

By Kristi Evans

Giving Them the World

A life-changing gift enables U.P. students to expand their horizons

In her youth, Marquette native **Gloria Jackson '68 BS** ventured beyond the Upper Peninsula only once: for a three-week summer stay at her uncle's home in East Lansing. As a successful Arizona-based business owner with her husband, Bill, she has since traveled extensively in the United States and abroad.

Jackson does not take these opportunities for granted. Even while in-flight thousands of feet above sea level, she remains firmly grounded in her U.P. values and upbringing. Her continued loyalty to the region and desire to help U.P. students reap the life-altering benefits of experiences beyond their insulated comfort zone—and farther away than East Lansing—led her and Bill to establish the \$1 million Jackson Scholars Study Abroad Endowment through the NMU Foundation.

The endowment will provide funding for a study abroad experience for one student from each of the 15 U.P. counties each year. According to the NMU Foundation, the ultimate value of this gift cannot be overestimated. More than three quarters of the students at NMU qualify for need-based aid. Many do not have the personal or family resources to shoulder the travel and living costs associated with international academic and service opportunities.

The gift also provides

funding for a campus-wide, annual celebration of international experiences. Its components align directly with the university's "Road Map to 2015" strategic plan.

"I had a discussion with Les [Wong] about his dream of providing an international experience for NMU students and I thought it was great," says Gloria Jackson. "It's exactly the kind of thing we believe in and the endowment seemed like a perfect way to support that. The world is shrinking. It is critical to have some exposure to other cultures, whether you work for a company with a presence overseas or you work and live in the United States alongside people from other countries."

Martha Haynes, NMU Foundation executive director, says the Jacksons have been tireless advocates for the vital role that international experiences play in preparing students to compete in the global marketplace. They also comprehend that, on all levels, the fates of individuals, communities, nations and the planet are tightly interwoven.

"The Jacksons are dedicated to the belief that international experiences will help students acquire the adaptability, self-confidence, global context and intellectual, personal and social growth necessary to succeed and to open new paths to a better future at home and abroad," Haynes adds. "This endowment is



an incredibly generous gift that will provide a solid financial underpinning for internationalization at NMU and life-transforming opportunities for our students.

Jackson has a unique understanding of the importance of global awareness and international education. She has parlayed her

Finnish heritage (her maiden name is Jussila) into an appointment as the honorary consul of Finland to the state of Arizona. As a member of the Arizona Consular Corps, she has contact with fellow consuls from about 30 countries. Her primary responsibilities include promoting Finland and helping to facilitate collaborative relationships between the country's business and education leaders and their counterparts in Arizona. She has processed declarations for people who lost and are reclaiming their Finnish citizenship and, prior to changes in U. S. immigration law, handled passport applications for Finnish citizens.

Because the Arizona Consular Corps has an endowed scholarship at Thunderbird School of Global Management, Jackson became involved with Thunderbird's Global Council. The private, graduate-level business school based in Glendale, Ariz., has affiliations in Mexico, China, Switzerland, France and soon Russia and Saudi Arabia.

One of Thunderbird's programs, Project Artemis, offers an intensive two-week business training program for women from Afghanistan. Jackson sponsored one of the participants last fall.

"It's amazing to hear the Afghan women talk about the conditions they live under, even after Taliban rule ended. Several in the program spoke fluent English



Bill and Gloria Jackson with NMU President Les Wong.

The \$1 million Jackson Scholars Study Abroad Endowment will provide funding for a study abroad experience for one student from each of the 15 U.P. counties.

scenery was out of this world and the people were friendly. In that sense, it reminded me of the U.P."

Gloria and Bill are in what she describes as an "equal-opportunity marriage involving a Northern accountant and a Michigan Tech engineer." They willingly embrace and support each other's institutions, except when it comes to athletic events.

The couple met shortly after Gloria finished high school. Introduced by mutual acquaintances at the Tip Top—once a popular hangout on Third Street—they did not establish a connection until months later, when the same acquaintances invited them on a not-so-blind date.

because they were from upper-class families and went to private schools to learn English. A previous graduate who runs an embroidery business called Kandahar Treasures hired 500 women to do handwork in their homes and sells the items worldwide. She told me that 99 percent of her employees are illiterate.

