

Through the Syracuse Hunger Project, SU and community agencies are addressing issues of poverty and malnutrition and improving the social support system for those in need

By Amy Speech Shires

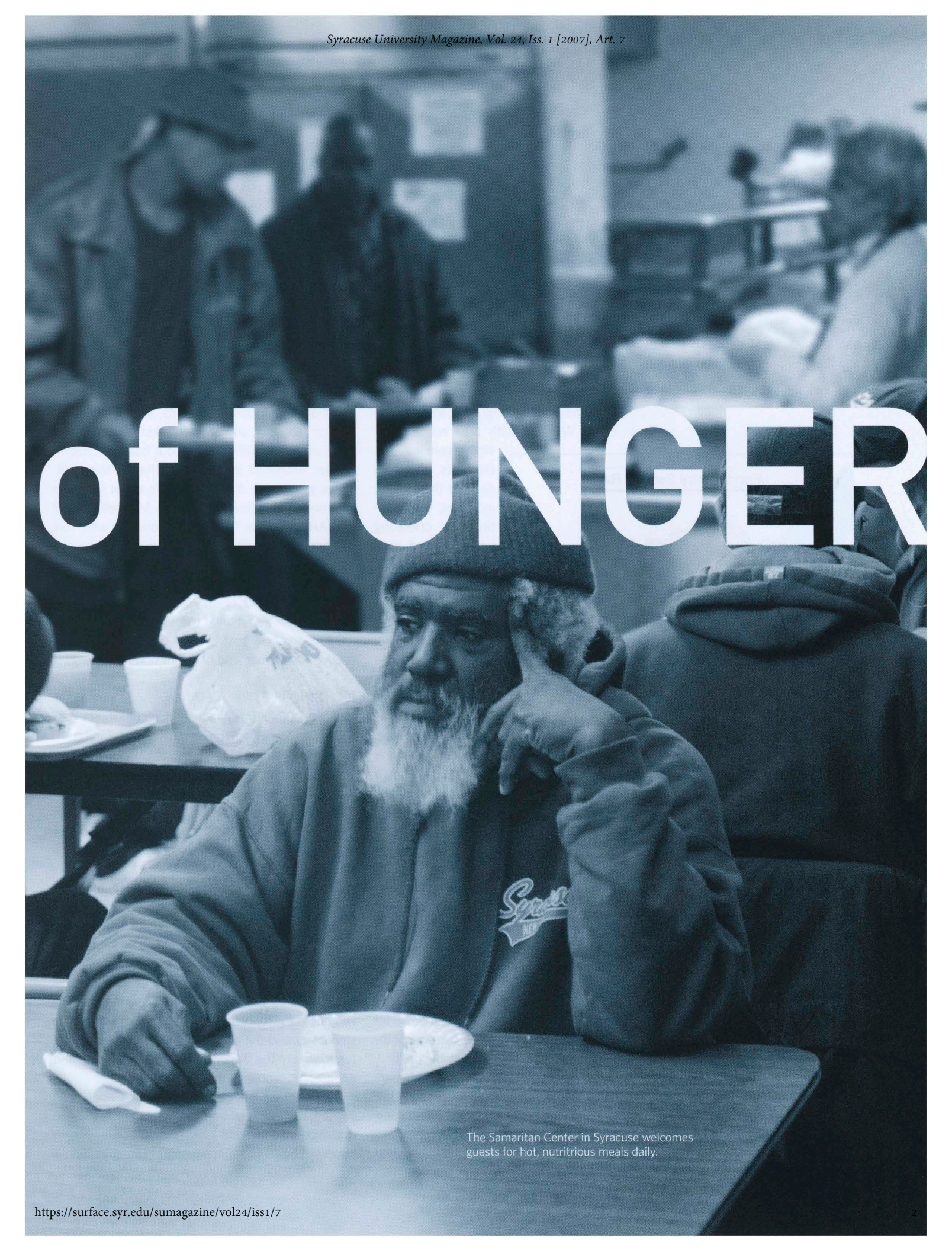
Geography

WHAT'S FOR DINNER? For the most fortunate among us, this simple question has an abundance of pleasurable answers. We can prepare something at home by selecting from the plentiful contents of the refrigerator and kitchen cupboards, take a quick drive to a familiar well-stocked grocery store, or dine at a favorite restaurant. Whatever the choice, a satisfying and nutritious meal is within easy reach for most Syracuse-area residents. But for some in the city's neighborhoods, getting supper on the table can present a challenge. At the end of a day lived in poverty, there may be nothing in the cupboards or the fridge, no cash for a restaurant meal, no way to get to fresh groceries or pay for them, and little energy left to meet even the most basic nutritional needs.

