Dr. Lorraine Dean is the recipient of the 2019 Delta Omega Award for Innovative Public Health Curriculum for her course, “Methods for Assessing Power, Privilege and Public Health in the US”, a service-learning course taught at the Bloomberg School of Public Health which was conducted in partnership with the Men and Families Center. Dr. Dean spoke with us about her experience with the course and what the award means to her. This interview is excerpted from a longer interview with Dr. Dean, Leon Purnell (Executive Director, Men and Families Center), and Quandra Gaines (Project Director, Men and Families Center) which will be available soon.

Can you share a little background on when, why and how this course was created?

Well, I’ve been at Hopkins for about 4 years – I came in as an Assistant Professor in Epidemiology, and one of the first statistics I heard was that 70% of the students that come into Hopkins are at the highest level of socioeconomic class. Now I’m a social epidemiologist, so the first thing that struck me about that was, if we’re here and we’re supposed to be teaching students about how to serve the underserved, how do we do that when they are from the highest levels of privilege? How do we teach them to serve the people who are the least privileged? And so that was really the founding concept for the course, that it was a way to think about training students to truly serve a broader cross-section of people in our society in a way that’s going to balance issues of power and privilege, and not just be descending on people. The course evolved when I got involved with SOURCE as a Service-Learning Fellow and was paired with Keilah Jacques to help actually develop the course, and I think we spent over 120+ hours (when we logged it) developing the course together.

How did the partnership with The Men and Families Center begin?

That was another brilliance of Keilah who put us together, as she saw what the course was trying to do. She identified that Men and Families Center would be a great partnership: one, it was local to Baltimore, it was serving Baltimore’s needs, they had data, they were organized, they had all the elements that would make it easy for students to start working alongside of them.

What deliverables did students provide to The Men and Families Center?

The first thing was to think about, what would help The Men and Families Center? One of the things that Quandra talked about was highlighting the public health problems that Men and Families Center sees and addresses, that’s not documented in the research literature. So one of the things the students did was package some of the products and services that Men and Families Center uniquely provides.
The students called this “Addressing Energy Insecurity” and I think they might have coined the name “BGE Assist” for Men and Families Center, which stood for Baltimore Gas and Electric Assistance. Essentially it’s part of what Men and Families Center does is to make sure when people have issues with lights, utilities, housing, that they have a way to talk with these energy companies, and with the clients that they work with, about how to go around so people don’t end up in foreclosures, so people don’t end up undomiciled, so that people don’t end up in dire straits in darkness without heat or without light.

What was the impact on your students after being involved in this partnership?

I can take that directly from the mouths of the students. One of them talked about how this was one of the most valuable educational experiences they’ve ever had in their life. Another one talked about understanding how the academic approach can’t solve all the problems. We talked about how the academic approach can be deficit-based, so it can talk about all of the problems but maybe not necessarily have solutions to those problems, or talk so much about the problems that it actually undermines the solutions that are happening and that are working. So when we talked about what Men and Families was doing, rather than pointing out that Baltimore has all these problems, we focused that conversation on, what is Men and Families doing to prevent Baltimore from being in a worse position?

How has this course shaped the future of the way that you work with communities or design your courses?

It really, I would say at first, was scary, because the academic model is, “I’m this fountain of knowledge”, right? I’m expected to have all of the knowledge, and what the service-learning approach taught me was that, I don’t need to have all of the knowledge. The community-based partners have knowledge sources – institutional knowledge – that you can’t get anywhere else. Students will come with knowledge, and it actually ended up taking some of the pressure off of me. So, some of the approaches that we use in the class – things like “flipped classroom” – those are things that now I’m taking over into other classes, and challenging my colleagues to do the same in their classes, and they’re loving it too, so it’s really neat to see that. I’d also say it challenged me to think differently about how the structures of privilege that have benefitted me might still be hurting other people. One of the things that we talked about in the class was even things like NIH funding and who really has access to it, so I’ve been trying to find people at other institutions who don’t find it as easy to get NIH funding and partner with them to be on my grants, so that they can have some resources [available] to them.

What advice would you give for other faculty members at Hopkins who want to partner with communities or take community-based approaches to their work?

I would say, it’s worth it to do it, it’s worth the time it takes to do it, and in the end, again it ends up making your job easier in some ways – not in all ways but in some ways – but it’s a more enriching educational experience for students. So, in summation, despite the extra time that it might take, which I think is the thing that faculty members are generally concerned about – because I do think that there are a lot of faculty members who do want to work more in community-based settings but are concerned about it – it’s worth it do in the end. Once you have that relationship established, you can do it again like clockwork if [the community partner] saw another need.

Lastly, what does this award mean to you?

For me, this award is a sign that this type of learning, this type of teaching, and this content that focuses on deconstructing our own privilege, and focuses on truly finding ways of not necessarily just to reach across the aisle, but make the aisles level so that they’re equal playing fields, is desirable by students not just at Hopkins but at other places. So I hope it also, in addition to giving visibility to the Men and Families Center, gives visibility to this content as something that is incredibly important and necessary for students across the board. Now, I talked about the case of Hopkins, but if you think about even just college graduates in the world, that still represents 1% of the entire world. There’s still a level of privilege no matter what sort of institution or university you go to. So I think that this could be used at many other types of institutions, not just a Hopkins type of institution, and I’m glad that the people in Delta Omega and beyond will know more about this.