"The intricate work takes their minds off the situation. They earn about 20 U.S. dollars per month, which goes a long way toward improving their living conditions. Their courage is inspiring and they are helping to rebuild Afghanistan one woman-owned business at a time."

Whether traveling in her consular capacity or for pleasure, Jackson says Finland tops her list of favorite destinations.

"If I had to live anywhere else, it would be there. New Zealand is also wonderful. A friend and I spent two weeks hiking there about 10 years ago. It was more laid back than the U.S. There were no freeways—only two-lane roads—and hardly any traffic lights. The



They will close out 2009 by celebrating their 50th anniversary on New Year's Eve.

The Jacksons' journey has included several business enterprises: electronic parts distributor,

industrial equipment sales, antenna installation, a local origination TV station and a gourmet cookware store.

Wanting to contribute to the initial family business, Gloria enrolled in the accounting program at Northern after their wedding. She says her professors were highly accommodating as she juggled her education with an expanding family. She even recalls going into labor during an economics exam, but still managed to perform well on the test. It was a perfect display of *sisu*, that Finnish expression for determination, perseverance and acting rationally in the face of adversity.

"The Jacksons are dedicated to the belief that international experiences will help students acquire the adaptability, self-confidence, global context and intellectual, personal and social growth necessary to succeed."



Gloria serves on the NMU Foundation

Board of Trustees. She was the keynote speaker and honorary degree recipient at December commencement. Her address included references to Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," and Dr. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*, to illustrate both life's journey and Northern's strategic direction. It was an appropriate preview of the Jackson's generous gift to support study abroad opportunities for U.P. students and the latest example of their lingering devotion to the region.

"I always say you can take the girl out of the U.P., but you can't take the U.P. out of the girl," Gloria says. "We own a home in Eagle Harbor and return to the area often to visit friends and relatives. Marquette will always be home."

More students from the Upper Peninsula, like these pictured, will have the mind-opening, resume-building experiences of learning in another part of the world, thanks to the Jackson Endowment. Shown clockwise from top are of Amber Larson of Menominee in Spain, Brianne Horton of Marquette in Ghana, Africa, and Alisha Hammill of Kingsford in Stockholm, Sweden.



which later relocated to Arizona.

Some husbands and wives thrive in a shared professional environment; others advise against working

The couple entered the cable TV industry in 1971, when the U.S. Air Force decided that the government-operated cable TV system at K.I. Sawyer should be run by a private contractor. The Jacksons submitted the winning bid. That was the beginning of CableAmerica,

NMU earns Carnegie Classification

Northern Michigan University has been selected for the 2008 Community Engagement Classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. NMU is one of 119 higher education institutions in the nation to earn the distinction. Colleges and universities were invited to apply for the classification by submitting documentation describing the nature and extent of their engagement with the community, be it local or beyond. Business professor Sandra Poindexter played a pivotal role in compiling NMU's material.

"There is not an area on campus that does not have a community tie," she says. "Youth and sports outreach, academic service learning and student volunteer efforts are only the tip of the iceberg. Community-based research and consulting by faculty and students, facilities and partnership planning and continued training for U.P. educators and other workforces is very strong.

"Community involvement is also impressive. Between the Volunteer Center, Superior Edge, and Student Leader Fellowship Program, students volunteer more than 100,000 hours per year. And over the past three years, 49 administrators held 58 leadership positions in

76 local or regional organizations."

Institutions were classified in one of three categories: curricular engagement, outreach and partnerships or a combination of both areas. NMU received the maximum recognition.

"Community engagement is a goal central to NMU's strategic plan, the Road Map to 2015, and achieving the Carnegie classification reinforces our commitment to that goal," says Susan Koch, NMU provost and vice president for academic affairs. "Students who attend a community-engaged university learn the broad context in which they live, work and grow, while the community benefits greatly from the many contributions of those students."

The application highlighted NMU partnerships with several local and regional entities. These include Marquette General Health System in the areas of brain tumor research and surgical technology, cytogenetic and molecular pathology education; Lake Superior Community Partnership and the U.P. power industry for an electrical line technician program; various law enforcement agencies through the NMU Public Safety Institute; Michigan Board of Light and Power on a proposed biomass-fueled heat and power cogeneration plant.



Students Jessica Jannette and Bob Towers volunteering at an area nursing home.

