

Fight against blight: GCSU continues effort to make county homes safe



Dr. Damian Francis discusses his work removing blight from Baldwin County.

At a meeting on what concerns residents—a gentleman from Oconee Heights, Milledgeville, once asked Dr. Damian Francis if he'd be like all the others—doing one thing to help the community, then disappearing. "I said, 'No, we're here for the long haul.' That was 2½ years ago, and we're still here. We're showing some benefit now, and residents are really appreciative," said Francis, an epidemiologist and director of Georgia College & State University's Center for Health & Social Issues (CHSI). "It gives us credibility. We're now seen as a credible entity when it comes to health," he said, "and people take us seriously. The county takes us seriously. The county knows we're not just here to cast blame and say the government is not doing enough. When it really matters, we'll put our money where our mouth is. We'll put our hands and our feet on the ground to make this work."

Francis moved to Georgia from Jamaica in 2018, when his wife got a nursing job in Dublin. Previously, he taught at the University of West

Indies in Jamaica and did sickle cell research at the Caribbean Institute for Health Research. In between jobs in the United States, he consulted for the World Health Organization.

When a job opened in public health at Georgia College, Francis applied. He didn't want to be a "cookie-cutter" professor. So, he took a Center for Teaching & Learning workshop with Dr. Cynthia Alby to become transformative when teaching.

One way to engage students, he learned, is to involve them in research. Francis' interest is helping people live healthier lives—especially those in low-income areas who are known to have higher rates of heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. He wanted to get students involved in health outreach.

To do that, he had them conduct a survey to learn what quality-of-life issues concern Baldwin County residents most.

It wasn't health.

It was blight—dysfunctional housing and property.

"During our assessment," Francis said, "we found the needs that residents wanted addressed were things like housing, crime and physical infrastructure in their community."

"It goes back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs," he said. "If your house is leaking and you can't sleep comfortably during the rainy period, that's going to be more important to you than managing your blood pressure, which you cannot see. People prioritize these needs, because if I can't sleep well at night, that's going to affect my blood pressure. If my house is falling apart, that's going to affect my blood pressure. Without money to fix it, that's real stress."

Residents in the Coopers neighborhood in southwest Baldwin County, the Hardwick neighborhood around Central State Hospital and Oconee Heights neighborhood just south of downtown Milledgeville all identified damaged housing as a top concern.

So, in 2020—prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns—a public health student started assessing the problem in Oconee Heights. Kaitlin Gauthier was a senior at the time. She went door-to-door to map and assess

more than 100 houses, checking for things like fire damage, sunken roofs, foundational cracks and fallen trees.

Gauthier helped Francis write a grant application to fund the housing infrastructure assessment. She collaborated with Geography Professor Dr. Doug Oetter to use Geographic Information System (GIS) to create, analyze and map data. Later, another public health student, Kristina Taylor, helped present those findings to county officials in 2021.

Results showed nearly two-thirds of Oconee Heights houses had some level of blight.

At least one-third were deemed uninhabitable.

"One of the amazing things was—quite a bit of houses deemed livable by the survey were still occupied," Francis said. "That represents a public health hazard."

Once county officials were onboard, the data students collected provided support for Baldwin County designation as a Georgia Initiative for Community Housing community. Then, with letters of support from the university and organizations like Overview Inc. and Habitat for Humanity, the county applied for and was awarded a \$400,000 federal Community HOME Investment Program (CHIP) grant this summer.

The money will pay to rehabilitate up to eight blighted homes. Francis is helping county officials select the first round of houses to fix. The elderly and disabled are being given priority. Work will begin at the end of the semester. Progress from this round of improvement can be cited when applying for more CHIP grants in the future.

It's Francis' hope that as many as 66 houses can be saved.

"This was a really big success story for the university, the county and residents," Francis said. "Some people live in houses where, every time it rains, they might as well be living outside. Clearly, some residents were ecstatic to hear the news."

"It's one of our strategic goals to remove or mitigate some of the obstacles that keep people from living healthy lives, and housing is definitely part of that," he said. "To be helping people in such a concrete way—it just gives you this feeling of joy."

Special Ed prof named Governor's Teaching Fellow

Special Education Associate Professor Dr. Rob Sumowski is one of 12 faculty members from across the state selected as a 2022-'23 Governor's Teaching Fellow.

Former Georgia Governor Zell Miller started the yearlong symposium in 1995 to provide state education faculty with opportunities to learn important teaching skills, like the use of emerging technologies.

More than 600 fellows in 80 different state disciplines, professions and teaching areas have participated in the last 27 years.

"I'm honored, partly because the program was begun by Governor Zell Miller, a staunch advocate for public education and a man I met as a young teacher," Sumowski said. "I'm also honored because everywhere I look on this campus, there are faculty who are so good at what they do that it makes my head spin. The idea that I might be considered as even approaching the high bar set by my colleagues humbles me."

