Students cap off their Freeman experience by planning St. Jude Community Center's transformation

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Professor Larry Merington's BSM students met with stakeholders after presenting their plan for St. Jude Community Center's renovation. Back row, from left to right: Andre Vogel, Harley Bonn, Casey Guidry, Dani Nierenberg, Jillian Tobasky and Rebecca Weiss. Front row, from left to right: Tanasha Minor and Sister Beth Mouch.

When Professor of Practice Larry Merington told students in his Business Management capstone class they would be developing a plan to help St. Jude Community Center renovate its building and expand its community assistance programs, Dani Nierenberg (BSM '25) was instantly sold on the idea.

“I jumped at the opportunity,” Nierenberg said. “It seemed like an awesome way to do something meaningful during my senior year.”

For over two decades, St. Jude has provided critical support for those in the New Orleans area who are homeless or hungry, and demand for its services remains high. Led by Sister Beth Mouch, the center provides hot meals to hundreds of people each day, offers shelter to unhoused women, and operates one of the largest food pantries in New Orleans. Plans to expand the center began in 2023, shortly after the center was sold to the START Corp., a nonprofit that provides housing, healthcare and job training to people experiencing hardships. Mouch teamed up with Casey Guidry, CEO of START, to make St. Jude a one-stop shop for those in need.

Nierenberg and fellow BSM students Jillian Tobasky (BSM ’25), Harley Bonn (BSM ’25), Andre Vogel (BSM ’25) and Rebecca Weiss (BSM ’25) acted as consultants on the development plan, advising Mouch and Guidry on how to expand St. Jude’s offerings to include medical and dental care, nutrition services, veterans support, job training, psychiatric assistance and emergency housing.



On Nov. 14, Freeman students and stakeholders attended an outreach dinner to raise funds to renovate St. Jude Community Center. From left to right: Andre Vogel, Rebecca Weiss, Professor Larry Merington, Sister Beth

Mouch, Dani Nierenberg, Jillian Tobasky, Elia Brodsky, Harley Bonn, Casey Guidry and Aly Rau.

Over the course of the semester, they attended weekly stakeholder meetings, researched funding opportunities, identified business partnerships and took part in outreach events. They also volunteered at the center to gain a clearer understanding of the center's operational needs.

"It's hard to help build a program when you've not seen the center in action or you've not really participated in it," Mouch said. "So it was great for them to come and experience what we do here."

Students toured the center's kitchens and dining hall and worked alongside experienced volunteers to prepare and distribute meals. While they worked, they had the chance to speak to — and learn from — the volunteers who work daily to keep the center running. "All the volunteers we met were so invested in what they were doing," Nierenberg said. "That was inspiring to see."

Visiting the center also exposed students to the struggles faced by many in the New Orleans area. Mouch, who has been with St. Jude since 2006, said that many of the people the center serves are homeless, recovering from abuse or addiction, or struggling with mental illness.

"It was eye-opening for my team and me," said Bonn. "We come from suburban areas and haven't been exposed to some of the challenges faced by underserved communities."

"Actually going and seeing people come in to get breakfast was important for our team," Nierenberg agreed. "Those are the people who need help the most, and it was important for us to see how our work was going to change people's lives."

The students ultimately channeled that first-hand experience into their consulting plan. The product of a semester's worth of meetings and research, the comprehensive proposal included a marketing strategy, a partnership plan and advice on renovating St. Jude's 16,000-square-foot building.

"One of our key architectural suggestions was the addition of a takeout window to enhance safety for staff and streamline food distribution for guests," said Tobasky. "This feature would allow for quicker pickups while reducing congestion within the

facility.”

The students also offered input on how St. Jude could secure reliable food donations and prepare meals more efficiently. They recommended establishing partnerships with New Orleans restaurants to ensure more consistent food donations. Likewise, they urged St. Jude stakeholders to implement a tracking system to gather data on food and meal distribution. This data could then be used to streamline food services operations.

The team’s insights were warmly received by Mouch, Guidry and other guests at their presentation of the recommendations.

“I saw the positive reactions and tearful eyes of some in the audience,” said Merington, professor of practice in management. “To call it an impactful moment would be an understatement. It was closer to magical.”

Mouch was impressed both by the students’ plan and by their poise.

“The Freeman students are a delightful group of folks,” Mouch said. “They’re smart and energetic, and they have a wonderful presence about them.”

Merington was similarly pleased with the students’ results. “I was incredibly proud of them,” he said. “They were confident and humble and comfortable telling their story.”

In helping transform St. Jude Community Center, the students also experienced a transformation.

“It wasn’t just about getting a good grade,” Nierenberg said. “I really cared about my team, St. Jude and my professor.”

Tobasky said that the class helped her see the real-world impact of her coursework. “Working with Sister Beth, Casey and the St. Jude facility allowed me to see firsthand how business concepts like strategic planning, operational efficiency and community engagement can translate into real-world solutions,” she said. “The project also underscored the importance of creating dignified, accessible spaces to foster hope and empowerment for those experiencing housing insecurity.”

For Bonn, the capstone was the perfect way to put her Freeman skillset to use. “This project gave us the opportunity to apply everything we’ve learned throughout our

time at Freeman," she said.

Though the capstone class concluded at the end of the semester, Nierenberg hopes that next year’s class will help bring her team’s plan to life. “We’re going to brief Professor Merington’s next capstone class and get them up to speed,” she said. “Hopefully the next team will let us help, because we’re all still so invested in it. We care about seeing it come to fruition.”

Ultimately, Nierenberg said she feels lucky she had the chance to put her business skills to work for such an important cause.

“I’m so glad that I took this class,” she said. “It was a great culmination of four years at Freeman.”