Examples of community outreach included educational and professional development programs offered by the Seaborg Center, educator and administrator support through the U.P. Center for Educational Development, the "One Book, One Community" initiative, the annual "Learning to Walk Together" pow wow sponsored by the Center for Native American Studies, an instructional Web site maintained by the NMU and Central U.P. Archives on the history of immigration on the Marquette Iron Range, and activities involving the U.S. Olympic Education Center and the Center for Economic Education and Entrepreneurship.

The Carnegie Foundation in Stanford, Calif., is an independent policy and research center dedicated to the improvement of teaching and learning.

The full NMU report is available at www.nmu.edu/comengage.

On campus today

The nature of technology

Visitors to national parks have many new resources for enhancing their experience through the use of technology, such as podcasts, cellphone-based programs and GPS guiding devices. Professor Craig Rademacher of Northern's Health, Physical Education and Recreation Department has launched a project and new Web site to research and understand the use of new media in America's national parks, forests and wildlife refuges.

According to Rademacher, "Through the New Media in National Parks Project we hope to better understand how and why this new technology-mediated connection between agency and public occurs. Hopefully this work will lead to better communication experiences for park visitors and public land management agencies, both now



and in the future."

The site includes articles, news, interviews and research about technology use, resources and links to national parks podcasts. See it at <http://newmedia.nmu.edu>.



NMU's initial all-online program has first graduate

To the casual observer, Denci Thomas did nothing to stand out from the nearly 400 graduates donning green caps and gowns at NMU's December commencement. But when she crossed the stage to receive her diploma, the single mother of three achieved something no one else had. She officially became NMU's first recipient of a loss prevention management degree—NMU's first program offered totally online. "It wasn't my plan or intention to be first," Thomas said. "It was all about getting through school and finding a job so that I could be independent and support my kids on my own with or without

support from their father. But I must admit it's pretty cool to be the first-ever graduate."

NMU offers one of the only baccalaureate programs in this field in the country.

"It was perfect for me as a single mom because I had day care issues and couldn't always make it to campus," she said. "To have the freedom to tuck my kids into bed at night and do my homework at my convenience when I could and when I wanted was a godsend.

"I was always interested in criminal justice, but I knew I didn't want to be a cop," Thomas added. "Loss prevention really piqued my interest because it offered good money-making potential and security. I really want to make a difference with a company and this is an exciting way to do that. It's not a boring, 9-to-5, pencil-pushing job; it's different every

day. It's also a growing field."

The field requires the use of sophisticated technology and investigative techniques. Many companies are looking for specialists who are not only technologically savvy and possess solid investigative skills, but who also are world-class learners, problem solvers, adaptable and resilient. Thomas would add the following qualities to her personal description: "strong, confident, sassy, assertive and independent."

Shortly before graduation, Thomas secured a position with the supermarket chain Winn-Dixie in Jacksonville, Fla., and started in early January, eager and excited to begin her new career. She'll also have a fellow alumnus on her side: **Dan Fakkety '79 BS** is vice president of asset protection for Winn-Dixie, and serves on the NMU program's curriculum advisory board.

Digitizing 400-year-old poems

English professor Robert Whalen has been awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for more than \$50,000. The fellowship will allow him to work full time during the 2009-10 academic year on "The Digital Temple," an electronic documentary edition of 17th century devotional poet George Herbert's English verse.



Robert Whalen

Whalen's goal is to transcribe and encode the verse of three essential Herbert artifacts: two manuscripts and a copy of the first edition of "Temple." The new digital tool will allow users to view multiple-source documents simultaneously in high resolution and thoroughly examine the texts with sophisticated analysis software.

"I am delighted to receive this prestigious award," Whalen said. "Having worked on this project for seven years, I was beginning to

wonder whether I would have the support necessary to complete it. I am relieved to know that this is now certain. Most gratifying, however, is the acknowledgment by my scholarly peers that the project is worthwhile. The NEH awards are highly competitive; that 'The Digital Temple' was selected is a tremendous vote of confidence. I am deeply honored."

"The Digital Temple" is under contract with University of Virginia Press. When complete, it will include original-spelling transcriptions; links to high-resolution images of the artifacts, which total about 700 pages; a critical apparatus for annotations, commentary and introductions; and a user interface with which to navigate these materials. Whalen is manually treating the transcriptions with TEI-XML, a robust encoding protocol that, together with customized interface software, will allow users to perform sophisticated data search, retrieval and analysis.

