

Serving the Community

By Lisa Gregory

As a student, **Michele Wolff**, M.A. sociology '89 and director of the Shriver Center's Work and Service-Learning Program, worked for the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware. She was an intern but didn't realize it. "It wasn't called an internship and I didn't earn credit linked to it," says Wolff. "But, now knowing what makes an experience an internship, it really was a chance for me to connect theory to practice in a real-work environment. It had a great impact on me."

Since then Wolff, who has more than 10 years of experience in experiential learning, has helped countless students explore their own real-work experiences through internships, co-ops and service-learning. In fact, this past year, the Work and Service-Learning Program made nearly 1,100 placements, a new record for total number of placements in a single year.

Wolff received her master's degree in applied sociology from UMBC and began teaching SOCY396, Reflections on Community Service: A Sociological Perspective, in 1993. The class is designed to give students participating in service-learning experiences a chance to come together as a group to think critically about the social issues they are addressing through their direct service in the community. "This is an important part of what I do," says Wolff. "It is essential that students get the chance to connect what they are learning in their courses to real situations."

"Michele was a very effective instructor," says student **Jamie Fiore**, psychology '02. "I found her to be insightful and helped get the class thinking outside of a classroom spectrum. What I received from this class was a new sense of community." Another former student, **Gabriela Villanueva**, political science '01, has worked as a volunteer and an intern for the Shriver Center. "Michele is effective at what she does because she listens to the needs of all students, administrators and faculty alike," says Villanueva. "She makes you love what you do. She is my role model."

Amber Widmayer agrees. Widmayer, now a graduate student at UMBC, was also a volunteer and an intern for the Shriver Center before becoming the center's service-learning coordinator. "Michele took an enthusiastic student and harnessed that enthusiasm into developing a more effective and refined professional," says Widmayer. "Her patience and confidence in my abilities were gifts I will always be grateful for receiving so early in the game."

"What I find most rewarding about my work is that we make a positive difference for people," says Wolff. "The students involved in work and service-based learning have life-changing experiences, faculty find their teaching to be reinvigorated by the incorporation of service as an element of their curriculum and we know that our work is making positive changes in the communities where our students do their work or service."