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# Small Steps

*Students make big contributions to help low-income residents*

**By Chris Bouneff**

**B**orn with cerebral palsy, Liz Stockwell moves with some difficulty. She has developed a system for traveling short distances, and it comes in handy for the trip to the door of her office, where her walking sticks, as she calls her crutches, stand to aid her for longer treks.

The Boise State social work major grabs her desk, leans forward and pushes off. Momentum takes her forward on the precarious trip.

She occasionally falls, then laughs and with some effort, makes it to her feet, grabs her sticks and heads next door for a meeting with a resident of Boise’s low-income housing in the Capitol Boulevard Apartments.

On the way she says she hopes that residents see her fall, and she hopes they see her get up — a message for those around her who also are wounded in various ways.

“I can identify with them,” Stockwell says simply. “I know how it feels to try very hard.”

Stockwell, 31, is one of three Boise State students who





*A new school started by Sue Sheridan for her child — and others with cerebral palsy — provided Justin Borg, right, with a Service Learning marketing project.*

## LEARNING THROUGH SERVICE

**S**ue Sheridan wanted to publicize Jump Start, the new school she started for children with cerebral palsy, but she didn't have the resources to hire an advertising agency.

Enter Justin Borg.

A Boise State marketing major, Borg needed an extra-credit Service Learning project that allowed him to apply the skills he was learning in his marketing class to a community organization.

After meeting Sheridan, Borg adopted Jump Start as his project and worked to develop a marketing campaign for the fledgling organization.

But he got much more than practical experience out of the project. An afternoon spent helping a 3-year-old raise a spoon to her mouth without spilling lunch all over her clothes helped clarify his objectives. "After I left," he says, "I had a very tangible sense of the service that I would be helping Jump Start market."

Service Learning gives students an opportunity to integrate their classroom knowledge into real-life situations.

A new concept being embraced by colleges across the country, Service Learning is catching on fast at Boise State. Started in spring 1998 with just three courses, the program expanded to eight in fall 1998, with classes in health delivery systems, media production and public administration.

Working closely with faculty and coordinator Rose Olson, Service Learning students sign up for 45 hours of volunteer work that complements their courses. They are also required to keep journals and meet regularly for "reflection sessions" and complete pre- and post-service evaluations. At the end of the project, they receive an additional course credit.

Past participants have provided services that range from after-school tutoring for young children to increasing computer access for low-income people. Some participating agencies are Central District Health, the Better Business Bureau and the Silver Sage Girl Scout Council.

Psychology professor Susan Amato admits to being skeptical initially. She worried about potential problems tying the service experience to her syllabus. But the projects enriched the course material and energized the class. "I feel much better about the class, the way I am teaching it and what my students are taking away," she says.

For his classroom project, Borg started by defining the target market and then creating a positioning strategy. With assistance from a volunteer graphic designer, he came up with a new logo, tagline, brochure and letterhead to give Jump Start a more professional image.

Although the fall semester course ended, he's stayed on to complete some tasks and see his new logo adorn T-shirts worn by the children.

"The Service Learning program and particularly my time working with Jump Start have provided a meaningful context to apply the principles I have been learning at Boise State — and been a great benefit to the community," Borg says. □

work at the converted motel as part of a practicum that all social work majors must complete. The city of Boise invited social work professor Doug Yunker to establish the office at the apartments to help residents, mostly with immediate needs such as finding food or rent assistance.

The three students aren't volunteers in the purest sense, but they put in many more hours than are necessary. And each contributes to their community in a variety of other ways. In March, Carolyn Delgadillo Bevington received the university's Larry G. Selland Humanitarian Award for her overall service. Linda Thomas, a former church missionary to Thailand, volunteers with several service groups. And then there's Stockwell, who attends class, works part time at Pizza Hut, and spends at least 25 hours a week at the old motel.

"The people here are incredibly amazing," Stockwell says. "They put in tremendous effort. And they survive with very little."

The small motel rooms house people in transition. For some who are just off the streets or emerging from prison, the motel provides affordable shelter while they put their lives together. Others suffer from physical or mental impairments and can't afford to live anywhere else. Still many others work full or part time, yet they barely earn enough to afford the \$300 or so in monthly rent.

They're people like 54-year-old Pete, a portly man with a dark beard and peppery hair who's on a fixed income and who goes to the Veteran's Medical Center three times a week for dialysis.

"I had a trailer in Nampa for a while," he says. "I sold that and moved over to the Good Samaritan Home for a while, then I moved out of that. I had a car, and I was down at the mission staying in the car for five months. Then my car got impounded and I ended up in the hospital with a tumor on my spine."

The 150 or so residents distrust anyone or anything "official" and prefer to stay behind closed doors. And it doesn't help that they live in an old motel designed for temporary stays, a place where people breeze through unnoticed. Some buildings still retain that motel ghost town feeling. Their long hallways, carpeted in a nondescript checkered motel pattern, stand vacant except for a glimpse of someone on the stairs and silent except for muffled television sounds. It's the type of place where Stockwell asks the residents, "If I knock on your door, will you answer?" Because often people don't.

