SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Eleven, Number One

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you Connections —

"Sit Back and Enjoy the Ride"

by Elisabeth Allen

Passionists Volunteers - East

"Just sit back and enjoy the ride." This is one of the first pieces of advice I remember receiving from Katie, our volunteer program director, upon my arrival in rural West Virginia. It was said in reference to what we should do if we got stuck behind a notoriously slow coal truck. No, we shouldn't try to pass the coal truck, but instead, be patient and *sit back and enjoy the ride.* I soon realized that this advice was more than just a safety tip. It was a reminder that contrary to my former life in the suburban Northeast, I could not always be in control of life in Appalachia. I would not be leading the way and setting the pace down the winding country roads. Instead, I needed to take the lead from the people who knew those mountains like the back of their hands. These wise and wonderful mountain dwellers would navigate my four fellow volunteers and me through their world. Our volunteer community would be formed and strengthened by our reception into the larger community, which I soon learned was a whole new culture and a whole new way of life.

Navigating a new culture was something I had never even considered as a challenge that I would face in a volunteer placement that was a mere 600 or so miles from where I was raised. I suppose my initial focus was the volunteer community. Our orientation explored some important topics of living in community such as our working styles, personality differences, conflict resolution techniques and how we would go about having reflections and community days. Our true bonding together, however, came not from what we did within our isolated volunteer community, but how we came together to integrate ourselves into the larger community.

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During the first couple of weeks, we made an effort to visit and get to know our new neighbors, the people of Preston

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Welcome new volunteers - you are on a blessed journey! We hope the stories and activities in this issue of *Shared Visions* serve to smooth your transition and help you to appreciate the new communities that you are experiencing.

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"Allow Others... Nurture Yourself"

by Dan Corrou

Jesuit Volunteers International

There was a celebration of the New Year at the house of my host family and I readily accepted the invitation. I had been working as a Jesuit Volunteer (JV) at an Agriculture and Trade School on the island of Pohnpei in Micronesia for four months. So getting off campus and spending a day doing real Pohnpeian things was a welcomed treat.

I was the only American at the celebration and was asked to sit at the sakau stone with some of the oldest men in the family. My host father was next to me as my translator. Being only a few months out of college I unwittingly treated this as some sort of a quaint anthropological exercise. I wondered what these elders thought sitting on old tires while pounding this pepper root into a narcotic pulp. What did they think about the "death" of the high language, and the shift toward a more democratic structure of government? After I had made a fool of myself for several minutes my host father leaned over and told me that it was "much more polite to be quiet." I was reminded that I was now in a very different world; my community had changed dramatically.

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Community, intentional community, is a tricky thing. Back in the United States, I had participated in countless communities both in school and at home. The communities in which I lived in Micronesia included the group of teachers who were American, Australian, Filipino, British, and Micronesian (from 9 different island groups). There were also the communities of the students, host families, the local parish, the local government, and the myriad of other personal communities of which I was a part. And I was also part of the Jesuit Volunteer community.

Our JV community of 6 volunteers established very basic goals of weekly meetings and semi-annual retreats. We received some flak from the other teachers (especially Americans) for being elitist, or exclusivist. This was difficult to defend.

Our connection as a JV community did not necessarily mean we all had the same ideas about living in community. We realized early on that we were very different people. However, our community was based on a common commitment, a covenant. We agreed to meet as a JV community once a week for shared prayer. As insignificant as this sounds it was a struggle to agree even to this. We had to finish our work early every Tuesday to "be a JV." At times it meant cutting short our work in the study hall, or a conversation with a student or fellow teacher. This too was difficult to defend.

One particular member of our JV community used to fast every Wednesday and consequently had a lower energy level. Because our school was very achievement oriented, the thought of working less diligently on one day of every week was, to some of us, unconscionable. Once, I asked him why he chose to fast, why he chose to be tired and slow. He told me that it was precisely because he would be slow and tired that he fasted. He chose to be less productive in order to allow himself to be more reflective. He understood life as a balance, and fasting allowed him to do something else well.

I began to use my friend's fasting as a metaphor for our JV community. On many occasions, I begrudgingly went to our weekly shared prayer to find that the slow pace of prayer, or a vigorous conversation, was exactly what I needed. I had put aside my ego-serving frenetic pace to enjoy the simplicity of time shared with others. On one occasion, I remember having to force myself to go to community night after having had a rather major verbal argument with another JV about a school policy. On that occasion my ego-sacrifice was to put aside my childish rivalry and act like an adult. Without meaning to sound cheesy, we did have a good talk that night, and at least got to the point where we were not wishing each other harm. Baby steps, it's all about baby steps.

"...I had put aside my ego-serving frenetic pace to enjoy the simplicity of time shared with others."

