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UD Students Help Habitat Build a Better Database

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UD STUDENTS HELP HABITAT BUILD A BETTER DATABASE

DAYTON, Ohio — Three University of Dayton students in MIS professor Tom Ferratt’s two-semester capstone course are helping to bring Habitat for Humanity’s database management, marketing and development efforts into the 21st century.

Last fall, seniors Renee Fiely, Chris Forbes and John Lemoine assessed the organization’s technological platform and recommended hardware upgrades with networking capability. Then the students started work on a Microsoft Access database interface application that will help Habitat Executive Director John Robinson and his staff improve fund-raising, work-site staffing and community participation.

This spring, newly installed hardware solved part of Habitat’s data management problems. On the office’s old donated computers, a simple backup of the database and financial records took the volunteer bookkeeper as long as four hours, Robinson said. Compared to that, the “new” used computers are “quick as lightning,” he said.

As the new system was being installed, the MIS team ran trials on the prototype of the database application they designed for it. The project, which Robinson said could have cost Habitat $12,000 or more if he’d hired a consultant, was a real luxury for an organization that limits its operating expenses to 22 percent of its total revenue. Without the system, Habitat would not be capable of creating specific, directed communication for people and companies on its database, he said. The system wasn’t set up to infer information such as which non-donor volunteers would be likely to become donors if asked, which donors are prospective volunteers, who has skills in what aspects of home-building, and which volunteers are able to serve the organization in ways other than building homes.

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For Fiely, the experience has been as educational as it has been rewarding. Her textbook addressed the challenges often encountered in overhauling information systems, some of which she and her teammates encountered. The only computerized database the students found, for example, was a file used to create mailing labels. But she looked at the bright side: “I think it actually made it easier that it was all on paper.”

In his year and a half in Dayton, Robinson has been impressed with UD students’ enthusiasm for community service.

“Those kids have a serious commitment,” he said. “They’re not there in their newest white sneakers like kids from other schools or groups who come just to volunteer for a day. ... I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more wholesome, respectable and dedicated group of kids. I think they’ll take this with them and make philanthropy a part of what they do.”

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For media interviews, call Tom Ferratt at (937) 229-2728, Renee Fiely at (937) 285-8052 and John Robinson at (937) 586-0860.