Binghamton student Joshua Gonzalez wonders: What will happen to Johnson City residents when the University's pharmacy school building opens next fall?

Gonzalez, 22, is part of a team conducting a novel gentrification study concerning the area surrounding the new pharmacy school.

Gentrification typically comes in the form of businesses buying depreciated properties, resulting in increased property values in the surrounding area. This often leads landlords to hike rents, which causes lower-income residents to move.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18.8 percent of Johnson City residents live in poverty, a figure 25 percent higher than the national average.

“It’s one of the most poverty-stricken areas in the country,” says Gonzalez, an accelerated student who is pursuing a bachelor's in geographic information systems (GIS) and a master's degree in urban planning. “Buildings are made out of sheet rock, plywood staircases, with multiple families living in them. People living in these terrible conditions all because they’re paying $50-200 for rent.”

These conditions make Johnson City a prime gentrification target, and the pharmacy school provides an opportunity to study the area and its residents before gentrification takes place. That’s what makes Gonzalez’s research important: Previous research has typically examined gentrification after it has already occurred, but not before the process starts.

Gonzalez and his colleagues will look at variables such as spatial makeup, rent cost, median age, ethnicity and unemployment during the next several years. They’ll
compare the local data to national figures. The team also conducts interviews and surveys and is establishing relationships with area residents. The researchers say there's a lack of research that documents individual cases of gentrification and tracks where people go when they are displaced.

The research team uses Story Maps, a website that documents statistics on a map over a timeline, to help tie together the different forms of data in a simple display, making it easier to observe the changes that take place over time.

Gonzalez, who grew up in Harlem, is familiar with how an area can change over time from gentrification.

“Watching my own home change and my friends move out of their homes really pushed me toward this research,” Gonzalez says. “Its purpose is to improve the area for the community, but if you're pushing the existing community out as a result, who is the improvement for?”

Gonzalez learned about the project from John Frazier, director of the research team. Kevin Heard, associate director of the GIS core facility at Binghamton and part of the research team, says they’ve been impressed by Gonzalez's positive ideas for the study.

“He takes initiative,” Heard says. “Anytime we bring up a project, he always shows interest.”

Gonzalez plans to apply to Harvard University and MIT for a program in urban design. Eventually, he wants to start an urban development consulting firm that helps with planning and designing new buildings and takes into account the existing demographics of an area.

Gonzalez may even want to go into politics. He's already had a taste of that work while serving as the vice president of multicultural affairs (VPMA) on the Student Association.

“I really care about people who are of marginalized communities,” Gonzalez says. “That's why I'm VPMA. I want to help out everyone who feels like they don't have a voice.”

To learn more about Gonzalez and his team’s research, visit the Story Maps site.

http://discovere.binghamton.edu/student-spotlights/gonzalez-3-7065.html