

After moving many times throughout her childhood, high school junior Destiney Hopkins landed in Norman a year ago for the second time, making the community the closest thing to home she's ever known.

"I've been to 11 different schools," Hopkins says. "Home, for me, has never been a stationary place."

During the past few months, Hopkins has been exploring the concept of home through the "What is Home?" project—a collaboration between the University of Oklahoma's Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing and the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication. Funded through a grant from the Kirkpatrick Foundation, "What is Home?" is one of the institute's many projects offering individuals like Hopkins the opportunity to recognize character traits that help them adapt to personal challenges.

Founded in 2015, the institute is a non-degree-granting program that focuses on the study and development of nine key virtues, or character traits—open-mindedness, love of learning, intellectual humility, self-regulation, perseverance, honesty, civility, fairness and compassion.

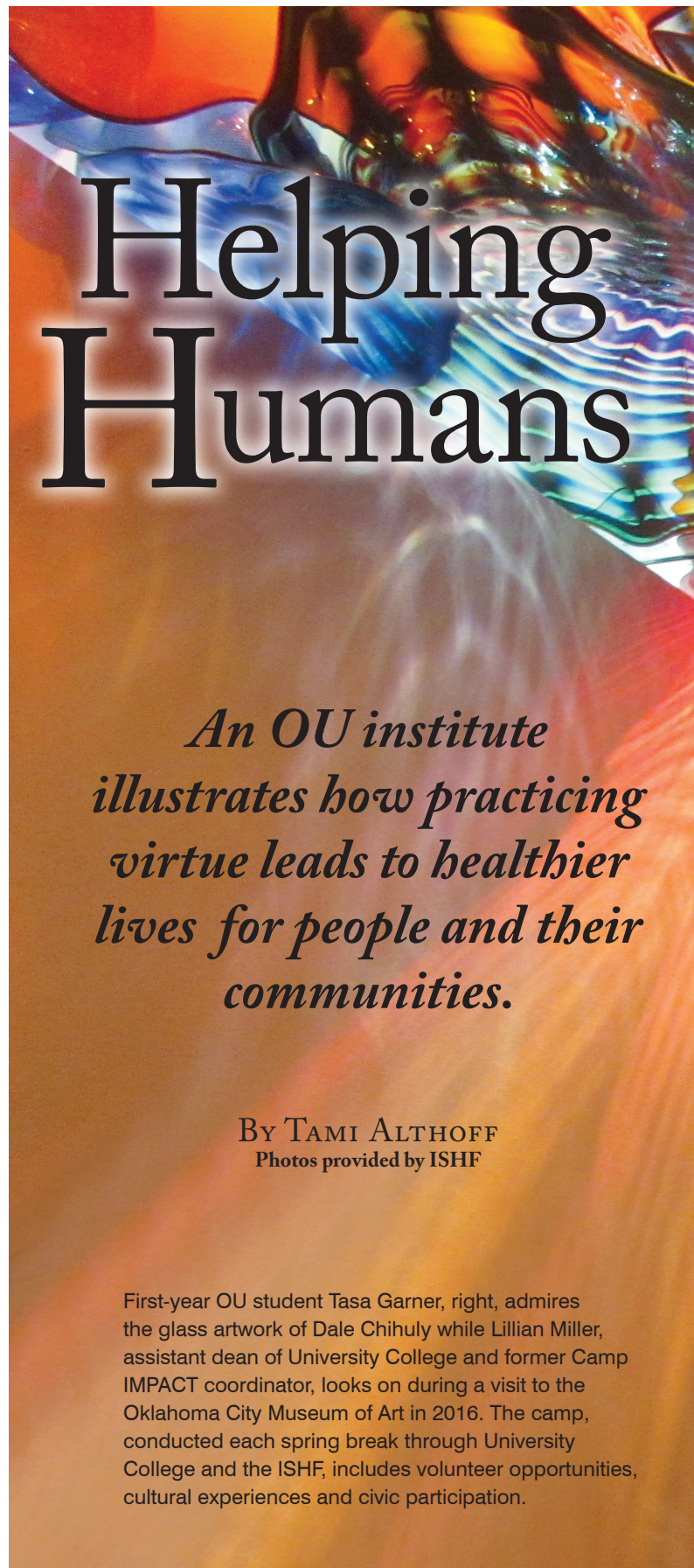
Nancy E. Snow, an OU philosophy professor and the institute's founding director, says cultivating these virtues is necessary for individuals and communities to thrive. Some virtues, like perseverance and self-regulation, are crucial for any worthwhile personal achievement. Others, like honesty and open-mindedness, are especially important for collaborative endeavors, such as friendship or scholarship.

