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Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps comes to L.A.

By **R. W. Dellinger**

Jennifer Mangali had never heard of the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps until she was working on her master's degree in theology earlier this year at Jesuit-run Loyola Marymount University. But since April, the 30-year-old South Bay resident has also been working to kick-start the innovative volunteer program here in Los Angeles.

The Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps (ILVC) is a national organization of semi-retired or retired men and women, age 50 and over, who volunteer in their local community two days a week for at least 10 months. They share their talents and life experiences with nonprofit organizations that directly serve the poor or that address the structural causes of poverty.

Two Baltimore Jesuits founded ILVC in 1995. And after a decade of serving in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York City, Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Long Island and San Diego, there are some 200 volunteers today across the country. Los Angeles is the corps' newest site.

Older adults' skills are matched with partnered agencies. Volunteers tutor, distribute food and clothing, and help find jobs and housing for low-income individuals and families. They also do fund-raising, counseling and all kinds of administrative jobs to help ILVC complete its threefold mission of serving the needs of people who are poor, working for a more just society and helping volunteers grow deeper in their Christian faith.

Volunteers receive no compensation, donating their professional skills to the agencies in which they are placed. Organizations ordinarily pay \$1,000 to help cover recruitment and supervisors costs. The fee is negotiable, however, and ILVC's promotional literature states that a volunteer is "never turned away" from an agency that can't afford it.

Reflecting on serving the poor is the hallmark of the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps, according to Mangali. Volunteers keep a personal journal, meet monthly with a spiritual "reflector" as well as with other local volunteers, have days of pray and go on an overnight retreat. The purpose of all this introspection, which is based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, is to deepen the volunteer's experience of service - to, in short, find God in all things.

"I think the spiritual formation component of the program is very attractive to a lot of people," she pointed out. "They're directly reflecting on their service as part of their own faith journey."

It's been that and more for Kathleen Spreen, a retired registered nurse in San Diego who does double duty as an ILVC volunteer. The 68-year-old woman uses her nursing experience at a medical clinic serving low-income workers who have no health insurance, doing basic health assessments, taking vital signs, scheduling appointments with physicians, and doing follow-ups.

In addition, she applies her organizing skills volunteering on the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, which promotes the dignity and rights of the working poor. This spring, after a lengthy grassroots lobbying effort by the Interfaith Committee, the city council passed a living wage ordinance, mandating that all contractors doing work with San Diego pay a minimum of \$10 an hour and \$2 towards health benefits.

"The reflection is the essential part, because in any of these helping volunteer things you really can get very burnt out and sucked dry," she said. "It's coming together as a group to pray and then to have your one-on-one reflection monthly that keeps you going. We discuss the difficult challenges as well as the joys in finding the presence of Christ in the work we're doing. And the journaling is wonderful. When I go back and look at something, I'll say, 'Gee, this is really an issue for me.'"

Regular reflecting has helped Spreen view her volunteering as a true ministry - a vital part of her life that's opened up areas which probably would have remained closed. Every night when she does her Ignatian exam of the day, she looks at what she's done right plus "where I screwed up again."

The Brooklyn native, who founded San Diego's Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps in 2001 and was its regional director for three years, is optimistic about Jennifer Mangali's pioneering efforts in Los Angeles. "I'm sure she'll be inundated both by agencies who want these older volunteers, and older adults who want to work with the poor and grow deeper in their faith."

Editor's note: To find out more about the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps' new Los Angeles program, contact Jennifer Mangali, regional director, at 310-937-8280, e-mail: LA@ilvc.org or P.O. Box 2187, Manhattan Beach, CA 90267-2187.

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