Maxwell professor Don Mitchell refers to this contrast in life circumstances as the "uneven topography of hunger in Syracuse." As chair of the Department of Geography, he coordinates SU's involvement in the Syracuse Hunger Project, a community initiative designed to understand and heal hunger-related issues in the city and close the gaps in nutritional opportunities among residents. The project exemplifies the University's commitment to Scholarship in Action, with students, staff, and faculty working together with the local community to address a vital issue. The hunger project began three years ago with a request from Dale Johnson '74, G'80, G'01, then executive director of the Samaritan Center, an interfaith hot meal program that serves hungry people in down-

town Syracuse. The center had tried for some time, without success, to gain a comprehensive overview of the changing needs for emergency food services and the resources available to fight hunger in the city. "Dale thought the landscape of hunger in Syracuse had changed a lot in recent years, but that the geography of service provisions for them—such as soup kitchens and food pantries—hadn't," Mitchell says. "He asked if the geography department could help figure out if that was the case, and then see what might develop out of that." The original goal of the Syracuse Hunger Project was to bring together all agencies in the city that deal with the problem of hunger and to merge information about the services they offer and the people they serve in one central database.

of HUNGER



The Samaritan Center in Syracuse welcomes guests for hot, nutritious meals daily.

Johnson believed the geographers would contribute technological sophistication and professional expertise to the process of presenting and analyzing the collected information. "There really wasn't a coherent picture of what was going on citywide when it came to food availability," says Johnson, a graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Maxwell School, and the College of Law who currently directs Hospice of Central New York. "Geography was the obvious discipline that would help us turn what we found into real pictures."

MAPPING OUT THE ISSUE

Mitchell discussed Johnson's request with geography professor Jane Read, who specializes in geographic information systems (GIS), a computer technology used for spatial analysis. Read enlisted the research and mapping skills of students in her spring 2004 Principles of Geographic Information Systems class. Working with area human service agencies, the students gathered data for the project, including the location and operating hours of food pantries, the number of meals served, statistics on participation in government food aid programs, and census data about income, race, and housing quality.

Using specialized GIS software, they translated the information into a series of maps, creating a visual portrait of poverty and hunger in Syracuse. "Basically, GIS enables you to layer different types of information on top

of each other—the way geographers once used tracing paper, only now the process is totally digital—and then do a spatial analysis," Read says. "Coding information in different ways, classifying it, and displaying it in various colors can be a powerful way to look at patterns, find where certain conditions exist, and see instantly what is going on."

One member of Read's class considers his participation in the project among his most fulfilling experiences at SU. "It was a lot more than taking some figures and plugging them into a computer," says Stephan Rice '04, who majored in geography

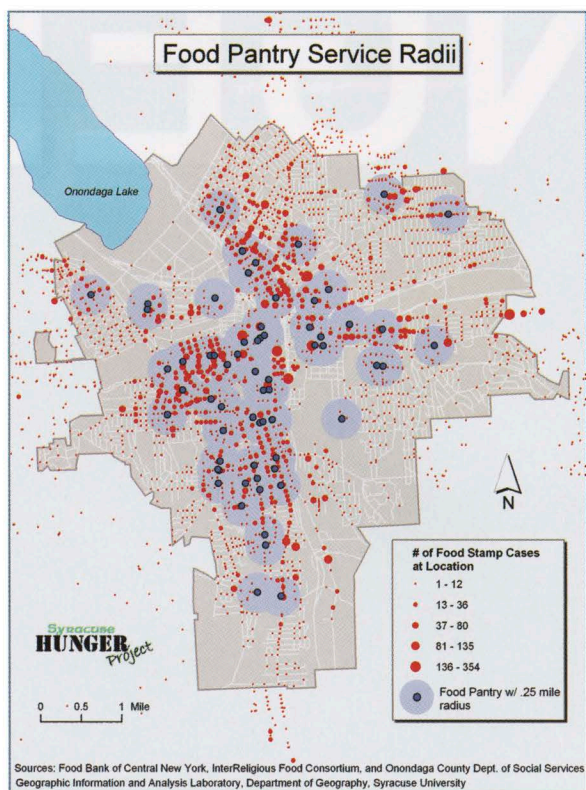
and political science. "We had a chance to go out into the community, and we became very motivated when we saw the locations we were mapping, meeting people in the streets and in the food pantries. In fact, a number of people in the class volunteered to work in the pantries."

Beyond the development of the maps, the Syracuse Hunger Project brought together social service providers and educators, including representatives from county and city governmental agencies, the Syracuse City School District, Le Moyne College, and several emergency food services. The Maxwell participants were joined in the project by other members of the SU community from the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service (CPCS) and the College of Human Services and Health Professions. "The hunger project created this quite voluntary and always changing coalition of academics, students, service providers, service receivers, and other interested people who meet once a month to talk about issues related to hunger, exchange ideas about what all these different groups are doing, and think about solutions that need to be developed," says Mitchell, a 1998 MacArthur Fellow. "It gives us a forum in which we explore issues of all kinds. And while we often discuss them looking at a map, the map just gives us something to focus on. So instead of talking about turf, or about which agency is supposed to be doing what, we talk about what the maps show—what is needed, and how best to meet that need in collaborative ways. That kind of discussion is ongoing."

