlife doctoral student Daniel Rutledge** said he got started with Big Brothers and Big Sisters because he knew he wanted to do some type of community service.

“As a graduate student, I don’t have loads of extra time, so I wanted to try to make as big an impact as I could. A fellow graduate student in Fisheries & Wildlife already had a ‘little sister’ and found the experience very rewarding. I talked to her about it, and she urged me to become a ‘big brother.’ Also, BBBS was short on big brothers and they were trying to recruit as many men as possible. So I decided to take the plunge and go through the orientation and matching process.

“I got paired with a teenager, now 15, which represents somewhat of the high age end for little brothers. Most of our activities involve simple things, like going to movies, playing basketball or football, or just hanging out. It is fun to spend time with him and quite eye opening. He has such a different perspective, given his age and background. I like to interact with him because he offers me a different viewpoint, and I in turn can offer him good advice, someone who will listen without judging him, and most importantly: friendship.

“The most important thing with respect to the BBBS relationship is consistency. As a graduate student, it’s easy to get lost in your research and forget the rest of the world exists. Therefore keeping in touch, even if you can’t spend lots of one-on-one time, is critical.

“Overall, I find the big brother role to be very rewarding. It is a good way to forge a connection with the community outside MSU and to do something positive at the same time.”

-Daniel Rutledge

**Student Affairs master’s student Jennifer Avery** said she had always thought that Big Brothers and Big Sisters was a great organization.

“My parents were divorced when I was young, and I know that it is difficult for some children when a parent is not around. I also understand the necessity of having adult role models, even if they are not always parents. As a college student, I thought that I could give a child an excellent example of where you can go in life with hard work and persistence. Last June I went to an orientation process for BBBS and then I was finally matched with my little sister, Fela, in October.

“I try to do a lot of different things with Fela, and being an MSU student provides me with a lot of fun opportunities. We have gone to a women’s basketball game, gone swimming, fed the ducks, and the VetaVisit (the College of Veterinary Medicine’s annual open house). We also play games, bake cookies, watch videos, take the dog on a walk, go to the park, go bowling and just hang out. As a member of BBBS we get discounts to a lot of places around the Lansing Area. For instance, the admission to Impression 5 Science museum is free for her, so we have gone there before.

“It’s a lot of fun to hang out with Fela, and we have been matched for almost five months. When I was applying for BBBS, I wanted a child with a lot of energy, and they couldn’t have found me a better match. She is a lot of fun and hanging out with her is a good break from the rigors of graduate school.

“Sometimes it can be a challenge finding time to see Fela, especially around finals or when I have papers or projects due. Those weeks, I usually spend just a couple of hours with her. When I have more time, I usually like to see her for the afternoon. Her family is really flexible with my schedule, and they are very understanding that I have time constraints. Like I said before, seeing her is a good break from the rigors of graduate school, and it helps me to relax and de-stress. Playing with her is a good break from writing papers or the loads of reading that I have!”

Volunteers feature continues on next page


Established by the MSU Board of Trustees in 1967 as the Office of Volunteer Programs, the Office was renamed the Service-Learning Center in 1987 to reflect the integration of active learning through career and civic development.

The Mission of the Service-Learning Center (SLC) is to inform and prepare students for career and civic involvement through community service. Service-Learning Center has three categories of placements:

1. Service-Learning which is integrated with MSU classes, or academic programs through independent study (internship) options.
2. Civic and career development for pre-professional students in medicine, pre-vet medicine, human or public service careers.
3. Co-curricular community service through student leadership with community organizations.

Over 5,000 students applied for 1,000 local area opportunities to serve during the 1999-2000 year.

The Service-Learning Center Program book is available for faculty and advisors.
The SLC BULLETIN is a newsletter published each semester to recognize student efforts.

Service Learning Center, 27 Student Services, (517) 353-4400, Email: servlm@msu.edu

Student Application Hours: noon-5:00 p.m. M-F

Interested in volunteering? The Service-Learning Center can help find opportunities

English master’s student Bryan Stumpf produces and directs The Farmer’s Forum, which broadcasts Wednesdays at 7:30 p.m. on WELM, Lansing Public Access. Bryan said he found that The Farmer’s Forum got him out of the classroom and into the field—literally—as he visited Mid-Michigan farmers at work.

“As the creator and producer of the documentary television series The Farmer’s Forum, my fieldwork has stretched out into the rural community to interact with family farmers concerned about the pressures of the current economy. I’ve interviewed farmers from both Ingham and Clinton counties. These farmers have been diverse in their operations—I interviewed dairy, pig, and cash crop farmers. I also interviewed two professors from Michigan State University’s Agricultural Economics department. All those interviewed show a mixture of pessimism and optimism about the future of traditional family farming.

“The basis for my project began long before graduate school. Growing up on a dairy farm in Upstate New York, I grew interested in family farmer concerns after witnessing my father trying to maintain his farm under tremendous economic pressures. My neighbors also were gradually losing their farms and agricultural businesses to corporate interests and housing pressures.

“While enrolled in the Critical Studies in the Teaching of English program, I discovered many critical approaches to working with underprivileged students. I developed an interest in working-class perspectives and this grew to be a cornerstone in my graduate research.

“While in Lansing, I learned about the pressures on traditional family farmers surrounding the urban area. While teaching at Mott Community College and Integrated Arts and Humanities 201 at MSU, I incorporated my experiences growing up on a small dairy farm to exemplify working-class struggles. In order to reach a wider audience, the next step was a television series production through Public Access.

“I found many small farmers interested in addressing their concerns through the Ingham County Farm Bureau, which was very helpful in getting my project got off the ground. I found ways to combine my research on the working class with my interest in filmmaking.

“My interviewees were impassioned about the housing pressures from sub-divisions, dwindling prices for commodities from a small farms, and lack of interest in their struggles from the general public. David Droscha, a pig farmer from Mason, said ‘farms are just getting bigger and bigger and the margin is all the time being made smaller so you have to farm more acres to get the same wage to support your family.’

“My excursions off campus, away from academic environment, into real-life struggles of the farmers has been eye-opening—they don’t have many opportunities to address their concerns and they appreciated being interviewed.”

Contact: www.msu.edu/~stumpfr/thefarmersforum.html