

West Side Photovoice Project Reflection

It's been a privilege to participate in the West Side Photovoice project. As a WVU SoM faculty, my role has been to coordinate the WVU-Charleston medical students' involvement in the project behind the scenes, but I've learned a great deal myself. The initial lectures and overview of population health gave all of us a common approach to 'seeing' the neighborhood itself as an organism in need. The community members graciously hosted the visiting medical students and team, sharing their stories as we toured their West Side home. During our tour, learning the history of the West Side as a former prominent working-class neighborhood, now deeply declined and at risk, was moving to witness first hand.

The follow-up meeting on April 1st allowed the community members to share, by photo and public storytelling, their sense of pride and hope, as well as their struggle and pain. The medical students learned practical lessons in population health, through their own photo-taking and reflections on what they saw and understood. The students have learned lessons as large as the concepts of population health from a Public Health faculty and eminent domain from a WVU law professor, to the grief of a mother whose son is effectively lost to her due to substance abuse, poverty and lack of resources. The wisdom and resilience of the West Side residents are as impactful a lesson as any didactics. The community members and university brainstormed ideas for health interventions that may ultimately grow and take hold. In the short term, relationships were formed, with respectful dialogue at the center.

Throughout this West Side Photovoice, I've experienced and been moved by the dynamic of a community that is suffering and deeply at risk, in tandem with hope and a commitment to improve the health and wellness of this population by positive intervention. This experience has informed my understanding of the social determinants of health. A team of committed community members and interested medical students is an ideal mix of learners to document, and hopefully impact, the population health on the West Side of Charleston, WV.

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