Snow says living ethically helps people live well. When a person's basic needs are met, they survive. When they practice virtues, they flourish.

For the past six years, the institute has been working to help OU students and members of the Norman community flourish through virtue-oriented curriculum development and hands-on, student-led projects and community outreach opportunities held in conjunction with local schools.

"Now, more than ever, in light of the events that have roiled our nation and our world, we need to cultivate virtues such as civic friendship, kindness, generosity and so on. This is not always easy to do and will take concerted effort on our part if we're to restore the civic fabric of our torn nation," Snow says. "We are presently looking to integrate virtues more firmly into the curriculum at OU, and in various area public schools."

One way the institute is achieving this in the OU student population is through the University's "First-Year Foundations" classes, formerly known as "Gateway to College Learning." Freshmen and transfer students coming into OU often take the classes to help them acclimate to campus. In



Helping Humans

An OU institute illustrates how practicing virtue leads to healthier lives for people and their communities.

BY TAMI ALTHOFF
Photos provided by ISHF

First-year OU student Tasa Garner, right, admires the glass artwork of Dale Chihuly while Lillian Miller, assistant dean of University College and former Camp IMPACT coordinator, looks on during a visit to the Oklahoma City Museum of Art in 2016. The camp, conducted each spring break through University College and the ISHF, includes volunteer opportunities, cultural experiences and civic participation.



Flourish



preparation for the course, Foundations instructors and peer teaching assistants receive training in virtue-related concepts and themes. All 95 sections use a textbook that includes practical instruction on virtues.

ReRe Lunsford, an OU Graduate College admissions counselor who served as a Gateway instructor during the fall 2019 and 2020 semesters, says teaching the course and watching her students grow was very fulfilling.

“Every week in my Gateway class we would focus on one of the virtues. I loved doing this because it really allowed students to apply each virtue to not only their personal life, but also their life on campus and really think about how that virtue could play into their collegiate career,” Lunsford says. “One of my favorites to talk about was ‘love of learning,’ because we discussed the importance of chasing the knowledge rather than chasing the grade. Seeing my students grasp this concept never got old for me.”

Nine area schools have long partnered with the institute—six public schools in Norman and three in Oklahoma City.

“Norman North High School, for example, has a waiting list of teachers who want to participate in a project we’ll be hosting during the fall,” Snow says.

Hopkins, who aspires to attend OU and become a journalist, was introduced to “What is Home?” by one of her

teachers at Norman High School. When she realized it would encourage personal growth in addition to helping her hone a few journalism skills, she was all in.

“In the project, there are a set of virtues that we focus on. That drew me in because I’m always wanting to work on my character,” Hopkins says. “I took a deeper look when I knew it would help me flourish. I also wanted an opportunity to find out if journalism was really for me, and this solidified that.” Hopkins says throughout the project, the virtue that has meant the most to her is perseverance.

“Throughout my life, I’ve seen these themes come up over and over again,” she says. “The project is teaching me about perseverance because it’s not easy. I’m expected to produce college-level work, and I’ve never learned skills like videography or production. This is all new to me, and it challenges me at a whole new level, but I’ll do the best I can.”

KaraLee Langford, a recent OU journalism graduate, worked with the institute as a student leader and host of the “Survive and Thrive” podcast, another collaboration between the institute and Gaylord College. The 24-episode podcast series produced by Gaylord students features Oklahomans from a diverse spectrum giving their take on how to “survive and thrive” during the twofold crisis of the pandemic and racial upheaval.

“Oklahoma has already seen its fair share of tragedy with the Oklahoma City bombing, the Tulsa Race Massacre, the Trail of Tears, the Dust Bowl, not to mention all of the devastating tornadoes we see,” Langford says. “The theme of the podcast is resilience; how can Oklahomans take from what we have learned dealing with all these past tragedies and apply that knowledge to move forward through the health and racism pandemics we are in today?”

