

Firsthand Experience in a Secondhand Store

Internship helps student explore career options

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You hear it all the time from students, the value of taking what they've learned in the classroom out to the field to gain up-close experience while exploring possible career options.

Colleen Ryan '15, who had never really thought about doing an internship until now, is right in the midst of all that. Ironically, it's her work at a secondhand store that is giving her firsthand knowledge.

A senior majoring in human development and family studies, Ryan is a month into her yearlong internship at Fair Tide, a Kittery, Maine, nonprofit that, boosted by proceeds from its thrift store of the same name, provides housing for the homeless. Founded in 1998, Fair Tide bought an apartment building in town and accepted its first residents in May 2003.

Ryan only occasionally has direct contact with tenants but it is often enough to have an impact.

"Until you come across families encountering homelessness in real life, it's just something you've heard about," Ryan says. "You think it's something that happens to a certain segment of the population. And then you find out, it can happen to almost anyone."

The surprise of that registers in her voice as she mentions meeting an individual whose road to homelessness started with an on-the-job injury that left him unable to work. There are other stories—similar stories—that she hears when she visits the residence with the case manager.

"Getting to sit in when she checks in with the residents gives me a chance to interact with them and be part of the conversation," Ryan says. "There is a lot to be learned from just listening."

The duties of her 14-hour-a-week unpaid internship include administrative tasks, case management, and working in the thrift shop. She also is learning about grant writing, a subject she says she knew little about. And then there are the meetings Ryan attends with Fair Tide director Mary Oplinger; the most recent was on coordinating access with other area homeless shelters.

All of this is helping the UNH senior decide what she might do for work after graduation—one of the goals of an internship.

"Each year, the department of human development and family studies places 10-15 students in internships at homeless and domestic violence shelters, assisted living facilities, afterschool programs, and community centers throughout the Seacoast region. The experience they gain from working alongside human services professionals in the field is extremely valuable for shaping their professional goals and honing their skills in working with children, youth, and families," says Tyler Jamison, assistant professor in the department of human development and family studies.

Ryan says, "I've only been here a month but I've seen different aspects of the organization and I think that will help me figure out what I want to do when I graduate.

Even if all I find out is what I don't want to do, it will be a help," she says. "Already, the experience has been invaluable."

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