Despite these obstacles, Stockwell is confident about the residents' chances because she understands that along with their weaknesses, they also have strengths. They are survivors, she says, just like her, but they don't know it yet because they can't see beyond today's crisis. "It can be frustrating

to put in a big effort and not see immediate gains," she says.

No one there is unbroken, adds Walt, a resident who was Stockwell's first client. And that includes Stockwell, who easily could have been someone who lives there.

After Stockwell was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, doctors suggested that her parents place her in an institution so they could concentrate on their other children. Instead, they enlisted a corps of 400 volunteers over a six-year period to help put Stockwell through a rigorous physical therapy program that included crawling, climbing and rolling. It took three people at a time to work her through up to nine hours of therapy a day. The exercises dominated Stockwell's life between ages 3 and 9.

Eventually, she reached a level of physical proficiency that granted her some independence. She's short, wears glasses thicker than pop bottles and moves and speaks slowly enough that many at first believe she's mentally disabled. Yet, she finished high school, learned to drive and eventually enrolled at Boise State, where with her part-time job, she joined the working poor.

All three social work students enjoy a good relationship with the residents, but Stockwell's tie is closer to family.

"I've always felt that the people who live there identify with her because she's wounded in some way," professor Yunker says. "They look at her and see that she's stayed strong. And she looks at them and says, 'You can do this.'"

Stockwell's sincerity and empathy help her build trust with the residents, adds Jim Fackrell, who oversees the apartments as Housing and Community Development manager for the city of Boise. "She's very committed," he says.

Stockwell says she's glad for the opportunity to serve. "This is my chance to pay back for the big community effort to help me," she says.

The residents of the Capitol Boulevard Apartments have varied needs, but mostly they want help finding food. Or, they're behind on their rent and near eviction. The city works with residents on back rent, but they have to arrange for payments, a task that seems overwhelming to some.

For Ken, who comes to use the office phone to call about jobs, time is growing short and hope faint. An alcoholic who recently reached sobriety, he talks about bartending, and he complains about the lack of city bus service to available jobs. On the



CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

*Working at the Capitol Boulevard Apartments, social work student Liz Stockwell works to help Walt gain self-sufficiency.*

phone with a temporary job service, he sounds plain desperate.

"I'm OK if I can get some work," he tells the woman on the other end. "No, I don't have computer skills.

"Look, I need some money to pay my rent or I'll be out on the street, kiddo."

Stockwell encourages him and says she'll call private charity agencies around town that offer small amounts of rent money. And she offers to meet with Ken the next day to talk about his job search, which seems to comfort him a bit. At least Stockwell is someone to talk with about his crisis.

The students' services are completely con-

"I'm going to end up sleeping under a

bridge," says Ed, a 62-year-old veteran who faces eviction unless he makes payments on his back rent.

Ed is on probation for drinking and driving and says he hoped to be released before his sentence expired in November so he could have joined family in Salt Lake City. That didn't happen, he says, but he still spent the \$723 he gets monthly as if he were going.

Mostly, he says, he buys Christmas presents for his grandchildren.

"Right now, I don't have enough money to eat, and I'm going to struggle," he says in the tone of a man who doesn't see any options.

"Do you know how to eat an elephant?" Stockwell replies. "Do you know, Ed?"

A long silence as he stares at her. "No," comes the weak reply.

"One bite at a time," she says.

