



On a hot day in L.A., a bicyclist receives a bottle of water from Urban Plunge participants Brian Contreras (left), Jesse Brennan, Brent McGarry and Andrew Yassa.



PLUNGING INTO REALITY

LOYOLA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT
URBAN POVERTY BY LIVING AMONG THE HOMELESS
IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

BY SUSAN L. WAMPLER
PHOTOS BY MANUELLO PAGANELLI

While students go about their daily routines at Loyola High School (LHS) in the heart of central Los Angeles, the downtown skyline just to the east serves as a constant reminder of the school's connection to the city and its role in the community. Founded in 1865, LHS is the oldest continuously operated educational institution in Southern California. Over the years, this Jesuit school has grown up along with the city and educated many of its civic leaders.

Despite the school's historic connection to Los Angeles, as one walks across its beautiful, tranquil, and sheltered campus, it is easy to forget that Skid Row and the city's largest concentration of homeless persons are a mere three miles away. To underscore the students' role as men for and with others, and to minister to those most in need, LHS launched the Urban Plunge in May 2004. Now, plunge programs are scheduled on numerous weekends throughout the year, with student volunteers spending three or four days and nights living among and serving the homeless.

"Students understand going into this urban immersion that while they will engage in direct service with homeless or nearly homeless people, the major attitude adjustment going on is their own," says Tom Zeko, LHS director of community service.

The specific sites vary from plunge to plunge, but the students engage with the homeless in at least three separate communities: Skid

Row, Hollywood, and Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles. On Skid Row, the focus is the homeless adult population; in Hollywood, the homeless youth population; and in Boyle Heights, on the undocumented immigrant population, adds Tom. Food and lodging for LHS volunteers are provided through the participating shelters and centers.

During each plunge, 10 to 12 participating students along with two to three adult leaders, who are drawn from LHS faculty, staff, parents, and alumni, travel by public transportation or on foot between the sites. The group members prepare and serve food, visit with the homeless, listen to their stories and concerns, play with youngsters at a home for battered women and children, and do chores at the various agencies.

/// The main reason for being homeless that I heard was **MAKING A BAD CHOICE** of quitting their jobs or [doing] drugs. The homeless people I met impressed me in their **EFFORT TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVES.** /// —**MAURICIO ALFONSO, senior**

“The most challenging part of the plunge is probably getting over the stereotypes people have of the homeless,” says Kirk Busby, an LHS senior who recently participated in his second plunge, his first as a student leader. Kirk says it’s “a little bit disorienting to leave behind all the comforts at home and meet these people who have endured so much.”

STARK TALE OF TWO CITIES

Los Angeles is simultaneously a city of great wealth and devastating poverty, with the nation’s largest number of homeless men, women, and children. On any given day, the city is populated by nearly 70,000 homeless, 10,000 of whom are under the age of 18. More than 5,000 homeless are concentrated along Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. When the homeless throughout Los Angeles County are tallied, the population is closer to 75,000, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, which conducted an official count in 2007.

While the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported a 15 percent drop in the number of homeless both in California and nationwide between 2005 and 2007, homeless advocates fear the numbers may spike again due to the housing crisis and the overall economic downturn.

Statistical data for Los Angeles paint a disturbing picture: Some 86 percent of the homeless are U.S. citizens, 76 percent were employed for some or all of the two years prior to becoming homeless, more than 40 percent are women and children, between one-third and one-half suffer from mental illness, and more than half engage in substance abuse.

Brian Contreras (right) draws a smile and a handshake from a client during a lunch hospitality visit for St. Margaret Mary Parish’s mission outreach team.







ABOVE: Guests share the dinner table with Loyola High School students Pablo Ruiz (center left) and Jesse Brennan (center right) at St. Vincent DePaul/Cardinal Manning Center. RIGHT: Students pitch it to clean kitchen counters.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

On a typically sunny Southern California Friday morning, 11 LHS students, led by seniors Jesse Brennan and Kirk Busby, gather on campus with backpacks and sleeping bags. They are met by the adult leaders for this particular Urban Plunge: mathematics teacher Rob Eleuteri, who is overseeing his second plunge, and Toyia Coulter of the treasurer's office, who is making her first plunge.

The weekend begins in Clougherty Chapel in Ruppert Hall, the Jesuit community residence, with the Pilgrim's Blessing, scripture reading, and group prayer. Shared group reflections are a vital component of each plunge and continue throughout the weekend.



The group's first stop is Good Shepherd Shelter in Hollywood, where LHS students play with the young residents of the transitional housing facility for homeless mothers and children seeking refuge from domestic violence. Next, the group moves on to nearby Blessed Sacrament Parish, a Jesuit parish that offers showers, fresh clothing, breakfast and lunch service, and weekly haircuts to the community's homeless. The students sort and organize donated clothing so it will be easier to distribute.

In the morning, the LHS contingent sets up and serves breakfast at Blessed Sacrament, helping with lunch service before traveling south to Inglewood. There, they visit St. John Chrysostom Catholic Church and perform some needed yard work. From Inglewood, they move east to downtown Los Angeles, where they share dinner and engage in conversation with many of the homeless at the St. Vincent DePaul/ Cardinal Manning Center, a beacon of hope on Skid Row for more than 50 years.

After spending Saturday night at Cardinal Manning Center, they arise early to serve breakfast to the homeless at Midnight Mission, another Skid Row shelter. The next stop is Dolores Mission Church, yet another Jesuit parish in Boyle Heights, where they attend Mass and engage in reflection and prayer. For their last service mission of the plunge, they join forces with a group from St. Margaret Mary Parish in Lomita to distribute sandwiches and water to the homeless living on the streets and under bridges. The weekend ends with a meal back at LHS and a final reflection.

// Over dinner, **ONE MAN** at Cardinal Manning Center **TOLD ME HIS WHOLE LIFE STORY.**

His words touched me. ... The majority of the people we visited are not that different from me.

The experience of **THE URBAN PLUNGE IS AN OPPORTUNITY EVERYONE SHOULD TAKE.** It gives you a good understanding of how many social issues there are today. // —CHRIS AYERS, senior

"Students lives are transformed over the course of the weekend," says Rob Eleuteri. "They not only see that there is much more to homelessness than what they read in the newspaper, but that there is also something that they can do to help resolve the problem."

"I was particularly impressed with the boys' actions, how they treated the people they met," adds Toyia Coulter. Like typical teenage boys, they're "laughing and joking around. But when it came time to interact with those in the missions and on the streets, they were very attentive and very respectful. Thirty or 40 years from now, this experience will still be a part of them. This is a lifelong learning lesson." 🌟

Loyola High School's Urban Plunge program has also conducted immersion trips to impoverished areas far beyond Los Angeles, including New Orleans in 2007 and Appalachia and Puebla, Mexico, during 2008. For more information on the program, e-mail Tom Zeko, director of community service: tzeko@loyolabs.edu

