1. What individual, community and or societal problem does your action plan address?

My action plan addresses the chronic need of young homeless women for assistance in completing their education. Homeless young women have lower chances of acquiring a quality education because of the lack of resources and educational experiences available to them. Many of these women are cast out by their families when they are young, and many have children from a very early age. By helping homeless women complete their education, the program will empower them to become self-sufficient.

2. What Key strategy are you using to address this problem? (ie education, direct action, political action, etc.)

My key strategy is education. This project will establish a learning resource center at a homeless shelter for unwed mothers that will provide one-on-one tutoring to help them with their education. For most, this resource center will be geared towards helping them receive their high school equivalency diplomas.

3. What steps have you taken so far?

In order to achieve this objective, I created a plan that I originally called the “Homeless Literacy Project”. Today, it has been renamed the “Learning Resource Center”. Under the plan, I would establish a program under which volunteers would serve as tutors at a shelter for homeless women. In order to provide this service where it was most needed, I approached the director of the Homeless Ministry in my Parish who referred me to a representative of Good Counsel Homes. Good Counsel Homes is a charitable organization that operates thirteen shelters for young unwed mothers throughout the greater New York and New Jersey area. It provides its residents with housing, childcare, counseling and other resources they need to help them become self-sufficient. Good Counsel agreed to support a tutoring project at one of its homes in Nyack, New York.

From the beginning, the project faced a significant challenge. The only available space for a work area was located in the basement of the home. The basement had many logistical problems that inhibited the start of the program as I had intended. First, it was poorly lit. It also had exposed pipes, wiring and other plumbing and heating fixtures. In addition, part of the space was used for washing and drying clothes. In order for the project to become a reality, the basement needed to be
renovated. Over the course of several independent visits to the house, I spent time mapping out the space. I developed schematics displaying the fixtures I wanted constructed and a list of furniture necessary to make the space compatible with the plans I had.

I knew that I would need help in funding, constructing and furnishing the facility. I approached the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men’s organization in my Parish. Together with a representative from Good Counsel Homes, I made a formal presentation to the Knights. I described the mission of Good Counsel Homes, the objective of the Learning Resource Center and the need for funding to construct and furnish the Center. The Knights enthusiastically endorsed the plan and helped raise $1,000 for construction materials. On a recent Saturday morning, led by a contractor who volunteered his time, a team of Knights constructed partitions, laid vinyl flooring and arranged for an electrician to install fluorescent lighting in the basement work area. From another charitable donation, tables, book cases, chairs and table lights will be delivered to the Center shortly. Once the center is furnished, a roster of individuals who have volunteered to serve as tutors will be prepared. These adult tutors were recruited separately as word of the project spread to other ministries in my parish. Over the next months, tutoring schedules will be established using an area of the Good Counsel website that has been specifically designated for this purpose. Good Counsel is now considering similar projects at its other shelters.

4. How many people are working with you on your project? Who are they and what are their roles?

I worked with a core group of five people, which consisted of a representative from Good Counsel, a representative from the Knights of Columbus, a contractor, a furniture vendor, and my dad, who became my personal assistant.

5. What effect has your project had on you personally? What have you learned about yourself?

Working on this project, I learned that I could not accomplish the objectives of the project alone. I learned that asking for others’ help and donations can be worth it in the long run. By making a direct appeal to the Knights of Columbus, I knew I would have a significant group to support the project. Working on a project of this kind also helped me to appreciate all the benefits I have been given. I spent time speaking with the residents of the shelter about their life’s experiences and about how they hoped to utilize this project to improve their own lives. Although the residents I met all came from unfortunate circumstances, I was struck by their determination to obtain their high school equivalency diplomas and to improve their lives. This gave me a clearer understanding of the focus that this tutoring project needed to take. Finally, I learned that I must have patience and perseverance to make a project like this work. This project required the help of many people working together during their spare time. I myself had to balance between my school work, family obligations and the project. It took a great deal of time to make multiple visits to the shelter, plan the space, prepare conceptual drawings, meet with key individuals including the students themselves, prepare presentations and organize planning and work sessions at the shelter. I am very grateful for the support I have been given by the core group and the by their organizations. I am now looking forward to seeing the tutoring sessions begin.
6. What effect has your project had on others? Think logically – how has your project impacted the people you work with, your school or your family?

I originally intended to help improve the lives of homeless women by helping them to educate themselves. This project has already had a positive impact on the residents of the shelter, in that they realize that others care enough to make their living space better. But the enthusiasm for the project also had some unexpected effects. When I presented my plan to the Knights of Columbus, a few Knights were struck by the difficulties that these homeless women face. These Knights were determined to make the project a reality. They have all expressed their satisfaction with the results of the construction. One Knight, a furniture retailer, felt enormous satisfaction in donating the furniture and fixtures for the work space. My “ah-ha” moment, though, came when the contractor insisted that he not be given public recognition for his efforts, stating that the satisfaction of a job well done was sufficient for him. I was suddenly aware of how contagious the satisfaction of doing for others can be.

7. What motivated you to work on your action plan?

The enthusiastic support I received from Good Counsel, the Knights of Columbus, my family, my parish and my peers at Brown all gave me enormous motivation to make my plan a reality.

8. If you attended the Leadership Institute Symposium on Social Action, has the Symposium affected your work? How so?

Without a doubt, my attendance at the Brown Symposium helped me to view my project from a different perspective. By participating in small discussion groups, I was able to listen to the progress that other students were making with their projects. The accounts served as an inspiration to me. I heard about how other students faced their own challenges, and I received good positive feedback from them on how I addressed my own challenges. As we all discussed our projects, were able to feed off of each other's energy. This gave us all inspiration to continue our work. It also helped give me the determination that I needed to bring my project to fruition.