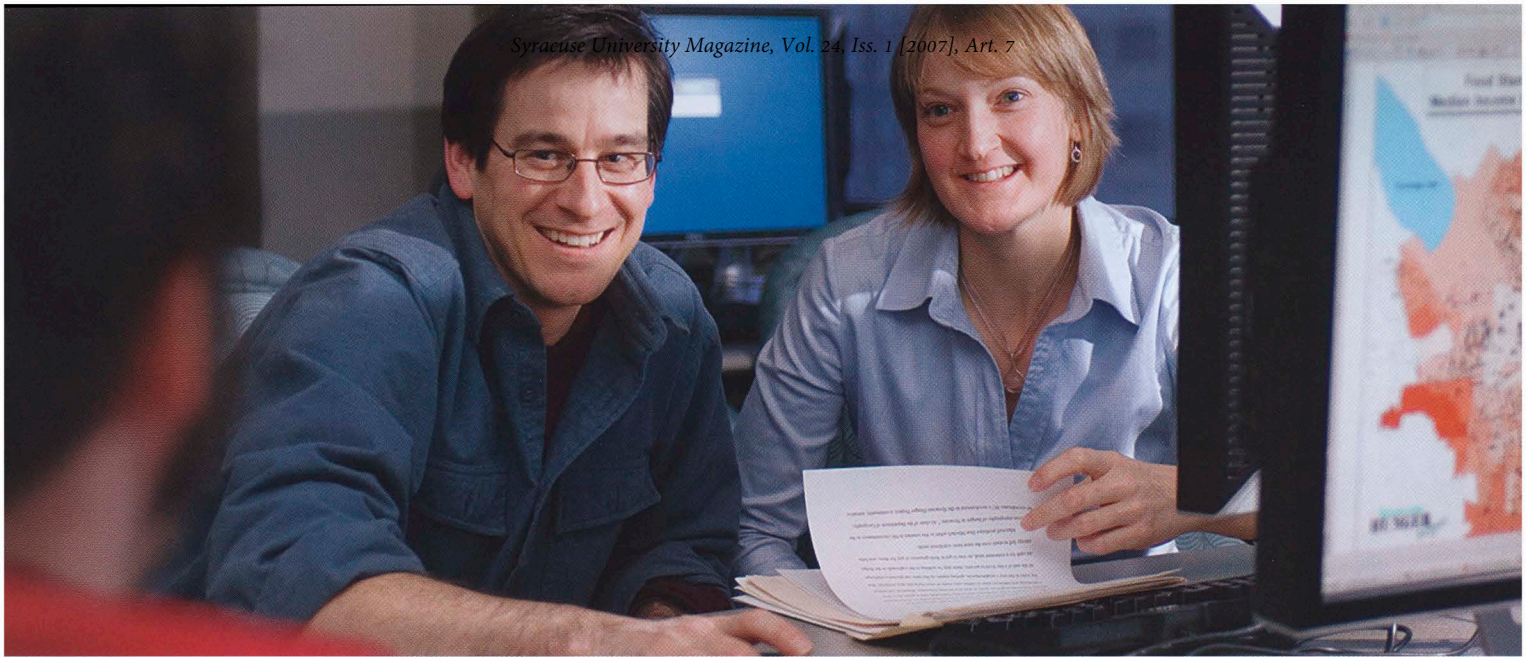
BRINGING POSITIVE CHANGE

In April 2004, the Syracuse Hunger Project presented a report to the community outlining 10 recommendations in the areas of children's needs, food pantries, systems for senior citizens, and the overall emergency hunger network. Among them were suggestions to form a cooperative of agencies to better meet children's needs, target outreach to senior citizens, and bring together a network of local faith leaders to address hunger issues. Another recommendation was that the hunger project itself be continued and expanded. "The making of the maps provided a new way to come together and draw on each other's ideas, skills, knowledge, and commitment," Mitchell says. "It also convinced us of the need to continue this project, to address the set of recommendations laid out in the report, and to assure that we—in the University and the community—continue working together on the social, political, economic, and geographic problems that beset us."

Several recommendations have since been carried out by coalition partners. For example, outreach efforts were launched to better inform people about food stamp programs in areas



Syracuse Hunger Project maps can be viewed online at www.maxwell.syr.edu/geo/community_geography/mapssyrhung.html.



where maps indicated discrepancies between the number of people eligible for such supplements and the number enrolled. In addition, some food pantries adjusted their schedules to accommodate people's work schedules. Additional mapping was conducted for the Syracuse City School District Health Services Department to explore the relationship between hunger and childhood obesity. That report, prepared by students in Maxwell professor William D. Coplin's Community Link Program, will provide a foundation for the district's development of programs to fight childhood obesity. A town meeting on hunger was held at St. Lucy's Church in 2005, drawing a cross-section of practicing professionals, pantry managers, church and community leaders, and academics. "We brought together people who use the emergency food networks, people who provide emergency food, and people who do analysis," Mitchell says. "We looked at the problem of 'food insecurity' in Syracuse from all of these perspectives."

Another major recommendation that came out of the project's first phase was the appointment of a full-time community geographer. Hired in September 2005, Jonnell Allen uses GIS and other geographic tools to support the hunger project and many other initiatives in Central New York. The position is unique in that, while Allen is a University staff member, she works for the community and is directed by a community-based steering committee. She continues looking at hunger issues, expanding the scope of the original maps to encompass all of Onondaga County, and has worked with students on several studies that grew out of the hunger project. She is currently developing an interactive mapping web site and an online informational guide about food insecurity and area service providers. "The position is the

perfect blend of research, community outreach, and activism," Allen says. "It is also nice to have access to students, to work with them and get them interested in community issues."

One of the students Allen works with is Jennifer Perrone '07, a geography and policy studies major who has used her GIS expertise to combat hunger in Syracuse and throughout New York State. Under Allen's supervision, Perrone contributed to the Syracuse Hunger Project as part of her independent study work. That experience led to a summer internship with the statewide Hunger Action Network of New York State (HANNYS). During the internship, which was funded through CPCS by the Robert B. Menschel Public Service Internship Award, she mapped farmers' markets and use of supplemental nutrition programs to increase awareness of poverty and food insecurity in New York State. "The use of GIS is quickly expanding, and SU has a lot to offer in this area," Perrone says. "It's exciting to see it being used not just for conservation or to predict weather patterns, but to assist organizations like HANNYS in helping people more effectively."