A prototype of the project is available at [http://myweb.nmu.edu/~rwhalen/v-machine\(4.0\)/index\(new\).htm](http://myweb.nmu.edu/~rwhalen/v-machine(4.0)/index(new).htm).

New resumé tool

Northern helped you get a degree (or two), now we can also help you get a job. A new career development tool for alumni and students has been launched through NMU Career Services. The online resume system allows alumni who might be looking to make a career change or soon-to-be graduates who are looking for their first job to post their resume, free of charge, on Career Services' Web site.

Employers will then have the chance to search for potential employees by name, major, geographic location and key words.

To find out more about this resource, contact Career Services at 906-227-2800 or visit www.nmu.edu/resumes.



High on workforce development

Two NMU/Lake Superior Community Partnership programs, the Midwest Skills Development Center and the electrical line technician program, have been selected as first-place winners in workforce development by the Mid-America Economic Development Council.

The award is given for an organization's activities that attract new workforce to an area, strengthen the skills of an existing workforce or encourage retention of youth in an area.

The electrical line tech program was created in response to the needs of regional utility companies who have a vital need for trained technicians. NMU offers the pre-apprenticeship program at the Midwest Skills Development Center at K.I. Sawyer, where other vocational training and technical diploma programs targeted to meet current and future workforce needs are also housed.

The sixth line tech class will be graduating this spring.

Needed: nurses to teach nurses

To address the state's critical shortage of nursing faculty, NMU has begun offering a six-month nurse educator certificate program which includes full tuition and a \$23,000 stipend for qualified students. The program is designed for nurses who hold a master's degree and want to teach in an academic or health-related setting.

Graduates must agree to teach full time in Michigan for at least five years after obtaining their certificates. The program is funded by a State of Michigan Nursing Corps grant.

"Last year, nursing programs in Michigan turned away more than 4,000 applicants because of the severe shortage of qualified faculty," says Julie Higbie, NMU nursing professor and grant director. "This funding will allow us to educate 10 new faculty members for Upper

Peninsula and lower Michigan colleges and universities."

The courses are delivered online except for a three-day simulation workshop on campus. Teaching practicum hours may be completed in the students' community with an approved faculty preceptor. Graduates will receive a post-master's certificate as a nurse educator.

Seven students are currently in the program. Higbie says the scholarship/stipend grant may be renewed if interest is expressed from a significant number of future students. To find out more, call Higbie at 906-227-1850 or visit www.nmu.edu/postmasters.



Collaborating for top teachers

Northern is collaborating with Central Michigan University on a program that will allow students to seamlessly transition from the specialist in education degree to the doctorate in educational leadership.

Thirty-one students enrolled this fall in the first classes for the Ed.S., which NMU is responsible for pro-

gramming and awarding. CMU will deliver the Ed.D. content and confer that degree.

"This is the first such partnership I'm aware of and it will serve as a model for collaboration in the state," says Rodney Clarken, associate dean of the NMU School of Education. "Two universities that

might be considered competitors are instead working together on being good stewards of state, university and student resources while developing quality school leaders."

To learn more, go to www.nmu.edu/education.

Crossing the borders of technology

The fourth annual International Information Technology Student Seminar will be hosted on Northern's campus Feb. 23-27. The seminar will bring together about 30 computer science and computer information systems students from six European institutions and from NMU for learning, sharing, international team-building and socializing.

Along with learning about technology in each other's countries, students work in multinational teams on exercises, problems or projects and present their results at

the end of each day. It's all done to encourage learning about similarities and differences—between computing programs, careers and student life in other countries.

Previous seminars were held in Madrid, Copenhagen and Helsinki.

Students from different countries working together at the 2006 International IT Student Seminar held in Copenhagen.



Students snag competitive study abroad scholarships

Students Jessica Cross of Oxford, Mich., and Nancy Kenok of Homewood, Ill., received Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarships for study-abroad programs, ranging from \$4,500 to \$5,000.

Cross will study in Ankara, Turkey, from early February to mid-June. Her program will include a course load similar to what she would have taken on the NMU campus, with the addition of Turkish language courses. Her group will also make excursions to multiple locations in the country and participate in cultural activities. Volunteer opportunities are also likely.