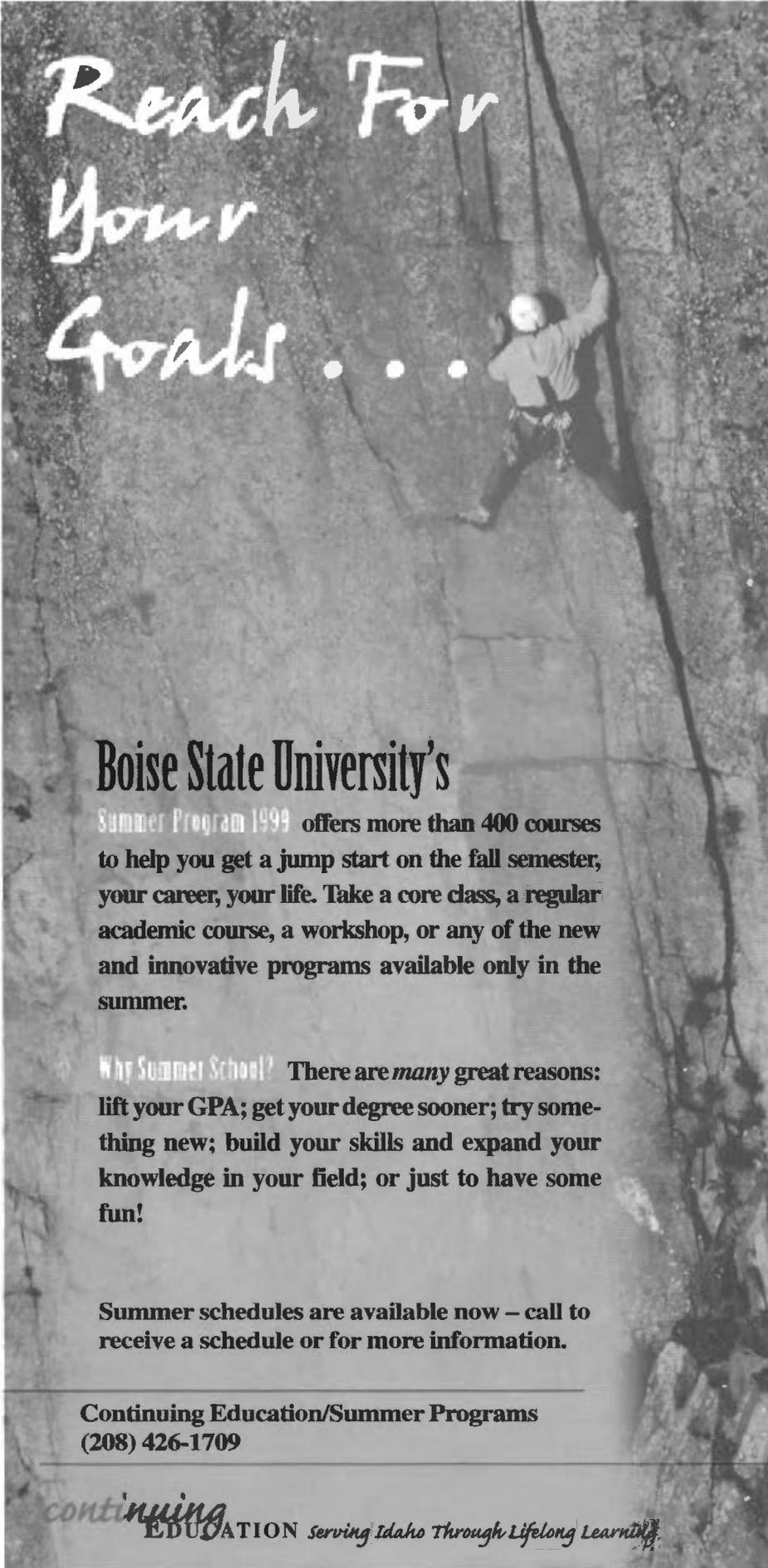
From that cliché, she slowly works Ed toward the truth about how much money he has and where the rest went.

Before a recent stay in the hospital, he spent most of his money drinking, and he says he has no more than \$300 in hand to make it through March. She persuades him to make a \$150 payment and apply for rent assistance from Ada County to pay March's rent.

"Can you do that tomorrow?" Stockwell

**'Look, I need some money to pay my rent or I'll be out on the street.'**

sumer driven, Stockwell says, but she also probes to find a resident's underlying problems and build confidence that problems can be overcome. Each meeting, she takes small steps with the residents, steps as awkward for them at times as the ones that she takes to cross the office.



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asks. "Yeah, I can do that tomorrow," Ed answers with more confidence.

Stockwell looks at him for a moment and tells him that if he needs food, she'll drive him to get food boxes. Then she makes another appointment with Ed to fill out the county welfare form and to make sure he's OK.

Stockwell listens without judgment. "They need to know I'm one of them and they're one of me," she says. "We want to be known as not too much different from them."

Her job at first appears to be one without hope of success, but Stockwell and her co-workers posted solid achievements for their first year. They helped boost the residents' association steering committee, which successfully lobbied for a resident lounge, more pay phones, more washers and dryers and outdoor barbecues.

The students also formed men's and women's weekly support groups.

For most residents, though, Stockwell measures successes in inches rather than miles. Ed paid the \$150 and applied for rental assistance with Ada County welfare. And a phone sales firm hired Ken, who earns a weekly salary plus commission. Their immediate crises are over.

Then there's Walt, Stockwell's first client. An injury forced him to leave his restaurant job, and lung cancer struck, which required surgery last summer.

While he was in the hospital, Stockwell watered his plants, sent his registration payment on his truck, and sneaked in McDonald's food as a treat. She also gave him rides to the doctor once he was released. Today, he's seeking full-time employment and hopes to save enough money to move into a small duplex.

The gestures weren't life-changing, but they were huge to him, as the bus tokens or quarters to wash work clothes that the students hand out are to the other residents.

"It's a huge gesture if you don't have transportation," Walt, 57, says. "It's a huge gesture if you have 163 stitches in your side and you can't get to the bus."

Stockwell's final gesture will come this spring when she graduates. Hopefully, the residents at the Capitol Boulevard Apartments will see through her success that the future is full of possibilities, but she may never know how many will.

New students will take her place in the program while she pursues her own challenges — finding a job, moving from her parents' home and getting an apartment.

Her dream is to find a social work position that allows her to work with clients in face-to-face situations. Eventually, she'd like to be involved in policy development for social justice issues.

"It's in my genes to work very hard," Stockwell says. "I've been very blessed." □