

# Watching the Olympics

vancouver 2010



The 2008 Summer Olympics ended just months ago. But planners have already been looking ahead to the 2010 Winter Olympics, which will be hosted by Vancouver, British Columbia. And so has Wheaton's Assistant Professor of Anthropology Gabriela Torres.

But she's not thinking about which countries might win gold medals or whether the opening ceremonies will top the grand spectacle presented in Beijing. Instead, she's concerned about the impact the event will have on the vulnerable populations in Vancouver and the rights of its citizens as the city prepares to showcase itself for a worldwide audience.

To call attention to the potential harm, Torres has begun research that looks at the changes in municipal and social policy that are under way as Vancouver seeks to put forward its best image.

"I'm looking at what the social costs are to a city preparing for an Olympic event," said Torres, who lived in Vancouver from 1982 to 1997. "Vancouver

is a port city so there are a lot of drugs that go through the city. And it's a city where the climate is fairly good all year-round so it has much higher homeless rates than the rest of Canada. There is a particular area of downtown Vancouver close to the central business district that has become an oasis for drug deals and where homeless people reside as well.

"This space is a real problem for the kind of image that wants to be projected by the organizing committee for the Olympics, as well as for the city of Vancouver. So what do you do with people who are drug addicts, prostitutes and homeless when you don't want tourists and athletes to see them? They live there. This is their home. This is where people have lived

for decades. Is it right to remove them, even if just temporarily?"

On the flip side, when the Olympics come to a city, major needed improvements are made, which benefits the city long after the games are over. For example, Barcelona spent \$8 billion in infrastructure improvements for the 1992 Olympics, and the city's raised profile increased tourism so much that several travel guides now describe Barcelona as the most visited city in Spain.

At a press conference held last August, British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell addressed criticism regarding the displacement of the homeless, saying: "I think you will see a city and a community that has invested significantly in housing those who need support. We

have invested literally hundreds of millions of dollars."

However, there remains strong opposition to the Olympic events, as well as very strong support to holding the games, Torres noted. The dynamic of that polarization presents a rich field for research and feeds the curriculum of her "Introduction to Cultural Anthropology" course, in which she discusses contested spaces.

Last summer, she began the research by spending five weeks in Vancouver. She plans to publish a paper once her work is complete.

John Campopiano '08, Julia Rettig '11 and Evelyn Sanders '08 have assisted Torres on the project as part of the Wheaton Research Partnership program.

"This is a great opportunity for a student who wishes to contribute toward the research and preliminary writing of an academic publication and wants to learn how to construct research queries, use qualitative software, conduct a popular and academic literature review, and perform analysis of qualitative texts and images," she said. 