Our JV community was different from our former communities in the way that Pohnpeian culture was different from the culture of college life. It took the ego check of forcing ourselves to finish our work early one night every week, to make time for the JV community. It meant sacrificing responsibility at the school and even, at times, with the students in order to be present to our community. Community living is just as, if not more, counter-cultural than intentional poverty, or the preferential option for the poor. It forced me to set aside my thinly veiled ambition and allow others to help me. ✚

Life's Recipe

1 Cup (C) good thoughts
1 C kind deeds
1 C consideration for others
3 C sacrifice for others
3 C forgiveness
2 C well beaten faults

Mix these thoroughly and add tears of joy and sorrow and sympathy for others. Flavor with little gifts of love. Fold in 4 cups of prayer and faith to lighten other ingredients and raise the texture to great heights of Christian living. After pouring all this into your daily life, bake well with the heat of human kindness. Serve with a smile.

Questions for Dan's article:

- What new cultures or communities have you encountered thus far as a volunteer? How do you see yourself responding to these new situations within your household community? The larger community? Your job site? In what ways do you see God trying to speak to you through these various circumstances and through the people in your community?
- Dan and his housemates received "flak" from other teachers for sometimes doing exclusively JV things. How, if at all, has this been an issue for your community so far this year? How can your community foster good relationships with outside communities while still respecting the importance of nurturing your own household community?
- From Dan's experience of celebrating the New Year in Pohnpei with his host family, he learned that he needed to be more accepting and respectful of the new culture and that he needed to approach community living with similar understanding and openness. What has the experience of the new culture you now find yourself in taught you about living in community?
- What are some "rituals," broadly understood, which your community of volunteers shares together (meals? talks? fun? prayer?) and which help you to strengthen your bond with one another?

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County, West Virginia. We sat on the front porch of a particular family's trailer and learned the folk wisdom of how to predict a snowy winter. We listened intently when we were told that because the bees were flying low, or that the woolly worms were particularly fuzzy, or that the fall mornings had been foggy, we were sure to have heavy snow in later months. Though we may not have put all our faith in these predictions, at least we were together being invited into the Appalachian culture. On another visit we learned that being told that someone was out 'senging' was not a mispronounced way of saying that she was at choir practice. Instead, it was a shortened way of explaining that she was out collecting ginseng in the woods, a common income producing fall activity. On yet another visit, we listened to Sonny's stories of his coal mining days, learning why, sadly, he could hardly walk due to the crouched position he assumed every day for many years mining coal. We were invited to can tomatoes with one family, and on another visit, we marveled at the knowledge that the schools would be closed early to mark the start of squirrel hunting season.

"I cherished this moment when the distinction between the volunteer and the larger community faded.."

Perhaps the best community building time for us volunteers was when we were invited to participate in the annual Buckwheat Festival, the largest and most celebrated event in the county. We were asked to construct the float for the Catholic Church of Preston County and later ride on it on both days of the Buckwheat Parade. We took on the task of designing the float with great pride and had many laughs in the process. By the time the Buckwheat Festival arrived, we were solidified as a volunteer community and no longer felt like outsiders in the larger community. Perched atop the float, volunteers and Preston County residents together rode triumphantly through the town of Kingwood, West Virginia. I cherished this moment when the distinction between the volunteer and the larger community faded. Though I wasn't stuck behind a coal truck, I truly did sit back and enjoy the ride! In our ministry in the months to come, we would be dealing with many cruel realities of Appalachian poverty, so I can retrospectively appreciate this time of understanding and celebrating the positive aspects of my two new communities. ✚

Questions for Elisabeth's Article:

- Identify some of the "coal trucks," those things that force you to slow down or relinquish control in your new volunteer environment. In what ways are you challenged by them? How can you benefit from them?
- Who might be a "trail guide" for you and/or your community? Identify a local resident who might impart wisdom and insight about local culture. Consider inviting him/her over for dinner.
- Elisabeth and her housemates made efforts to visit and get to know their new neighbors in West Virginia and even participated in the Buckwheat Festival. Share some ways you could or do integrate yourself or your community into the larger community.
- Elisabeth cherished a time when the distinction between her volunteer and the greater community faded. Have you had a taste for this blending of distinct groups into one? If not, what might be some existing barriers preventing you from experiencing this mutual acceptance?
- "Cross cultural" experiences can happen within a mile of home or half way around the world. They stretch us and can cause us to reassess long-held assumptions. They can be difficult at times but can also serve as a blessing to us. Share with a friend or trusted co-worker how you are handling any "immersion" experiences you are having.

We're Not in Kansas Anymore, Toto!

One hundred years ago, a now classic story was told about a strange new land of Oz, and how Dorothy broke the news to her dog, Toto, that they were now in a foreign land. You, as a current volunteer or missioner, perhaps find yourself in a similarly strange new land. If so, below is a list of questions to help you identify and talk about some of the differences you notice between your "Land of Oz" (house or work place) and your "Kansas" (place of origin).

- One of the funniest things about this place is...
- A local ritual or custom I like is...
- A local ritual that I've had to adjust to is...
- An unusual or impressive aspect of their spirituality is...
- One scent that I've noticed here is...
- Something I really like about his place is...
- Instead of calling this place Oz, I would call it...
- A local value or belief that has grown on me is...
- One way I've felt welcomed here is...
- One food item that is relatively new to me is...

