

# Let's get excited about our city

Suppose that you wanted to introduce a group of students to Providence, where would you take them? To the East Side? To the Brown campus and the RISD Museum? To the constantly changing Capital Center and waterfront? To the entertainment and artistic performances found in the downtown? And would these visits give a fair appraisal of the city's character?

I recently was faced with that opportunity in a two-week Geography Institute sponsored by the National Geographic Society and Fleet Bank. Our 24 students were Rhode Island teachers, from kindergarten through grade 12, including two students who were planning to become teachers.

We looked at marine and rural issues in the southern part of the state the first week, using the W. Alton Jones Campus of the University of Rhode Island as our base. The second week was devoted to teaching activities and a look at urban issues, using Rhode Island College as our base and Providence as our laboratory.

In our limited time in the city we heard lectures on Providence's era of greatness—1832 to 1932—and its historical development; we toured parts of the East Side, the Capital Center, the downtown, the waterfront; and we heard about the proposed relocation of Route 195. All very exciting, all very positive and all very new to many of the teachers, most of whom were from the suburbs.

But did these visits, lectures, tours and study give a true and complete picture of Providence? As students of the city we needed to get a complete picture and that meant we should take a closer look at where city residents live: in the neighborhoods.

Having served as the president of the Olneyville Housing Corporation for two years and having sent student interns to work for the corporation on several occasions, I felt I knew something of the area and had close ties to several people and organizations in the neighborhood. And in a city that is heavily blue-collar with much poverty, many minorities and an old housing stock in need of attention, Olneyville seemed a good choice to illustrate some of these characteristics.

An account of our walk through the neighborhood was written up in the papers on July 23. The piece was a fair appraisal of some of the conditions we saw, i.e., litter-strewn lots, broken sidewalks, abandoned and boarded-up houses, battered cars, and crowded multifamily and rented housing units. Comments by the teachers expressed the shock and dismay that many felt on seeing the difficult housing and living conditions that most had read about but were viewing for the first time.

Not everyone was pleased with the newspaper account of the visit, especially some of the neighborhood residents and some political leaders. It is not easy being told that your community has many problems that need to be addressed, for most of us would rather have our beauty marks revealed rather than our warts.

Are efforts being made to tackle some of these underlying urban problems and to im-

prove living conditions for the several neighborhoods? Definitely, yes. The reporter did not hear the talks at the Nickerson Community Center about the services provided to many residents—information that prompted many of the teachers to make contributions to the good work of that 110-year-old organization.

Ironically, the newspaper piece of our walking tour was placed next to a story on the efforts of the Providence Plan Housing Corporation to clean up urban blight in eight neighborhoods—Olneyville being one of them.

Perhaps even more important, some political leaders became excited about our walking tour story. Apparently they felt the negative publicity reflected on them and their apparent lack of effort to bring about more improvements to the community. Whether that be the case or not, the story highlighted the greater need to work for the improvement of our neighborhoods and our capital city.

It will require both political leaders and community people working together, not placing blame on each other for lack of effort or initiative. The problems are too big and too many in our urban centers, including Provi-

dence, for this type of wasted energy.

It is unfortunate if some community and political people view the walking tour story of Olneyville in a negative manner. Far better that people get angry, that they recognize there are problems to be addressed, that they come out and make their views known, that they recognize that they are all in it together, and that they cooperate to solve these problems.

From the teacher-visitor point of view, it was a revealing experience that brought home the hard living conditions that some people endure, including, in some cases, the teachers' own students. And they became far more sympathetic and understanding about the problems faced by many of our poorer city residents.

They also found out that Olneyville is a great place to visit because it has one of the best rib houses in the state. And they will be back, now that they know exactly where that rib house is located.

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