

Poets unite with Habitat for Humanity for Shantytown

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A mass of angry clouds furrows its brow over Whittier College's upper quad where a steady torrent of students begin to assemble. A sizable stack of cardboard, comprised of pieces provided by Habitat for Humanity and donations from students involved with the event, slowly diminishes as students parse and pick durable pieces. The clouds grow darker with each passing second, but the students brave the discouraging weather and erect their makeshift homesteads with deliberation and care. The sides of the cardboard real estate are swashed with color, creativity and activist facts about the grim statistical realities of homelessness in the United States.

The crude houses look something like an elementary school art project blown up to life-size scale. A banner waves over the stairs to the Wardman Gymnasium across the way; it proudly and unabashedly proclaims: "Shantytown."

So was the atmosphere last Friday, Oct. 19 when fledgling club Habitat for Humanity, in partnership with the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), joined a handful of other schools in the nation in raising awareness about the growing epidemic of homelessness in the country.

For those who do not know, Habitat for Humanity encompasses a national community that has made concerted efforts to improve the living conditions of low income families through "build" projects (i.e. housing). The Whittier College

chapter of this philanthropic club found its origins in Argentina where club president Stephen Fernandez, during a class trip, saw the efforts made by Habitat for Humanity in that region.

SIFE, Habitat for Humanity's non-profit cosponsor in this endeavor, proved an indispensable ally in pulling the strings together for Shantytown.

In addition to raising money for the event, SIFE utilized its healthy connections within the business community to approach willing donors who could provide the enormous stock of cardboard that would be used (both clubs approached Bon Appétit, who also catered breakfast burritos the next morning).

In fact, SIFE's core purpose is

to serve the community through its knowledge of the business world, and incorporating those skills in the way it operates in the community.

But financial and corporate motivations aside, one glance at the herculean effort put forth by SIFE representative and publicity spearhead junior Kathryn Harrold, is enough to convince anyone that the organization's heart is in the right place. "We're really just trying to do any small thing that we can," Harrold said. "We want people to get involved. If we can change even just one person's mind, then it's worth it! It's the first time we're doing something like this. Now we can put the Whittier College spin on it." She was very eager to join in with Habitat for Humanity when she heard what they were doing with the event.

Indeed, other colleges and universities nationwide have been participating in Shantytown long before Whittier jumped in. The University of California, Los Angeles in particular has a long tenure of putting on the event, so much so that their Shantytown actually lasts five consecutive days. In response to criticisms that Shantytown was derogating the experience of homelessness, Harrold was emphatic.

"We're not at all trying to replicate the experience of being homeless," she said. "People aren't seeing the true effort involved here."

In addition to the students in attendance at Shantytown, there were Whittier community representatives Bernice Jimenez and Antonio Crugnale (who interestingly enough is a former member of the hit 1970s rock band, The Jagers).

Jimenez, who was a participant in Occupy Whittier, is passionate about her cause. "There are exactly 238 homeless in Whittier currently,"

Jimenez said. "With winter coming, we just want to get them off of the streets."

In fact, Jimenez and Crugnale are trying to form a group for those who would like to help Whittier's homeless off the street and into shelters.

Whittier College's societies participated to garner support for the event.

The Penn Society creatively made their cardboard shelter into the shape of a triangle to match their iconic insignia. The Sachsen Society decorated their shanty with all their colorful propaganda and a loud banner that boldly labeled their plot amidst the numerous other cardboard houses.

In addition, KPOET radio blasted a steady stream of upbeat pop remixes that starkly contrasted with the brewing storm overhead. Both of their presences attracted a larger turnout that otherwise would have been turned away by the inclement weather.

Bracing themselves for the inevitable rain, students stacked on the layers and attempted roofs. Some simply used vertical cardboard pieces but the more industrious incorporated matted canopies of newspaper. Seemingly, this technique looked effective enough. However senior Melissa Camarena was not pleased with hers. "My roof didn't come out as good as I thought it would," she said.

Nevertheless, the interest and determination shown by the many students who participated in Shantytown has given credence to the success of the event's essential purpose: to spread awareness about homelessness. But as junior Hen Thompson succinctly states, "Raising support is the easy thing; finding out what to do with all of these boxes is the hard part."



COURTESY OF ACROPOLIS

Members of the Sachsen Society work together to build Fort 69, and their contribution to Shantytown won them first place.