

Campus Life

sociology course aims to burst the BU bubble

08.03.2012

By [Leslie Friday](#)

5



Donald Gillis, a CAS lecturer in sociology, briefs his class on the history of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). Photos by Kristyn Ulanday

Boston University students study abroad from Argentina to Singapore, they design water filtration systems in Peru, and they caravan across the country to volunteer during [Alternative Spring Break](#). Yet some of BU's most fascinating learning experiences can be had by following Donald Gillis to neighboring Jamaica Plain, Dorchester, or Roxbury.

Gillis teaches Boston's People, a College of Arts & Sciences sociology course that explores the evolution of Boston's neighborhoods over the past three centuries. The CAS lecturer in sociology says the class is meant to pop what he calls the BU bubble, where many BU students spend their college years.

"Boston's more than just Allston, Brighton, and Kenmore Square," says Boston native Gillis (GRS'78,'13). "It's a city of diverse and vibrant neighborhoods and one purpose of the course is to help students better understand the rich culture of its neighborhoods and people by visiting, speaking with, and understanding the complex social history of the city. If we accomplish that, even in a small way, students gain an invaluable understanding and appreciation for Boston and their role in their city."

Classwork includes many assigned readings, but Gillis encourages students to become "more connected to where they are," by reading the local newspapers. Weekly field trips allow students to hear directly from residents and community leaders about their neighborhoods' history and present struggles. During the four-week course they speak with Boston City Councilor Salvatore LaMattina in his East Boston district, where waves of Irish, then Italian, and now Latino immigrants have changed that neighborhood. They walk around the West End and speak to community leader Bruce Guarino, who Gillis says is just as "pissed

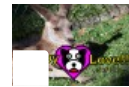
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off" today as he was 50 years ago when the city razed his home to build upscale apartments. And they visit Jamaica Plain, once the home of breweries and a thriving community of German and Irish immigrants, to chat with entrepreneur Kathy Mainzer and local historian and community activist Michael Reiskind.



May Louie (center), DSNI's director of leadership and capacity building, points out landmarks on Dudley Street.

One recent class meeting led 10 students, mostly juniors and seniors, to an air-conditioned conference room at the [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative \(DSNI\)](#), a nonprofit focusing on community-based planning and organizing in the heart of the Roxbury and North Dorchester neighborhoods. The students, who had seen the documentary [Holding Ground](#), about the nonprofit's early efforts, listened to Gillis spin decades of local history into a tight, five-minute lecture.

Dudley Triangle, a 60-acre patch of land bordered on two sides by Dudley Street and Blue Hill Avenue, was an urban wasteland in the mid-1980s. Burnt shells of buildings rose from vacant land used illegally as dumping grounds for trash and the skeletal remains of stolen cars. Most housing was owned by absentee landlords, and banks often refused to lend to the mostly African American, Cape Verdean, and Latino residents.

In 1984, Gillis explains, residents formed the DSNI to rebuild the neighborhood, and used eminent domain laws to take possession of public and private property. He says the move was one of the most successful uses of eminent domain in the country—and he should know. As Mayor Raymond Flynn's Office of Neighborhood Services director from 1984 to 1994, Gillis witnessed the entire process.

May Louie, DSNI's director of leadership and capacity building, sits at the table with them. "Do you guys know what a land trust is?" she asks. Silence. "I'll take that as a no."

Louie explains that a land trust like the one DSNI formed allows it to own the Dudley Triangle land and oversee the development of affordable housing there. Families can buy these lower-priced homes, but do not own the land they sit on, a practice that guarantees a constant supply of affordable housing in the neighborhood, prevents gentrification, and reduces the likelihood of foreclosure because the nonprofit steps in with interest-free loans should homeowners miss a mortgage payment.

more in this topic



Tanisha Millan (CAS'13) (center), Gillis (right), and Louie beside an urban garden.

Stepping out of DSNI into the bright afternoon sun, Louie leads the BU group on a tour along Dudley Street, where her history of local landmarks could be heard over music blaring from passing cars. She pauses in front of the closed Emerson School, a failing elementary school that will be reborn this fall as the Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School. The playground fronting the school, she proudly notes, was completely built by volunteers from the community.

Doubling back along Dudley Street, Louie points to a distant greenhouse (the only building the DSNI technically owns) operated by the [Food Project](#). The fresh, organic produce grown there is harvested and sold at a nearby farmers market. The group continues walking south past a vacant lot with a sign reading: "Boston Inspectional Services: Clean It or Lien It." Several such signs are scattered around the neighborhood as a warning to negligent property owners who fail to pay taxes that the city could take over their land.

Further down the road they pass a handful of attractive affordable apartment buildings, all built under DSNI's direction. Louie points to Mary Hannon Park, a previously sketchy public space now outfitted with a playground and baseball diamond. It's also the site of DSNI's annual Multicultural Festival. Students pass mothers pushing strollers and turn into the new [Kroc Salvation Army Community Center](#), complete with an aquatics area, gym, and sound studio for up-and-coming musicians. Back outside, an ice cream truck moves nonchalantly up Dudley Street.

Louie turns up a side street to stop by Dennis Street Park, a brilliantly painted playground and vast open space that's surrounded by affordable homes and cooperatives. Before DSNI was formed, she says, the area was littered with burned down homes and garbage.

The group then treks past a vast, lush Food Project garden. A sidewalk memorial for one of the neighborhood's fallen youth stands along one side. Candles perch on the cement and plastic-wrapped stuffed animals and faded pictures of the young man are affixed to a light pole. There, no one asks any questions.

Louie says practically everyone in Roxbury and Dorchester knows someone who has been killed, and many have become numb to the violence.

Crime "generally results from other things not existing," she says, referring to the neighborhood's lack of recreational opportunities. "We're trying to establish a culture where all the kids are our kids."

Watch the trailer for [Holding Ground](#) the first documentary on the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, and the latest, to be released this fall, called [Gaining](#)

Ground.

Donald Gillis teaches the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity (CAS SO 207) this fall, with a focus on Boston.

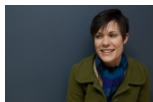
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5 Comments on One Class, One Day: Boston's People



Robin B on 08.03.2012 at 8:03 am

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It's nice to see that a professor has devised a class to learn about the city and people of Boston. And what better way to do it, than through engaging field trips, like those focused on learning about affordable housing and the DSNI initiatives.



Question on 08.03.2012 at 2:33 pm

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Doesn't Dr. benjamin teach a class similar to this one.



Maggie Huff-Rousselle on 08.03.2012 at 9:19 pm

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Can alum sign up? It sounds like a wonderful course for a Boston returnee to take.



Resign Reinvest on 08.04.2012 at 4:28 pm

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There is no mention of how Executive Director John Barros lied and manipulated the Emerson Elementary Community and voted as a School Committee member for its Closure. There was already work being done as part of the Promise Grant. This is a disgrace of how non profits should work within a City. As I know DSNI does good work. The way they got their school was wrong and therefore I do not support them anymore.



Anonymous on 10.19.2012 at 9:42 pm

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