

## **Emily Padgett**

### *My Emerging Leader Institute Experience*

In a word, my ELI experience was AWESOME!!! Just imagine all of those classes you dread most--and when you think of ELI, think the exact opposite! When I applied for ELI, like you I had no idea what to expect. Being the shy person that I am, I tend to like either really big classes where I can become invisible, or really small classes where I can get to know everyone's name. Through the course of the semester, I got to know my classmates on an individual level. We had fun together and we trusted one another--both of which helped foster my creativity and drive to succeed. But, what I wanted more than anything from this class was to become the leader that I know lives inside of me. Now, as the semester comes to a close, that inner drive is urging me on. I feel empowered to change the things around me that I don't like, and I truly believe that my efforts--great or small--make a difference. Consequently, ELI has helped me recognize my own potential as a student at this University, and in the community, and my hope is that it will do the same for you.

Picture for a moment the great leaders of our time--John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King--Princess Diana. While those are all fine examples of leadership, do you really have to be famous to be a leader? Throughout the course of the semester, I have realized that the answer to that question is definitely no. Within each of us lies the potential for something great, the ability to empower someone else to excellence. You may be second-guessing your inner capabilities for leadership right now, and that's perfectly understandable. See, when I signed up for ELI, I knew that there was something in me that wanted to come out, I just wondered if it ever would. In high school, I learned

to bottle myself up and put on a face that everyone else would like--that everyone would accept--and I did such a good job of it that I almost forgot what I was truly like. This semester, though, I have come to know myself again, and I can now appreciate my leadership qualities. For instance, leadership is not always boisterous. You don't have to hold a rally in front of huge crowds and urge them to take a stance to be a leader. Leadership is also in the small things--the kind words that we offer to strangers and our attempts to welcome newcomers to our class or group. In ELI, I learned to appreciate both types of leadership because, let's face it, there were 25 other completely different personalities in this class with me and we each learned to appreciate one another's gifts. Through learning to respect various viewpoints, my classmates and I also realized our common bond--our desire to actualize our leadership potential.

The culminating point of my experience in ELI, though, came about through my individual leadership project, an issue that will always remain very close to my heart. From early childhood, I witnessed first-hand the ridicule, the heartaches, and the let-downs that my mentally retarded brother has had to bear. And, although I still don't fully understand what makes him tick, what I do know is that I never again want to see him hurt like he has been in the past few years. Jeremy has repeatedly been promised a spot in various living facilities for people with mental handicaps throughout the state, but all have fallen through and likewise shattered what little hope for a "normal" life that Jeremy ever had. For that reason, I chose to bring the issue of Kentucky's lack of housing for the mentally handicapped to our legislators' attention through my individual leadership project. Before I fill you in on my efforts, though, I would like to give you a few statistics to ponder. First, in Kentucky alone, there are an estimated 16,750 people with mental

handicaps searching for some sort of assisted-living facility (Sullivan Interview). The bad news is that the turnover rate for most housing facilities is low because most residents--upon entering such a facility--remain there until death. The most obvious solution to the lack of housing is to build more housing, but that does not appear to be an option right now in Kentucky because of a lack of funding. Fortunately, though, a new bill (House Bill 144) has passed through the House guaranteeing \$40 million of funding for work with the mentally handicapped if Governor Patton approves it. I plan to speak with State Representatives Jimmie Lee about the allocation of funding for the state, as well as write to Governor Patton and express my concern regarding the lack of housing issue because as I understand it, the above-mentioned funds will be used to increase pay for caretakers, instead of to build more live-in facilities for the handicapped.

My battle with the state lawmakers has only begun. Through my experience with ELI, I feel knowledgeable about the issue, confident in my abilities, and I plan to make noise about the problem until someone listens. I've come a long way this semester, and I now have a passion to accomplish my goal--to somehow better the lives of Kentucky's mentally handicapped. ELI has taught me to believe in myself, to trust and depend on those around me, and to fight for what I believe is important. I urge each of you to apply to the Institute, because believe me, it will truly make the difference in your college experience. You don't want to miss out on the opportunity to actualize your true potential.