

Ignatian Volunteers Discover New Horizons

IVC offers opportunity for older adults to serve others as they seek God.

By Mary Geraldine Harrington



Bernie Small and Fr. Si Smith, SJ

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— Bernie Small

When she retired, former elementary principal Bernie Small had every reason to be content. She had been successful. She was passionate about reading and writing and teaching. “There wasn’t a day I didn’t love it,” says the petite 65-year-old.

She felt very blessed in life as well. “I had a very busy job, I worked hard, but when I retired, I knew I had to have a focus and a purpose.” To that end, she attended a symposium on retirement and spirituality at Boston College. After stopping by the New England Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC) information table and talking with the regional director, a vision of what she could do for the rest of her life began to take shape. And it included IVC.

Small became a volunteer for Catholic Charities in Worcester, Massachusetts, teaching English as a second language one morning each week, working in the food pantry, doing case management and administrative work. “They’ve used my skill set beautifully,” she said.

Changing her view of poverty

Fr. Si Smith, SJ, 80, is her spiritual reflector. Among other things, they talked about Small’s perceptions about poverty.

“My conceptual knowledge of the poor was vague and unclear. I would liken this new experience to that of mourning the death of a loved one, including shock, anger, acceptance and a new sense of reality and clarity that blossomed during my reflector sessions with Fr. Si. Paramount to that growth was truthfulness regarding what I was feeling intellectually and emotionally over time,” she said.

“My understanding of the poor and what they face every day has changed profoundly. I no longer judge them. My compassion for them has grown in leaps and bounds.”

Fr. Si, who has worked extensively in Kenya, Iraq and Jordan, said he can understand “almost anyone’s fresh encounter with poor people or those from other cultures.” A reflector’s attentive and astute listening, he added, can show a volunteer how they have grown spiritually and point out their increased awareness of God in their lives and service work.

What does a reflector do?

Fr. James Martin, SJ, has been Barbara Lee's spiritual reflector for the last 11 years. He recalled how he laughed when he was asked to be her reflector. He pictured the little plastic reflecting red devices on the back of a car or bicycle "which reflects light and prevents people from bumping into you."

"These days, though, I wonder if perhaps 'reflector' isn't the perfect word for what we do," he said. "Reflectors



Fr. James Martin, SJ, and Barbara Lee

do 'reflect' back people's experiences of God, to help them see God's presence more clearly. We warn them of possible pitfalls in the spiritual life (something that happens less as the volunteer grows in his or her own understanding of prayer). Most of all, we are happy to reflect their joy in their service to the people of God."

For her part, Lee, 73, a former U.S. magistrate judge, lawyer and law professor who lives in Manhattan, wondered if "someone so young could relate to the spiritual life and the life experience of a person old enough to be his mother.

"God, of course, chooses the instruments of his grace, in ways that have nothing to do with our expectations," she added. Fr. Martin has proven to be a faithful and generous companion, she said.

No time to collect dust

There was "no way I was going to sit around collecting dust," said Ed Sommerfeldt, 73, a retired physics, math and computer science professor.

He has worked for three years at Baltimore's Our Daily Bread Employment Center with formerly homeless men. One of the most interesting parts of his work is motivating the men he meets to help them discard "a prison mentality" of being told what to do.

His spiritual reflector is Sr. Catherine Gugerty, SSND, director of Loyola University Maryland's community service programs for students. She is the one pushing Sommerfeldt to reflect on his recent surgery and radiation treatments for a brain tumor. They have talked through his illness, she said, and she wants him to reflect on how his views on service have evolved as the result of his cancer.

Sommerfeldt, who returned to Our Daily Bread the day after he got the go-ahead from his doctor, has agreed to do this although he says, while it has heightened his understanding of his mortality, "half the time I have to



Ed Sommerfeldt and Sr. Catherine Gugerty, SSND

remind myself I have cancer. I don't brood on it because it doesn't do any good."

Sr. Gugerty is impressed with how important reflection is in the IVC volunteer experience. "There are a lot of volunteer programs out there that ensure their volunteers are equipped to do the work," she said. "But it is so critical to do the reflecting — for everyone."

Mary Geraldine Harrington is a freelance writer and a member of the IVC New England regional council. She is a graduate of the College of the Holy Cross and a former Jesuit Volunteer.



Founded in 1995 by Fr. Jim Conroy, SJ, and the late Fr. Charles Costello, SJ, the Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC) differs from other volunteer organizations in that it combines direct service with a structured reflection process based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. IVC offers mature adult men and women the opportunity to share their skills, professional and life experiences with organizations that assist people who are materially poor or address issues related to poverty. Each volunteer is matched with a spiritual guide with whom they meet monthly to reflect on the deeper meaning of their service.

IVC is headquartered in Baltimore, with 16 regional offices.

 For information on how to become an IVC volunteer or reflector, contact IVC at 410-752-4686 or 888-831-4686 or visit www.ivcusa.org.