

For one Excelsior College faculty member, a passion for volunteer service has combined with her educational career to the benefit of many. Sharon De Martini, faculty program director for special projects, is also the founding president of St. Paul's Center, a shelter for homeless women and their children in Rensselaer, N.Y. Drawing on her grassroots experience in helping the homeless, De Martini designed, developed and now teaches a course, PBH 342 Homelessness: Social and Health Perspectives in the College's School of Health Sciences.

De Martini became involved in the creation of the homeless shelter eight years ago when her church initiated a detailed community needs assessment to consider options for a newly vacated church after its parish merged with hers. "I decided that it was time to start giving back a little bit and this seemed like a perfect opportunity," she explains. A Rensselaer native, she appreciated how the St. Paul's building had served the community for 100 years, not only as a house of worship but also as a school, a polling place and site of other civic activities.

Since its founding as a non-denominational, not-for-profit entity, the shelter has provided services for more than 320 families. Most of the women who are assisted at St. Paul's are single, with no income and limited education. It took \$1.3 million to renovate the church to create the homey 19-bed shelter. While one month is the typical length of stay, the Center continues to support the families for up to a year through its Bridges Program that assists families as they transition to independent living arrangements.

"The Bridges Program is a really big part of the whole homelessness picture," De Martini explains. "To just provide a roof over one's head is not enough—you need to supply support services for at least a year in order to help people make the transition successfully."

Soon, De Martini will be undergoing a transition of her own. Due to term limits, she'll be stepping down from the Center's Board of Directors, after serving as a guiding force in not only the creation of the shelter but also in steering its development and current day-to-day operation. David Rossetti, executive director of St. Paul's, reflects, "Sharon's greatest contributions have been her dedication to the mission and the vision of the organization, her ability to communicate articulately and her genuineness. [She also] has been able to manage some very difficult situations while on the board, ensuring the focus remains on the shelter."

But now, as she leaves the board, De Martini can continue to apply lessons learned from eight years of navigating homelessness issues to her Excelsior College course on the subject. Developed through the encouragement



Sharon De Martini meets with St. Paul's Center Executive Director David Rossetti. "Sharon has been helpful with brainstorming, being one of our regular donors, and nurturing me as the Center's executive director," Rossetti explains.

of School of Health Sciences Dean Deborah Sopczyk, the course has been well-received by students and is so popular that it is offered every eight weeks. Students learn about the many faces of homelessness and are surprised at the complexity of the issues involved. De Martini notes, "I love teaching it [the course] and the discussions we have. I love it when students say, 'Wow, I had no idea how many people are homeless in my community. I never thought about the huge impact homelessness has on public health,' or the best one—"I want to do something to help."

Exemplifying the many Excelsior employees who are committed to the College and their communities, De Martini has worked at Excelsior for nearly 25 years. Her experience is complemented by a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a Master of Science in Educational Psychology.

While the intersection of learning and homelessness may not seem readily apparent, De Martini observes, "The shelter and Excelsior are both places where people really strive to provide and equip others to improve their lives and become what they want to become." ■

FOR MORE INFO

St. Paul's Center, www.stpaulscenter.com

PBH 342 Homelessness: Social and Health Perspectives

This course provides a comprehensive view of homelessness within the U.S. from both social and public health perspectives. Students explore the various causes of homelessness, examine the different homeless populations, and investigate interventions aimed at addressing relevant issues. The course puts a face to the thousands of men, women and children who are without the shelter, safety and comfort of a home.