Sumowski will attend a series of meetings at

the Louise McBee Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia (UGA). Fellows spend three days a month in master classes learning how to become more effective instructors from experts like Georgia College & State University's Cynthia Alby, professor of secondary education in the Lounsbury College of Education.

The symposium is "a chance to pause and reflect on improving our delivery of instruction," Sumowski said, "but it's also intense, and it moves quickly."

Dr. Steve Elliott-Gower, associate professor of political science, suggested his colleague complete an application for the highly-competitive program. Sumowski received the 2021 Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) Dunn Award for service to his students beyond the classroom.

He applied for the Governor's Teaching Fellow program because he's always rethinking his approach to "everything."

As part of the program, each fellow identifies a key academic project to focus on. Sumowski chose



to redesign a course called "EDEX 4334: Teachers as Leaders" that senior special education majors take prior to graduation.

According to research, many K-12 teachers leave the field within their first three years.

"That's not okay. We can do better," Sumowski said. "I hope redesigning this course will directly impact teacher retention."

Did you know?

The Bobcat Medallion on Front Campus is in the process of being refreshed with a new installation to withstand the foot traffic, events and ceremonies that make Front Campus such a valued part of our institution.

The existing Bobcat Medallion is showing signs of wear and tear, with cracks forming throughout, especially around the Georgia College & State University lettering. A new medallion, with a more-robust construction, is already in the works to make sure this focus-point of the Georgia College experience continues to display its Bobcat pride.

The new medallion will consist of a single piece of four-inch-thick granite with etched and sealed lettering. It more than doubles the thickness of the multi-piece granite installation that it's replacing.

The existing design of the Front Campus walkways with its Bobcat Medallion centerpiece dates to 2001. The new medallion will be stronger and provide a better platform for celebrations.

Photography exhibit focuses attention on our relationships with our bodies

The genesis for the Embodied exhibit came from a photography project in which Georgia College & State University (GCSU) senior Anne Elise Beals and Women's Center practicum student Regan Mitchell invited women who had been catcalled to sit for a portrait and talk about how it impacted them.

Catcalling is the practice of, predominantly, men whistling or yelling gratuitous comments, usually of a sexual nature, at women as they pass by on the street.

Beals, who has been the target of catcalling, said it is an almost universal experience for women. In that universality, the harmful impact catcalling has on the individual is lost on the men and boys who see catcalling as an expression of their masculinity or a right-of-passage.

"I think people need to understand that just because you're not physically assaulting someone, verbal harassment is still so impactful on people's well-being and on people's perception of themselves," Beals said. "Catcalling makes people feel responsible for other people's perception of them, it makes them want to cover up, it makes them feel like they have to retract into themselves and hide parts of themselves. Those are things that nobody should ever feel."

Beals hoped portrait photography could engage audiences in a conversation about this practice that is often minimized as a crude part of culture. In the project, Bobcats Call Back, Beals and Mitchell asked participants to pose for two portraits.

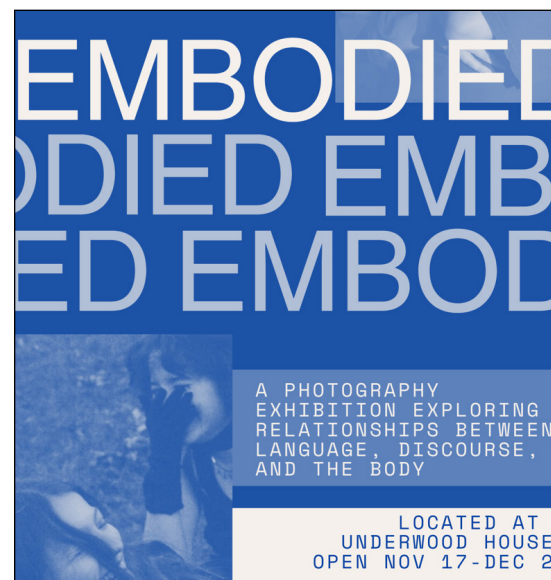
By putting a face to the harmful impact of cat-

calling, Beals wants audiences to form connections with the portrait subjects that compel them to eliminate behavior that subjugates people based on any number of subjective qualities.

In the process of chronicling the negative effects of catcalling, Beals saw the opportunity for a larger conversation about how our relationships with our bodies are shaped both negatively and positively.

The result is a group exhibit of eight student photographers sharing gorgeous, thought-provoking imagery that encourages audiences to reconsider their relationship with their body and be more mindful about outside influences affecting that bond.

Embodied premiered Nov. 17 at the Museum of Fine Arts in the Underwood House.



EMBODIED
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A PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE, AND THE BODY

LOCATED AT UNDERWOOD HOUSE
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What's going on in Bobcat Territory?

Visit frontpage.gcsu.edu/events

Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<p>22</p> <p>4-6 p.m. GCSU Women's Basketball vs. Shorter live at Centennial Center.</p>	<p>23</p>	<p>24</p> <p>HAPPY THANKSGIVING!</p>	<p>25</p>	<p>26</p>