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Making a difference: Volunteers offer the gift of service

This is the final article in a four-part series on the life of the diocesan church in summer

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Jamie Chapman grew up volunteering in her hometown of Dacula, Georgia. The Portsmouth Abbey School student had always seen service as something simple, something she did to help people and the community, but a recent 10-day summer service trip to Lourdes, France changed the simplicity of the act.

"Volunteering in Lourdes has been the most humbling experience of my life," the 17 year-old explained. "I volunteered to help the Hospital Pilgrims, but I feel as though they helped me on a much deeper level."

After her conversion to Catholicism in 2009, Chapman found her new faith somewhat overwhelming. She felt called to pursue her faith by volunteering in France this summer for the Ampleforth Lourdes Hospitalite.

"I decided to volunteer in Lourdes to better understand what faith really means," she said. "I needed to understand what these people had found in Lourdes that drove them so close to God, to be so reverent in their own faith."

Chapman shared that volunteering has had a tremendous impact on her faith.

"God determined my path to allow me to come to know myself and him in Lourdes over ten days," she said. "I came to Lourdes to find the faith. To find the people who could survive and persevere. To find the people I want to become."

The Lourdes volunteer experience provided Joe Michaud, a 1990 Portsmouth Abbey alum from Maine, with great perspective and a strong spiritual foundation.

"It changed how I looked at the world," he said. "And I felt that it was important to ensure other students could experience Lourdes firsthand, so I stayed involved."

For more than 20 years, Michaud has continued to help high school students experience Lourdes, a place of prayer, reflection, and service.

"We take high school students and ask them to participate in a working pilgrimage," he said. "I am certain most of the students have no idea what they are getting themselves into. Spiritually and emotionally, the experience is one of the most eye-opening and important of their lives, and they go home renewed."

At the collegiate level, eight Providence College students were recently awarded Father Philip A. Smith, O.P. Fellowships for Study and Service Abroad. Sponsored by the Office of Mission and Ministry, the Father Smith Fellowships encourage students to deepen their understanding of the Catholic and Dominican tradition and the philosophy of Christian service.

Providence College seniors, Kathryn McCann of Stewart Manor, N.Y. and Thomas Cody of Wilton, Conn., lived and worked with the Dominican Friars at St. Martin de Porres Priory in Kisumu, Kenya. They spent time teaching a wide range of ages and subjects at Our Lady of Grace School, helping out wherever and whenever they were needed.

McCann said that during her experience, she was reminded of the purpose of service work: to restore and affirm each person's God-given dignity.

"I think volunteering and bearing witness to poverty and injustice have both challenged my faith and helped strengthen it," she said. "If we have been blessed with material wealth, spiritual wealth and infinite other signs of God's love for us, we must have faith and continue to work for peace and justice."

Cody said that he came to realize the importance of learning from those he traveled so far to serve.

"I learned so much from the students at the school," he said. "They have taught me the importance of hope and perseverance. Volunteering is not supposed to always feel good or be easy. It is a tough deal, but yields fruit if done with love. Often times you do not see the fruits of your labor until the end, if you are lucky. You need to have faith that you did God's work and he was able to work through you to touch someone's heart."

The extraordinary efforts of local Catholics of all ages provide service to improve the lives of others, both in Rhode Island and abroad. This unselfish compassion can not only be found in youth on fire for the faith, but also from older Catholics devoted to service.

Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC) is proof of this devotion. IVC provides men and women over the age of 50 the opportunity to grow deeper in faith as they serve the needs of people who are poor.

IVC New England Regional Director David Hinchey explained that this period of life can become a great opportunity to blend experience and skills, reasonably good health and increased available time, to reach out in service to others.

"It is a chance for many to use their gifts in a different way while simultaneously growing in their own spiritual awareness," he said.

Volunteers commit to two full days per week of service for a 10-month period and take part in a spiritual reflection program based on the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits.

"Direct contact with individuals who have faced more than their share of hardship and challenge has made volunteers more empathetic to the poor and their world and of our common humanity," he said. "Reflection and sharing with a community of other volunteers helps them to continue their effort to build a more just society."

Larry Loh, who turned 67 in June, was placed as an IVC worker at the Genesis Center in Providence in July. Annually, the Genesis Center serves up to 600 individuals in its adult education and workforce development programs and up to 72 children in its childcare program.

After more than 35 years in a career in Information Systems in the semiconductor industry, the Medfield, Mass. resident decided that it was time to retire. He wanted more time to himself and for his family and was ready to do something different.

"I became a volunteer because, at this stage of my life, I feel a need to give back," he said. "I also have a selfish reason for volunteering. I miss work and the social interaction in working with people. I've always enjoyed belonging to an organization, working on a team, focusing on a common mission. My role here at the Genesis Center is one of financial counseling—to individuals or families who are struggling to secure employment and gain some form of financial stability."

For Loh, the greatest challenge is the ability to "start-over" and adapt. He believes that the rewards of volunteering come in small doses, from day-to-day, ordinary situations, in one-on-one personal interactions and when he accomplishes specific goals.

"I believe the work is its reward," he said. "This new role has allowed me to get in touch with a whole segment of the impoverished in our society that I would probably never have gotten to know firsthand. I've learned to refrain from stereo-typing and judgments because, at the end of the day, I find that these are people just like you and I, other than the circumstances they were born into."