Share your answers with suitable companions, be they lion, scarecrow, tinman, housemate or co-worker. Any similarities in how your companions and you experience your "Oz?" Differences? What, if anything, have you learned about yourself since you came to your volunteer/mission placement site?

Imagine Your Community...

Here's a fun exercise to help you focus your current "picture" of your in-house volunteer community or whatever group you live with.

Materials needed: Lots of disposable magazines and/or newspapers, pairs of scissors, glue, tape, colorful magic markers, posterboard or newsprint paper.

Time needed: Allow one hour for this activity and follow-up discussion.

Instructions:

1. Ask each person to make a "portrait" describing your volunteer community by filling an entire posterboard or sheet of newsprint paper with magazine pictures, advertisements, words or symbols. Allow about 20 minutes. For example, do you feel your volunteer community is like a defensive castle or a welcoming chateau, a nest of fragile eggshell personalities or a hearty wide-open public house? Do its members work together as a supportive sisterhood, an animal house fraternity, a conspiracy for promoting social justice or like ships passing in the night?

2. Invite each person to briefly present his/her completed poster portrait of the volunteer community (hold clarifying questions until later). Then, by taping each individual poster together, make a composite "quilt" from all the individual posters and attach it to the wall.

3. Include a few blank posters in the quilt to allow for future additions to your portrait of your community. Use strips of newsprint, posterboard, or some other blank paper to create a 2 or 3 inch border around your community quilt.

4. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for the group, as a whole, to discuss clarifying questions about the meaning or symbols of any individual's poster.

5. With the whole group together, encourage everyone to take a few minutes to quietly view and reflect on the community's quilt portrait "as a whole." Ask: What words describe our community? Using a blue pen, write those descriptors in the border area. They might include, for example: humor, hot, cool, anxiety, caution, enthusiasm, casual, accepting, etc.

6. Encourage everyone as a group to take a few minutes to quietly consider its composite verbal description of the community. Ask: What desirable aspects, if any, seem to be missing from our community life? Using a green pen, representing hope, write in one of the blank quilt patches the words describing these potential community strengths or components. Examples might include: spirituality, health, shared responsibilities, neatness, playfulness, trust, whatever.

Congratulations! You've figured out and shared your individual awareness of who you are as a community. You've considered some possible directions in which your community could grow. Allow your artwork to adorn your volunteer chateau!

Follow-up: A few months from now, as a group, revisit your community portrait and discuss what may have changed. Add new pictures to the blank quilt patches to represent the ways your community has grown.

Building Bridges by Creating a Local Guidebook Binder

In addition to spiritual, social justice and other motivations, the opportunity to see another part of the country or the world is a typical reason why people choose to volunteer. And a very good reason it is!

Consider doing the following activity as a way to better know your new area and, at the same time, as a way to "build bridges" between your household or workplace community and your new neighborhood community.

Instructions:

1. Brainstorm different aspects of your neighborhood community that you and your fellow volunteers would like to explore. Write down your ideas.

(Different areas might include: other volunteer communities in the area, geological & environmental histories, former volunteers of your program still in the area, peace & justice events or groups, local community events, city parks, local shelters & soup kitchens, social & economic background, cultural & historic background, churches, indigenous flora & fauna, local foods, alternative shopping possibilities, predominant values, other.)

2. Pair up with housemates or co-workers to form small "teams." Each team choose one or more topics to explore.

3. Plan your information gathering excursions. Consider learning about your area through it's inhabitants -- this gives you an opportunity to meet your neighbors and gives your neighbors a chance to celebrate their history! Other potential sources of information include:

- Local churches
- The Yellow Pages
- The local library
- The Internet
- Your volunteer program
- Info. lying around your house

Set a deadline for gathering the information.

4. Share what you have learned! Possible ways of presenting information include:

- Invite a guest speaker over to give a presentation.
- Present facts, figures and objects "show & tell" style.
- Present a video tape or a musical piece.
- Plan a free or low cost excursion with the whole group.

5. Compile the following types of resources in a binder:

- Brochures - Parish bulletins - Area street, trail & transit maps
- Names, addresses, phone numbers, photos of local support people
- Calendar of local community events - Local website listings
- Places for affordable shopping & dining - Anything else!

6. Continue to add resources and information throughout your volunteer experience.

(Leave your binder in a prominent place as a gift to the volunteers who will come after you.)

A Biblical Question: Who is Your Community, Really?

Imagine you are a member of an ethnic minority and living in a politically charged time, when the dominant ethnic group actively taxes and oppresses minorities. Then imagine a preacher comes along and urges you to start thinking "outside the box."

"...there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female...but all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, 3:28)

Realistically speaking, what comes to your mind? How do you feel about putting aside these important group boundaries?

Now imagine you are a volunteer/missioner. In what ways do you feel comfortable becoming one with the people you serve? Can this really happen? What is gained and lost? How does a blurring of the distinction between your community of volunteers and the local community help or hurt your relationship with fellow volunteers?

Consider Christ's own Incarnation: to what extent is it a proper model for volunteers, walking in the shoes of those you serve?

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges 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, Paterson, NJ, St. 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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