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Uncovering East Baltimore

Baltimore Week gives students an overview of their surroundings

By *Greg Rienzi*
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When Rachel Weber, a doctoral student in the Bloomberg School of Public Health, returned to Baltimore last year after an extensive fieldwork trip in Tel Aviv, she had a slight nagging feeling. She had just spent two years examining the sex worker trade and human trafficking in that area — an experience she felt was immensely valuable — and she realized that since coming to Johns Hopkins, she hadn't done any hands-on work to confront health-related issues where she lived and went to school.



Community resident/bus-tour guide Glenn Ross with Rachel Weber, who conceived the weeklong program for East Baltimore students, and Seth Christman of SOURCE, who now directs Baltimore Week activities.

Photo by Will Kirk / HIPS

Weber said that when she decided to run for president of the school's student assembly, she knew a major aspect of her platform would be to help connect students with the surrounding community. She won the election, and one of her first undertakings was to create an event that would both encourage others to get involved with local agencies and help dispel some of the fears they might have about venturing out into the area.

Her efforts resulted in Baltimore Week, a week's worth of community-related activities for students at the schools of [Medicine](#), Nursing and Public Health. The October 2006 event was an instant success, as several of the activities drew hundreds of participants.

"I knew there was a lot of energy toward improving relations with area residents and getting students more involved with the community. What better way to change the culture than having a week at the beginning of the school year where we encourage people to strengthen their connection with the community and raise awareness to the issues right here in our own backyard," said Weber, a student in the Department of Epidemiology. "We also wanted to get

people excited about being in Baltimore and show them some of the great things about the community."

The second annual Baltimore Week, which begins today, will kick off with a bus tour of East Baltimore led by Glenn Ross, a community activist and East Baltimore resident for more than 30 years. Ross will impart a history of the neighborhoods, talk about the environmental issues the area faces and discuss the residents' view of their complex relationship, both good and bad, with Johns Hopkins. The tour, which takes place from noon to 1:30 p.m., starts at the hospital and travels down to the harbor.

On Tuesday, the School of Public Health will host a viewing of the award-winning documentary *The Boys of Baraka*, a film that follows four "at risk" Baltimore middle school students who attend an experimental boarding school in Kenya. It traces their journey from the inner city to the strict academic and disciplinary school and then back again to Baltimore. The film will be shown at 6 p.m. in the School of Public Health's Sheldon Hall. A discussion with some of the Baraka boys will follow the viewing.

Baltimore Week 2007 also includes a talk by Baltimore City Health Commissioner Joshua Sharfstein; a community involvement panel; a performance by WombWorks, a Baltimore-based theater company that focuses on health issues; and a series of seminars that link academic disciplines to community health issues. Several of the activities were pitched and are co-sponsored by various student groups at the three schools.

The week concludes with the Tri-School Day of Service on Saturday, Oct. 13. The day provides opportunities for students to take part in one-time community service projects at locations such as Our Daily Bread, the International Rescue Committee, Parks and People, Baltimore Reads Book Bank and the Village Learning Place.

All the events are open to faculty and staff.

This year, Baltimore Week was organized and is sponsored by SOURCE, Johns Hopkins' Student Outreach Resource Center, which provides academic, professional and personal development opportunities for members of the schools of Medicine, Nursing and Public Health through community outreach and service-learning partnerships with community-based organizations.

The three schools founded SOURCE in January 2005 to create one centralized, interdisciplinary community service and volunteerism center. The center coordinates volunteer activities — from a one-time park cleanup to an in-depth internship — and functions as a clearinghouse through which community groups can request volunteer help.

SOURCE's programs and services include an annual volunteer fair, quarterly donation drives, monthly lectures by community leaders and tours of the area for new students.

Seth Christman, a coordinator at SOURCE and director of Baltimore Week activities, said that the center's staff felt strongly about the value of Baltimore Week and wanted to continue what Weber started.

"Rachel's vision and dedication to the East Baltimore community is truly inspiring," Christman said. "SOURCE has taken a key role in the planning to ensure that this week of activities is institutionalized and well-supported at all levels, and that the week continues for years to come."

Christman said that an event like this could help shatter some of the myths people have about

the community and foster individual relationships with area agencies.

"We want to break down barriers, and the bus tour is one way to get people out there and show a lot of positive things," he said. "We want to show students here that it's a great community that is worth getting involved in."

For details about Baltimore Week and to sign up for a Tri-School Day of Service project, go to www.jhsph.edu/source/ProgramsEvents.html.

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