The sophomore electronic imaging major says she became interested in Turkey last summer when she met peers from there while working at Cedar Point Amusement Park in Ohio.

“Our friendships led me into a slight infatuation with the country,” explains Cross. “I figured if Turkey was home to those absolutely wonderful people, then it had to be a relatively awesome place. I’m going to have the chance to learn about and understand a whole new lifestyle, which will help me better understand our culture as well. I know this trip is going to help me with my future in more ways than I can imagine. Hopefully it will open up career opportunities and provide me the inspiration and perspective I need to make my work really stand out.”

Kenok left Jan. 17 for a Spanish language and cultural immersion program at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico. She will return in early June. The junior says the program aligns well with her academic major in international studies and minor in Latin American studies.

“I’m confident this program will help me achieve my career goal of working in an international field that benefits people,” Kenok says. “Because of my minor, I wanted to study in a Latin American country and Guanajuato is a colonial city that looks absolutely beautiful. It’s also a United Nations heritage site. I’m obsessed with the United Nations and I’m vice president of the Model UN Club at Northern.”

Kenok, who has had eight years of Spanish, is taking advanced language courses and studying the country’s history, literature and relations with the U.S.

Cross and Kenok were among 600 students nationwide who received a Gilman Scholarship for the spring 2009 semester.

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Volleyball gets back to national tourney

The NMU volleyball team made its first national tournament appearance since 2004, bowing to the University of Indianapolis in a five-set match at the NCAA II Midwest Regional Tournament on Nov. 21. NMU was the fifth seed and Indy the fourth seed in the regional.

NMU and Indianapolis had met twice before during the season with Indy taking the first contest in five sets and Northern taking the second meeting in three.

In the NCAA match, the Wildcats did not leave the regional tournament quietly, dropping the first two sets (15-25, 21-25) before storming back to take the next two and tie the match (25-15, 25-20). NMU had a brief lead early in the third set at 5-3 before the Greyhounds ran off five straight points to take the 8-5 lead. NMU tied the set at 10-all before Indy ended the match with a 5-2 run for the final score of 15-12.

The Wildcats closed the year at 20-12 and were 11-5 in Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference play to tie for third place in the North Division.

Third-year coach Dominic Yoder says the NMU program has been taking “baby steps back in the right direction.” He adds that he hopes to see “leaps forward” in 2009.

Since beginning the varsity program in 1974, Northern has made 14



NCAA tournament appearances, advancing to the Elite Eight round eight times. NMU finished fourth (1997) and third (1996) at the national tournament and won the NCAA title in 1993 and 1994.

New turf for Dome

Opening his presentation by saying “the timing couldn’t be worse,” Gavin Leach, vice president of finance and administration, informed the NMU Board of Trustees at its December meeting that the Superior Dome turf and mechanism to roll out the turf must be replaced. The project is estimated to cost about \$1.8 million and will be charged to the university’s deferred maintenance fund.

The turf, which was installed 18 years ago, has well surpassed its life expectancy of 10-12 years.

“Obviously in this economic climate this is not the year we were looking to make this update. However, we’ve made the turf last as long as we could, but it’s splitting and tearing now beyond what we can repair with green duct tape,” he says. “Every time we pull it out, there are more tears. It’s becoming very difficult to even roll it out. Not replacing it would be a big liability to the university.”

Additionally, the bar mechanism that rolls the turf in and out across the floor has bent over time and, Leach says, there is concern that one day it simply will not work.

“That could be on a day when the Dome is scheduled to hold an auto or boat show, and then we’d have a logistical and contractual crisis situation. A lot of the revenue to support the Dome’s operations comes from renting the facility out for community events.”

The current surface was installed by AstroTurf at a cost of \$1.3 million in 1991. AstroTurf will begin fabrication of the Dome’s new turf, which more closely resembles natural grass, in January, a process that will take about six months. The on-site installation phase will begin in late June or early July.

“It should be in and ready to accommodate classes we hold in the Dome by the start of the fall semester, and well in advance of the first Wildcat and area high school football games to be held there,” Leach says.

Weightlifting event moved; program gets reprieve



The current weightlifting program athletes at the United States Olympic Education Center, with coach Andy Tysz.