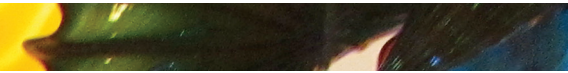
Langford says she’s had the opportunity



From left: Peer facilitator Marla Bailey along with then-first-year OU students and Camp IMPACT participants Jeannie Taylor, NyAisha Davis, Alexis Cantu and Solana Ceville take a photo while volunteering at the Oklahoma City Rescue Mission.



Nancy Snow is a professor of philosophy and founding director of the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing. Her research explores how practicing virtues helps individuals and their communities to blossom.



to hear stories from many notable Oklahomans, learning from each one.

“Everyone we have interviewed has had to overcome their own set of hardships. We have interviewed people from all walks of life and, for the most part, they have all mentioned Oklahomans’ ability to persevere. You know, on this podcast we have talked a lot about the ‘Oklahoma Standard’ and what it means to be ‘Oklahoma strong.’ The one thing our interviewees say is that Oklahomans forget their differences and come together to help each other.

“People experience things differently, and I think when people go through something traumatic it’s not so much how they handled the situation in the moment but how they handle it afterwards,” she added. “Are they making strides to progress despite what they endured?”

Langford says working on the project has given her a passion for podcasting and a desire to continue telling other people’s stories that otherwise might not be told. It also helped her become more mindful of how her actions affect other people.

“The podcast has not only been a great opportunity for growth in my career, but also in personal growth and understanding social situations,” she says. “It’s amazing what people can learn just from sitting down and listening to a person talk and explain their point of view, or from gaining a different perspective on a situation.”

Snow says as word of the institute and its work has spread, so has interest from entities wanting to get involved. The institute will be welcoming a philosophy professor in the fall, enabling it to expand efforts to meet demand for more outreach, including a more extensive virtue integration project at OU.

In addition to its local outreach projects, the institute supports research activities in the United States and 11 other countries with funding from the John Templeton Foundation and the Templeton Religion Trust.

“We have also garnered an international audience for our events via Zoom,” Snow says. “We have always had an international presence, but one of the most exciting things about the future is how that presence will grow. We are a world leader in interdisciplinary research and scholarship on virtue.”

Other projects are also on the horizon, including a Zoom event this fall in collaboration with the Kirkpatrick Foundation, Norman Public Schools and public schools in Noble and Clinton, Okla., that will offer a platform for students to read their poetry. The event was inspired by Amanda Gorman’s

Journalism students Miranda Foster, left, and Brooklyn Wayland get hands-on experience while working on the “Survive and Thrive” podcast, a collaboration between ISHF and Gaylord College. The 24-episode podcast series features notable Oklahomans on the topics of tragedy and resilience.

presidential inauguration poem and will feature the theme, “Our Country, Our Future.”

Another collaboration with the Kirkpatrick Foundation is in the offing for this fall. The foundation will host “The Animal Conference” in Oklahoma City Aug. 27 and 28. Snow will speak on virtue ethical perspectives regarding animals and will co-edit a volume of essays on that topic with Kirkpatrick Foundation Executive Director Louisa McCune. Oxford University Press is interested in the volume. Snow has applied to the Kirkpatrick Foundation for a grant that would fund a series of five presentations on virtue ethics and animals, to be held via Zoom during the 2021-22 academic year.

The institute is also working on a grant request for “The Civic Friendship Project,” which, if funded, will involve five research teams developing the concept of civic friendship and studying how it can be applied to communities in practice. The teams are based in the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy and Australia.

“We hope to make headway in understanding how the ancient idea of civic friendship—members of a political community united by shared values and bonds—might be used to overcome the rifts and tears we see politics causing in so many parts of the world,” Snow says. “Civility is being much studied, but civic friendship is a richer notion. I’m especially excited about this project.”

Back in Norman, Hopkins says she’s wrapped up her “What is Home?” project and will be focusing on community, because it’s the people around her who’ve come to mean home.

“I’ve been in Norman for a while and I can call it my home, for now, because of the people,” she says. “I have my mom and my siblings with me now, and that’s home to me.”



Tami Althoff works for the OU College of Professional and Continuing Studies and OU Outreach.