ENERGIZED BY COLLABORATION

The Syracuse Hunger Project meets monthly, generally attracting about 20 people—depending on the topic being discussed—and drawing from a membership of more than 70 organizations. The Samaritan Center, now under the direction of Mary Beth Frey, remains in the lead; but agenda items and projects are decided on as a group. "Many things have come out of this effort—relationships and networking—that wouldn't have happened otherwise," Frey says. "There is a collaborative energy that comes from being a very broad-based group. I also think these are issues people feel very strongly about. Hunger is funda-

Geography professors Don Mitchell and Jane Read meet in the Geographic Information and Analysis (GIA) Laboratory at the Maxwell School. The use of GIA mapping helped the Syracuse Hunger Project define areas in the city where hunger-related issues are prevalent.



At a hunger project meeting, community geographer Jonnell Allen (second from left) gives a presentation to Mary Beth Frey of the Samaritan Center, Amalia Swan (right), and Bethany Slater (foreground), both of the Food Bank of CNY.

Bringing Real Food Closer to Home

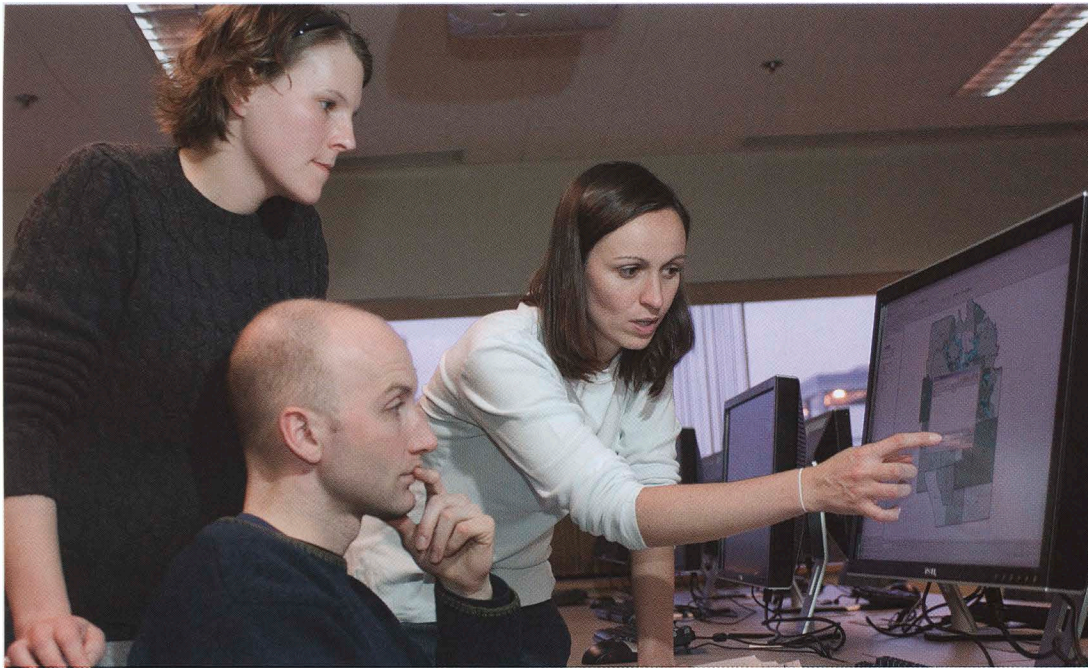
GATHERING THE SIMPLE INGREDIENTS FOR A FRESH SALAD OR HEALTHY BREAKFAST CAN BE A complex task for some residents of Syracuse's South Side, where access to affordable nutritious foods is limited. For economic reasons, neighborhood stores tend to stock convenient, nonperishable groceries that are high in fat and sugar, and low in nutrients. But Syracuse University faculty and students are partnering with community residents to change the situation. The Community Development Law Clinic has initiated establishment of a food cooperative grocery store that will be planned, owned, and managed by South Side residents. "The lack of nutritional food available for folks in low-income communities is one of the symptoms of poverty, as well as a contributing cause in the cycle of poverty," says College of Law professor and law clinic director Deborah Kenn, who proposed the food co-op idea to a coalition of community members last year. "In an effort to provide some systemic solutions to poverty, we are working together to bring high-quality, reasonably priced food and household products to the South Side."

Kenn says the project is still in the formative stages, but much of the groundwork has been completed. Last spring, law students researched the legal framework for developing a food co-op and presented information regarding ownership and democratic control of the cooperative to South Side residents. Whitman School of Management graduate students completed a feasibility study and business plan for the co-op last fall. "While these types of ventures are not an easy challenge, our M.B.A. students have prepared an outstanding business plan showing how the South Side food co-op can succeed," says Michael H. Morris, Witting Chair in Entrepreneurship and chair of the Department of Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises. "We believe the venture can create both economic and social value."

Additional collaborators include the Department of Nutrition in the College of Human Services and Health Professions, the Maxwell School, and the School of Information Studies, as well as the Rosamond Gifford Foundation, Syracuse Real Food Cooperative, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and Morrisville State College. Possibilities for expanding the project include the development of a community education program to address nutrition and wellness issues, a community garden to supply produce to the food co-op and local restaurant owners, and an outreach effort to home-based businesses needing a venue for product sales. "The main idea is to provide people in low-income communities on the South Side with opportunities to revitalize their neighborhoods and to really effect change," Kenn says. "This isn't about service. It is about economic development. The profits and benefits won't go to an anonymous major grocery store chain, but to the decision-making members of the cooperative and the residents of the community."

FOOD STAMP RECIPIENTS MAP (left)

The map indicates the number of food stamp cases in a specific area. Larger dots represent a higher density of cases.



Community geographer Jonnell Allen discusses a detail on a hunger project map with graduate students Stephanie Crist and Kevin Jensen.

mentally wrong. It is something that, at your core, you want to try to right." Frey especially values SU's involvement. "The people at the University have been huge in this, for a lot of reasons," she says. "They have the resources. They have a willingness and energy to get the work done. They are amazing people who want to make a difference. And the geographers are just fun!"

CPCS director Pamela Kirwin Heintz '91 is equally impressed by the strong relationships that have grown from the hunger project, and points to the many ways SU benefits from its involvement. "You see how complex these issues are, but you also see how you can forge new partnerships around social issues we might not have thought about before," she says. "We have the ability to do research, to help the community work out problems, to integrate some of the experiences into coursework for our students, and to reinvigorate faculty, perhaps in research areas that involve working with the community on really significant issues. These are issues people talk about in developing countries. But anything global is also right here in our community. That's the exciting part about it."

Responding to specific needs identified by the maps, coalition members have taken on several projects that vary widely in scope and content. For example, to promote the Earned Income Tax Credit benefit, the United Way established five new volunteer income tax assistance sites. Now in its second year, that successful initiative, geared toward getting more grocery money into the hands of hungry working people, was taken over by PEACE Inc., a local community development organization. The Food Bank of Central New York refers to hunger project maps for direction in targeting food stamp

"Hunger is fundamentally wrong. It is something that, at your core, you want to try to right."

—Mary Beth Frey, Samaritan Center

outreach efforts and enhancing summer feeding programs for children. "Regardless of the direction we take, we always try to keep an eye on what the recipients of services need," Frey says. "It is easy for organizations and wondrously well-meaning bureaucrats to get together and develop systems we think are just swell, but in reality aren't good for anybody. We have to continue to ask, what is it that communities and neighborhoods need, and what is it that the people we are trying to help actually want?"

A current focus at hunger project meetings is the development of a community gardening program, a topic that has attracted new partners who are experts in community development, agriculture, and the environment. Areas for future exploration include collaboration on grant proposals to provide more services, and creation of a directory of services, a hunger hotline, and mobile farmers' markets. "The hunger project itself is completely amorphous," Mitchell says. "It remains deeply interested in questions of food insecurity—not just meeting needs through emergency food supply, but also thinking about long-term interventions and solutions, realizing that hunger is just one indicator among many of the structural problems in our society."