The 2009 USA Weightlifting National Collegiate Championships that were scheduled to be held at the Berry Events Center on April 17-19 have been moved by USA Weightlifting to Shreveport, La. The national governing body says that the United States Olympic Education Center will have the first right of opportunity to host the event in a future year.

USA Weightlifting announced it was closing the USOEC residential weightlifting program at the end of the fall semester due to the national governing body's financial restructuring. However, short-term financing to keep the program going through the 2008-09 school year was provided to USA Weightlifting by Wek San Barbells and a number of other donors.

Jeff Kleinschmidt, director of the USOEC, says a decision about the long-term plans for the resident program will be made this spring or summer. "This was strictly a financial decision based on the budgetary challenges of USA Weightlifting," said Kleinschmidt. "It does not reflect on or impact the other programs at the USOEC."

Because of the uncertainty of the USOEC program at the time when a final decision about the location of the weightlifting championships was needed, it was decided that the event would be moved for this year.

To get to Vancouver



the world's best have to skate through Marquette

This fall, the Berry Events Center on the campus of Northern Michigan University will be the site of two major short-track speedskating competitions leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver next February. If you can't make it to Vancouver for the Games, the United States Olympic Education Center invites you to plan a trip back to your alma mater to watch the world's best skaters when they take to the ice in Marquette.

U.S. Short Track Olympic Trials September 8-12



America's best vying for the chance to represent the USA. Come support the USOEC skaters who will be competing.

Samsung ISU World Cup November 13-15

Final qualifying competition prior to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. More than 25 countries are expected to send skaters.



Event information: www.nmu.edu/usoc
Latest U.S. Olympic program news: www.usoc.org
2010 Winter Olympics: www.vancouver2010.com

On campus today



Designing a better world

Four NMU art and design students received awards from the Web-based magazine, *Yanko Design, Form Beyond Function*. The competition, open to designers from around the world, emphasized solutions to different aspects of poverty that were judged based on concept, cost to implement and deployment.

Receiving the silver award was Sara Melvinson of Vaxjo, Sweden, for her project, "Hidden City." The special recognition award was presented to Adam Trebel of Laurium for his project, "Red Cross." Marquette senior Ethan Przekaza received an honorable mention award for his "H2OME." And Jessica Rick of Kaleva was also a finalist in the competition with her "Table Tent" concept.



"H2OME provides the user with shelter from the elements and cold and at the same time it acts as a water collection/filtration system so clean, safe drinking water is available at all times," explains Ethan Przekaza of his design. "When H2OME needs to be transported it easily collapses to a compact cylindrical shape that will hold and protect the collected water and provide insulation to it as well. The compact shape allows for H2OME to be strapped directly to the back, attached to a backpack, or stored in almost any cart."

The students developed the projects in professor Peter Pless's Human-Centered Design: Concept and Technology class. He notes, "We are raised as designers with a notion that design needs to have an elitist component embedded into the artifact that we create. However, this four-week concept exploration forced us to examine the real issue of need versus want from a very unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable perspective. I saw a profound change in attitudes and awareness develop within the class."



"I created a system that would provide work for the homeless that they could handle with their lack of transportation and unappealing textile appearance," says Adam Trebel about his Red Cross project, which features this vending machine from which basic health and medical supplies can be purchased. "I accomplished this by laying out simple jobs like collecting garbage, collecting cans, working at homeless shelters, or general city clean up. In turn, an organization reimburses their work with Red Cross Credit. This puts credit on their homeless ID cards and allows them access to Red Cross vending machines. They continue this process to access other things."

Another art and design student, Mia Cinelli of Marquette (pictured top), received one of five honorable mention awards in the 2008 Calm-a-sutra of Tea National Scholarship competition, for her video entitled "Tea is for Me!" featuring her original music, lyrics, performance and animation. Nearly 700 students entered.



"I wanted to change the image of the homeless by letting them tell their stories in a personal letter; to place a face on a population we often try our hardest to ignore," says Sara Melvinson of her Hidden City. "A homeless person would be given a small cardboard replica of a house that folds together. Postage is prepaid and can be dropped in the mailbox to whomever they wish to send it. The receiver assembles the house and can go to the official Website to reply to the letter... and read other stories."