

East St Louis  
Work weekend, October



NTAC house



Garbage on the walkways

Friday, 7.15am, all group members meet at we started the three-hour journey to East St Louis. The assignment for the weekend was to design, “no dumping” flyers, and create “no dumping” signs. Upon first impression the area was a mess. Windows were often boards of wood, houses were overgrown with weeds, or even demolished with no clearing of the debris. You really wonder what can be done in this place. However, our first place we stopped was the NTAC house. This was a beautiful place and really showed us the effort that was being put into the rejuvenation.

It was here that we had lunch and left for the tour. The tour really showed us the extent of the problems in East St. Louis. I expected to find a place that was hostile and grim. Of course the area was deprived, yet the people we worked with couldn’t have been nicer. Further, places like Emerson Park looked landscaped and was aesthetically pleasing.

When touring the area we soon saw that there was much illegal dumping. Our objective was to prevent any more dumping on the sites were people helped to clean.

The cleaning of areas is very important in rejuvenating. It symbolizes that a small change will help make a big difference. It was our aim to make sure that the effort that was put into cleaning the sites was maintained.

Friday we designed the signs, and produced the flyers. Using the colors of red, white and blue (symbolic in itself of the national flag) we hoped to deter any illegal dumping.

Saturday we were at the church at 8.30am Simultaneously the boards were sawn and painted, and the stencil was made for the signs.



Whilst the boards were drying we conducted an interview with a local resident Mrs. De Shields. The interview with Mrs. De Shields touched on many of the important topics that we have covered in relation to East St Louis and the overall concepts of inequality and its deeper causes. In our interview we heard a first hand perspective of what segregation and discrimination were like in East St. Louis for an African American woman in the years before Civil Rights legislation was passed. Through our discussion we learned about the segregation in housing that was widespread and divided up white and black by a particular street. African American residents were not allowed to live on the main street of the city until “white flight” took hold of East St Louis. As she described her life in detail for us, we were amazed to see how East St. Louis is a textbook case of the fiscal crisis that deindustrialization has caused to many working class cities around the country. With a number of factories, meat packing plants, and shipping related industries East St Louis was a booming urban area that attracted Mrs. De Shields from her previous home in Danville, IL. Through her years in East St Louis. Mrs. De Shields has seen the gradual decline of the economic opportunities and hopes that East St Louis will once again return to its glory days this time as a place where equality and justice will prevail for all people. Although new to SENDO she is excited about helping to improve her part of East St Louis in an effort to organize people to create social change in both her neighborhood and city.



Whilst painting it gave us the opportunity to talk about our expectations of the area and what we actually thought it was like.

As a group we expected to see an area somewhat comparative to inner city locations. With kids playing on the street and litter a problem. The houses are run down, but usable. The reality was very different. The things people found most unbelievable were that the roads were often just gravel instead of tarmac. There were few people, and on the tour the downtown was more like a ghost town. The place was spread out, and there were far more vacant lots than ever imagined. Next to a well-kept house could be a remainder of a house, next to that a house with greenery all over it. Before going to East St. Louis I didn't believe there would be a community spirit. I thought that in a situation like this place people would be yield and stop working to change the area. It was the effort and the spirit of the people that surprised us the most.

We expected to be working in a poor area. We knew there were vacant lots and so forth, but it was the extent of the issue and deprivation that was not understood.



Once we were all done we had time to install the signs and see our work in place. The areas that were to get the signs were areas cleaned by other voluntary groups. We also gave one to Mrs. D, as behind her was an alley that was overgrown and subject to dumping. The signs were either erected on trees, as we felt this was more stable and less likely to be vandalized or in other locations the signs were inserted into the ground via a post.

Saturday, 7.30pm, we were all home and exhausted, but pleased with what we had achieved.

