

Faculty Spotlight

Renu Pariyadath, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies

Communication as Education and Advocacy for Our Shared Environment

Dr. Renu Pariyadath, assistant professor of communication studies at USC Upstate, has been connecting her classes and her research with both local and global communities since she joined the university in Fall 2016. Dr. Pariyadath studies the way communities and non-profit organizations communicate about issues of development and environmental justice in order to bring about social change. For her, it just made sense to bring her students into partnership with community organizations in order to apply course concepts and see the effects of environmental communication right where they live.



From the start, Dr. Pariyadath knew she wanted to incorporate service learning into her classes. Through service learning, students apply knowledge, skills, and original research they are learning in their courses to address a community need. Dr. Pariyadath works with an international community partner, the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (<https://www.bhopal.net/>). This is the 35th year of struggle for survivors of the Bhopal gas disaster, and her students created campus action to highlight this issue last year.

“But,” she said, “I really felt like students could use a local connection so that it became really personal for them as well. This is why I got in touch with local groups, hoping to make some kind of local connection.”

Dr. Pariyadath notes that her course goals were a perfect fit in the Spartanburg area, and she quickly established a service learning relationship with the Spartanburg Earth Day Festival organization.

“Our community here is quite focused on environmental issues,” Dr. Pariyadath adds. “It just made it very easy for me to connect with them and devise something together, design something together where their needs fit very well with the course objectives.”

Dr. Pariyadath’s students first worked on an anti-plastic straw campaign, which they presented at USC Upstate and brought about changes in straw use throughout campus. In the second semester she offered the course, students expanded their project to include a survey of green practices in Spartanburg restaurants. Most recently, students worked with Spartanburg Earth Day Festival as well as the Chapman Cultural Center to conduct a formal research survey of restaurants in Spartanburg’s Cultural District.

The students learned that their work was not just gauging the ecological footprint of the Spartanburg Cultural District, but also educating the community about a movement going on and prompting them to think about where they are in the process of using green processes.

“The class loved that positive aspect of working with the restaurants that way,” Dr. Pariyadath says. The next step is turning that research into a community publication to share throughout Spartanburg and beyond—one of the first research projects produced through an Earth Day Festival organization in the US.

As a result of her service learning work, Dr. Pariyadath was invited to become a member of the Spartanburg Earth Day Festival Committee, and she is working on a scholarly article about implementing service learning in her courses. The community-university partnership is also expanding, with plans to host the Fifth Spartanburg Earth Day Festival and 50th anniversary of Earth Day on the USC Upstate campus.

Thinking about the impact of service learning on her students, Dr. Pariyadath notes that “adding the service component really became important for them. When you tell them that they will be surveying people in Spartanburg, working with a group who has needs, and you will be able to help meet their needs, it gives them extra enthusiasm that I haven’t really seen in my other courses. And it makes me more excited as well to observe the students be of so much service to the community.”

