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Real Estate Students Learn There's No Place Like Home

Course looks at the need for low-income housing

BY SUSAN BUBAK

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Heather Scrannage, left, and Prof. Eden Grodzinski

Students who pursue a career in real estate often do so with dollar signs in their eyes, but there's more to being a real estate agent than making huge commissions on multi-million dollar properties. That's why Prof. Eden Grodzinski says it's important for aspiring real estate agents to experience the not-so-glamorous side of the industry: low-income housing.

Students enrolled in her second-year course "Service Learning in Housing" are required to spend at least 15 hours volunteering with a local not-for-profit organization that deals with poverty and other factors that affect the affordability of housing.

"Homelessness is really an iceberg," says Grodzinski, a professor in the Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies. "It's just a very small proportion that you see on the street. The majority of it's hidden."

"Just because we don't see it doesn't mean it's not there," adds Heather Scrannage, a fourth-year housing and real estate management student, who completed the course in 2009 and is now Grodzinski's teaching assistant.

The students volunteer with a variety of local organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, food banks, neighbourhood groups and shelters. They organize events, such as youth drop-ins and food drives, and help with property maintenance. Many of the students continue to volunteer with these organizations after they finish the course. They also apply what they learn in the program and help organizations relocate by finding properties that meet their budget and space requirements.

"I hope we teach them that volunteering is fun," says Grodzinski. "I think the real value of this type of course is that there's an academic component attached to it."

At the end of the course, the students give a class presentation about their volunteer experiences.

"A lot of times what we're covering in class, they're encountering out in the community," says Grodzinski. "I think it's really eye-opening to them to discover that there's poverty in Guelph."

The shortage of low-income housing often traps people in a cycle of poverty that's difficult to escape without an affordable place to live. Building low-income housing requires applying for government grants and subsidies, which is more of a deterrent than an incentive for developers who would rather build more profitable properties, says Grodzinski.

The students also examine the codes of ethics of various real estate professionals and look at why they tend to encounter more ethical dilemmas than those who work in other fields.

The course also hosted a youth housing forum in collaboration with the Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation, the City of Guelph and the County of Wellington. Representatives from community agencies were invited to speak about their programs and the challenges they face. Some of the guest speakers were the same age as the students themselves and shared their first-hand experiences with poverty and homelessness.

"It definitely gives a different perspective," says Scrannage. "Most of our classes are directed at how to make money and what to do with that money." She says Grodzinski's course provides the perspective that some people don't have money and suggests how future real estate agents can give back to society.


The course also examines the causes of homelessness and poverty, such as drug and alcohol addiction, health problems, lack of education and unemployment. A shortage of affordable housing makes it difficult for people facing these challenges to become financially stable. "If you're spending 80 per cent of your income on rent, you can't afford food," says Grodzinski.


Finding a place to live is more than just putting a roof over your head, she adds. A home is a stepping stone that helps people get back on their feet, find a job or go back to school.

ABOUT

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