Duquesne Students Work to Keep August Wilson’s Legacy Alive

By Ken Walters

Since August Wilson’s death in 2005, many fans and admirers of the playwright have made the pilgrimage to 1727 Bedford Avenue in the Hill District to see his childhood home.

Duquesne University Honors College students have been working to make those visits even more meaningful.

In collaboration with the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, Inc., named after the playwright’s mother, who made her home in the Hill District, the students have worked to promote the literary and social legacy of August Wilson during the past several years. After developing a strategic plan in 2011, students take on new responsibilities each year to help refurbish the house and create programming around it, including an annual block party on or near Wilson’s birthday, April 27.

“Our collaboration with Duquesne has been very productive,” said Paul A. Ellis, Jr., executive director and general counsel of the August Wilson House, the project name of the Daisy Wilson Artist Community, and a nephew of August Wilson. “The student impact has been extremely beneficial in helping us start and continue this partnership.”

Over the years, students used a variety of skills to benefit the house, Ellis said, noting their work in creating the organization’s website and Facebook pages, planning events, engaging with other community groups, and developing sponsorship opportunities.

“Students put us in a position to develop a unique curriculum every year,” Ellis said. “Thanks to their work, we’ve been at a different stage each year. Students have grown up along with our organization, and that makes it unique, much like the August Wilson house itself.”

“This work changes our students’ lives by encouraging them to look outward—the community is their classroom,” said Kathleen Roberts, professor of communication and rhetorical studies and
director of the University Honors College at Duquesne. “Students can develop a reverence for Wilson’s work and also learn how their skills have a use beyond the profession they choose.”

The students’ work also has reached the community in a variety of ways, from learning to create business plans to offering musical and theatrical performances, Roberts said.

The Honors College provides two courses for students who are interested in working with the Daisy Wilson Artist Community. An introductory course has students read and discuss Wilson’s plays, providing them with a knowledge of and reverence for the writer and a better understanding of the neighborhood’s history, Roberts noted. The second course allows students to work with the artist community on various projects.

The results of this collaboration have led to some creative ways to honor Wilson. To highlight the playwright’s love of jazz, for example, students from Duquesne’s School of Music performed jazz pieces during one of the birthday celebrations at the house, Roberts said. In another collaboration, she noted students from Duquesne’s College of Liberal Arts took narratives from the 1,000 Stories project, which chronicles the lives of Hill District residents over the decades, and created theatrical pieces which were performed on the home’s grounds.

The annual block party also serves to bring the community together. Roberts said that a variety of organizations support the event, including Strong Women, Strong Girls; Hill House; Carnegie Library; the City of Pittsburgh Police; food vendors; and dozens of small businesses offering myriad services and products.

Ellis added that the students’ impact goes far beyond their work for the house.

“One of the ways students have influenced us is in enhancing our partnerships in general,” he said. “Every year, students are engaged, proactive and committed to our goals. As soon as they find out what we need and what we stand for, they are all in. That passion and dedication sets an elevated standard for how we engage with all of our community partners. It’s invaluable in helping us reach our goals.”

To learn more, visit www.duq.edu/augustwilson to watch a video produced by students in the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts.