



Shared Visions

A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers
presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center ...

...The people who bring you Connections

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Volume Five, Number Four

Overview: Is it that time already? For many volunteers, summer time marks the final weeks of their term of service. Many are thinking about packing up, saying their good-byes, and looking down the road to what comes next. The writers for this issue of *Shared Visions* were in that boat not too long ago. Bill Leheny, a former Holy Cross Associate in Chile, returned to the states just four months ago. Bill shares his struggles to feel "at home" here, and to embrace the future. Ellen

Cumming, a former Chi Rho volunteer, remembers well her experience one year ago as she prepared to say "good-bye" and move on. Ellen offers some advice for those last weeks. Use the reflection questions and group activities inside to work through some issues that may be coming up right about now.

In This Issue:

- The final weeks of a volunteer term.
- Saying "Good-bye," packing up, moving on

A Struggle to Feel At Home Again

Bill Leheny

Former Holy Cross Associate

Exactly four months ago tomorrow, I returned to the United States after more than two and a half years working in Chile as a lay associate with the Congregation of Holy Cross. Our community of five North American volunteers lived in one of Santiago's poorer *poblaciones* or neighborhoods. I worked with a variety of different projects, from youth ministry to ministry of the sick and dying, from sowing seeds in a communal garden to sewing together the torn apart self-esteems of abandoned children now living in an orphanage. Regardless of what my "jobs" were, though, the most amazing "work" occurred inside me almost without my awareness. Through my work with the people, I grew and learned from them. At the same time that I was giving, I was also receiving. I became a part of the culture and the people with whom I worked. Some people call it full enculturation; Maryknoll missionaries refer to it as the National Geographic stage. Regardless of the name, its effects are the same. I felt comfortable with the lifestyle and culture in Chile. Things that originally seemed strange to me, like going to lunch at a neighbor's house without an invitation, now felt commonplace. I grew to love the music and dances of the people, and I could not even speak English without

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A Commitment to the Present

Ellen Cumming

Former Chi Rho Volunteer

My year of service work with the Archdiocesan Office of Urban Affairs in New Haven, CT was a gift. My work focused primarily on an after school tutorial program for low income, at-risk children. Many of the children and families I worked with last year shared a slice of their lives with me and in doing so granted me the chance to hear about their history, hopes and personal battles. My work at the office allowed me to learn a great deal about social justice from my co-workers as they shared the struggles, progress and strategies related to their own work. Indeed, it was a combination of experiences both in and

outside of the office that helped me to learn, to arrive at a truer understanding of social justice and to unveil my own call to work for it. Needless to say, as we prepared to say goodbye I found myself taking certain measures to plan for the future, but also to make the most of my last few months.

It might have been as early as March when some community members began to prepare themselves for July 31st (the concluding date). I remember our prayer time together occasionally took on the "let's prepare for the end" theme. On a daily basis some community members anxiously checked their mailboxes for graduate school acceptance letters. Others began to read the classifieds and to fine tune their resumes. I too thought about what I

wanted to do after *Chi Rho* and began taking steps to prepare for that, but I also made a strong commitment to focus on the present. I still had four months remaining and I wanted to be as open to new experiences and people as I had been in September, so I made every effort to make the most of the end.

Making a commitment to the present was the first step for me. As Jean Vanier states, "Our hearts must be filled with hope and they must be impatient, but our hope and our impatience must be based on the reality of the now. It is in the reality of the moment that Jesus will speak to us, that the Spirit will give himself to us." It wasn't always easy to live in the present when concerned friends, community members, family and co-workers rightfully asked

"A Commitment..." continued page 3

throwing in a little Spanish. (Needless to say, this caused confusion when I called home to Mom!) After looking forward for so long to the day when I would finally get to go home, when the time came, I did not want to leave. I felt more at home in the Chilean culture than I knew I would in the U.S.

But return to the U.S. I did, and thus began the long process of re-enculturation into my own country. Four months have passed, and now is as good a time as any for me to evaluate how I am doing.

At first my goals were simple. I knew that it would be a difficult adjustment, so I told myself to relax and take it easy. I did not have to deal with every pertinent issue regarding my readjustment in the first two weeks home. Additionally, I told myself that I could not as a whole reject everything about the North American culture. I had to approach things that made me uncomfortable with the same open-mindedness as I did when I first arrived in Chile. I could not resort to a sense of "cultural superiority," by responding to everything with: "The way it is done in Chile is like this . . ." I began the process of trying to integrate my experiences and what I learned in Chile into my life here in the U.S.

One way of integrating my experiences was to educate. If I could make people aware of a little of what I knew about Chile, then maybe they would share in my joy. So I began to talk to people about my time in Chile. I told everyone who was willing to listen all they could stand to hear. Knowing that they would listen, I took friends out to dinner, even though I had little or no money. I gave homilies at

Mass. While working as a substitute teacher, I victimized the students by showing them slides and telling my stories. (They had no choice but to sit there and listen). It reached a point, though, where nobody could stand it anymore. As the days and weeks passed, I began to feel my experience in Chile slipping away. Now, nobody seems to care. It feels at times as if my experiences in Chile have absolutely no relevance to what I am now doing with my life. I want so much to be known as "Bill from Chile," but I am just "Bill."

So I have resorted to another tactic. Through many letters and a few phone calls, I am now trying to recapture the sense of what it was like to live in Chile. I am determined to continue some of the friendships that I was blessed to have in Chile. I am attempting to live in Chile vicariously through them. Sometimes I wonder if I were handed a one-way ticket to Chile leaving tomorrow, would I go or not? I know that it is time for me to move on, and that I need to find my identity here in the States before I think about returning to Chile. But the task seems overwhelming, especially since it is not one that I wish to undertake.

I find myself caught between two worlds. Discovering how to integrate these two worlds, instead of choosing one over the other, is a long and difficult process. I know deep down inside, though, that it is one that I must undertake. I hoped four months ago that by now I would be well on my way to feeling comfortable with my life here. I now know that I have only just begun. Do I need to let go of the past to be able to embrace the future? Or does the future include the past? Until I find the answers to these questions for myself personally, I will not begin to feel that I have returned home.

Questions for discussion and personal reflection

1. When it was time to leave Chile, Bill felt more at home there than he knew he would in the U.S. How "at home" do you feel in your volunteer setting? What are your feelings about returning home?

2. What are some ways you can bring your friendships and your work experiences into your future after completing your volunteer term of service?

3. Bill's struggles are not uncommon to former volunteers. What ideas do you have or tactics do you recommend for returning volunteers to embrace the future?

me about my plans for the next year. I remember occasionally feeling somewhat anxious, but I believed that if I did my part in planning and put my faith in God, that He would help me figure out the next step.

Throughout my year of service, I grew increasingly more aware of the educational and transforming effects of service. Getting to know the parents and children began to put a face, a voice, a story on the inner city poverty statistics that we all read about in the papers. I was also blessed with a caring, reflective co-worker who lived in community with me. During our daily commute, we often talked about some of the experiences and people who challenged us to examine closely the root causes of some of the problems plaguing society. These talks made us better able to process some of our experiences and to learn from them.

By working among a team of people who supported and challenged me to think about what I was doing and why, I reflected on my role as a Christian. I knew as I began to prepare for the future that being part of a faith community and working for social justice were the most important criteria for any job. Through evaluations with my work supervisor and informal conversations with my co-worker, I had the opportunity to reflect on my work, my strengths, my weaknesses and my preferences. This was instrumental in helping me to determine other criteria for future jobs.

The months continued to pass by quickly. I was planning for the future, but I did not allow it to consume me. I had formed some close relationships in community, and some of our prayer times together were the most effective in preparing us to say goodbye to each other and to individuals in our ministries. I remember one evening the prayer leader gave each of us a votive candle and asked us to take a few moments to think about the person(s) who had significantly influenced each of us over the course of the year. We then lit the candle and individually shared who that person was and how he/she had touched us. On another occasion each of us chose a community member's name out of a hat and then had to write down

Questions for Discussion and Personal Reflection

1. Ellen was asked to take a few moments and think about the person(s) who significantly influenced her during her term of service. As you think of this question, who comes to your mind?

2. How did the person(s) influence you?

3. What are two important things you've learned about yourself during your term of service?

4. In your past, how have "good-bye's" been for you (with family, friends, classmates and co-workers)?

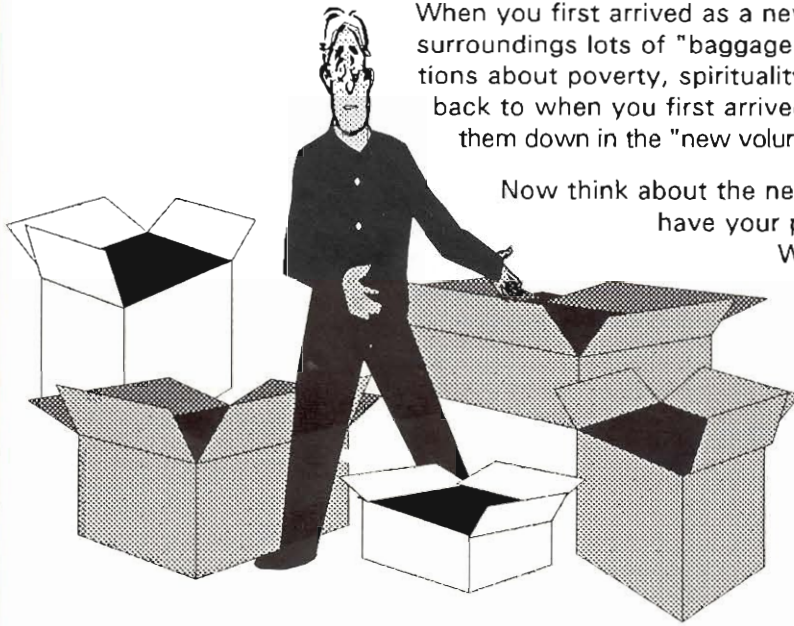
the gift(s) that they brought to the community. This kind of reflection helped us to think about the people and experiences that we would take with us.

The children, adults, families, co-workers and community members with whom you have spent a year have undoubtedly affected you and contributed to the person you are today. Thinking back, I would offer this advice to returning volunteers: Take time to think about your experiences with them and what you have learned. Take the time to say goodbye to them and to let them know how they have touched you. I did this in a variety of ways, including writing notes of thanks and taking time

to encourage the kids to keep up the good work in school. I found it most rewarding to tell people face-to-face how meaningful they were to my year. It is up to you to figure out what you wish to take and what you wish to leave behind, but know that what you take along with you will help keep the fire burning.

The month of July flew by and on our last night the few of us remaining gathered before going to bed to read *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* Yes, we were going to be moving on, but having been present to the richness and diversity of each moment of the year left memories of individuals and experiences that will always be a part of me and my work. †

Packing Up: What to Take? What to Leave Behind?



When you first arrived as a new volunteer, you brought with you to your new surroundings lots of "baggage." Included in this baggage were your perceptions about poverty, spirituality, God, justice and community living. Think back to when you first arrived. What were your perceptions of the above? Jot them down in the "new volunteer" box below.

Now think about the new influences in your life as a volunteer. How have your perceptions changed since you first arrived? Which changes do you view as positive? Which do you view as negative? Jot your thoughts down in the "returning volunteer" box below.

Imagine it is almost time for you to go. It is time to decide what to take and what to leave behind. Fill the bottom box below with perceptions you want to take with you as a former volunteer. Fill it also with the memories, the people and the images you want to have close to you as you begin your journey as a returning volunteer.

Perceptions as a New Volunteer:

Poverty:

God /Spirituality:

Justice:

Community Living:

Perceptions as a Returning Volunteer:

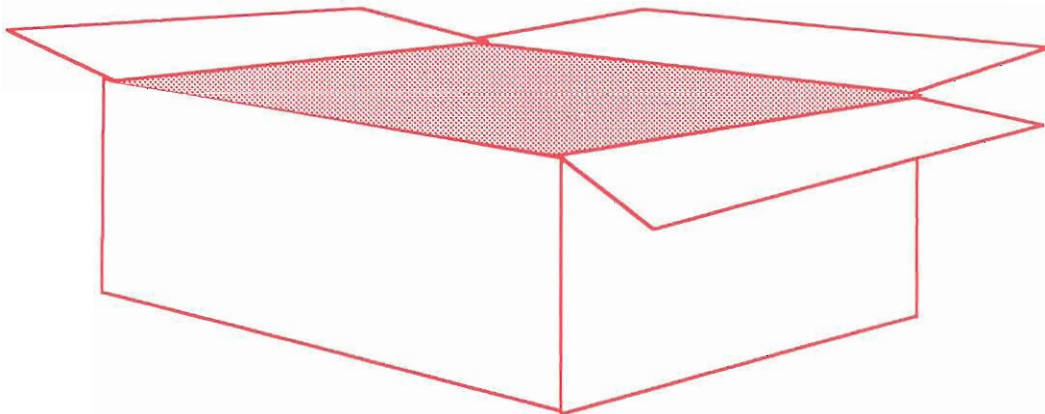
Poverty:

God /Spirituality:

Justice:

Community Living:

If the above themes were not central for you, change them to those that were.



Show Us What You're Made Of

In many cultures, especially Latino, a family's cross is handmade and filled with colorful drawings and illustrations depicting the family, their struggles, their triumphs, their joys and their sorrows. Each cross tells a special story. Use your creative side to tell the story of your life as a volunteer. Decorate the cross below with images and symbols that illustrate your work, relationships, community, highs, lows and meaning in your term

as a volunteer. If drawing is not one of your strengths, use words, symbols and phrases that have a special significance.

Now come together as a community. Spend a few moments simply passing the crosses around in silence. See if you can identify which cross belongs to which person. Take time with each cross that you see. Then allow each person to take a turn explaining as little or as much about their illustrations as they feel comfortable doing. When everyone has had a turn, discuss the following questions: How well do we know one another? What things have we discovered about one another recently? What has been positive about being together? What has been more challenging about being together? What have we learned from one another?

Now Show Us What Your Community Is Made Of!

Now together create a cross that will display what your community this year has been about. Think about leaving it in a prominent spot for next year's volunteers to see.

Returning Volunteers . . . Take Advantage of Our Services!

As you begin to look forward and ask yourself, "What Next?" remember the free resources and services the Pallotti Center offers you . . .

The "What's Next?" Notebook: Ask your program director for a copy. This notebook is designed to help you think through the decisions ahead and figure out how to incorporate your volunteer experience into whatever comes next. This notebook can point you toward several resources available to you at this leg of your journey. Also included in the notebook is information about the **Pallotti Center Job Bank**. Through this job bank, you can receive monthly employment listings from the Church and non-profit sectors. Your program director should have copies of the notebook. Ask for one!

Network of Former Lay Volunteers and Missioners: Through this network, you can be in contact with former volunteers from every program out there. Ask your program director for a network form!

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges the laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during and after* their term of service. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, Paterson, Saint Louis and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.



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