



# 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 Six, Number One

## Overview:

"How am I going to do this?"

It's not uncommon to hear those words from a volunteer during the first few months of service. New volunteers are asked to do a lot of things they've never done before. What is your situation? Are you living in community for the first time? Are you working at a job you never imagined yourself doing? Are you in surroundings unlike anywhere you've ever lived? Whatever the case, this issue of Shared Visions could be of help to you.

Judy Coode reflects on her two very different experiences of community during her years as a volunteer with JVC and Sojourners. Denis McDonough shares some discoveries he made during the time he spent in Belize as a volunteer.

Use the reflection questions and exercises to learn some new approaches to effective listening and understanding what this new experience means to you.

## Community Rewards

Judy Coode

Former JVC and Sojourners Volunteer

Out of the top five decisions I have made in my twenty eight years, two of the best have been my choice to join the Jesuit Volunteer Corps right out of college, and my decision to join the *Sojourners* magazine internship program the following year.

Both decisions were considered with the same reasons -- they were opportunities to put my belief in social justice into action through simple lifestyle and through working for something that could be called "a good cause." Also, both times I made the decisions, I was nearly paralyzed with fear of joining the "real world." The idea of getting a job that might tie me down for years, or worse, that I might lose, made me pretty anxious.

In the late winter/early spring of 1989, when, as a senior at Loyola University in New Orleans, I was first considering the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, one of the most appealing reasons for me

was that it would be an opportunity to live somewhere as far away from where I grew up as I could get. Not that I don't love Tennessee, or that I don't love New Orleans. It's just that the world is so big, with so many fascinating places and people, it seems almost a waste to live an entire lifetime in one geographic area if you have the opportunity to move around at least a little.

It's funny now to look back and realize that I felt ready to live far away from my home, ready to earn room and board and barely anything else, and ready to work at my placement, which was a daycare center for physically and mentally challenged children. But it never sank into my consciousness that I would be living with eight strangers whose life experiences and attitudes and expectations might totally differ from my own.

The director of JVC:Northwest told all of us incoming volunteers at Orientation that out of the four JVC components -- simple living, spirituality, social justice and community -- the hardest to live up to definitely would be community.

It was hard. We were nine people who were used to setting the table a

## What Am I Doing Here?

Denis McDonough

Former St. John's College Volunteer

Though it's three years ago, I remember quite well my first several weeks serving as a volunteer high school teacher in Belize. I recall especially my walks to school in the morning. It wasn't a long walk, perhaps the equivalent of three city blocks, but I did do some serious thing in those three blocks.

There was in fact, quite a lot to think about. There was the long grass in the yard out front of our house. "Should cut that grass this afternoon," I remember thinking. And the little kids up the hill a bit always playing before having to head off to school. "Should see about getting some balls sent down from the States for these kids." Then of course there were the hoops courts, nicely painted, good hoops, but no nets. "How could anyone play hoops without a net on their basket?" Definitely need to get some nets sent down," I remember thinking. And on top of the hill the road was washed out. According to the students, it had been for some time. I remember thinking one morning, "Should see if I can't get a crew together to fix this up a bit." As if my liberal arts training prepared me to somehow be an engineer... Yeah, right.

As you can imagine, there were considerably more significant questions I could have been thinking about as I walked to school in the morning. Picture my setting. I was getting ready to teach a group of adolescents seemingly so different that myself. They quite possibly thought of me as an alien. Questions perhaps like the following: What am I doing trying to teach "New Testament Theology?" Would they listen to a word I was saying if they really knew me? Do these kids know I

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certain way, or greeting others in the morning a certain way, or recycling a certain way, or, the WORST, loading the dishwasher a certain way. Not only did we have our own habits and routines, we had a spectrum of family backgrounds.

It is to the credit of several of my housemates that our JVC year was full of challenge and growth. There were those of us who could have easily slid into our own routines and ignored the "check-ins" or the opportunities for prayer or the need to really connect with those around us. But there were others who were determined that we would not be just roommates, that we really would build on each other and that we would learn to sacrifice and share, knowing that somehow we could be stronger and closer for it.

My resentment was clear many times. I hated the "check-ins," hated knowing that I had to learn to reprioritize my life. And I hated realizing that my attitude, good or bad, could affect all those around me. Learning that I did not live in a bubble was a major revelation for me, and I'm embarrassed to admit that it took me until I was 22 to figure that out.

My housemates knew this, and they helped me through it. And when I decided that I enjoyed this community living and that I wanted to try it again, they were supportive.

We had a subscription to *Sojourners* magazine during my JVC year, a gift from the JVC:Northwest office. I had never heard of the publication before that year, but I became a fan. It is a radical (that is, left-wing) ecumenical Christian magazine that writes on political and social situations with a Biblical viewpoint. There is also a *Sojourners* community and a *Sojourners* neighborhood center, all located in inner-city Washington, D.C.

*Sojourners* is an internship program, now in its 11th year. Interns are invited to live in D.C. in community with each other for one year, August to August, and to work at either the magazine office or at the neighborhood center for room and board and a nominal stipend, just like JVC.

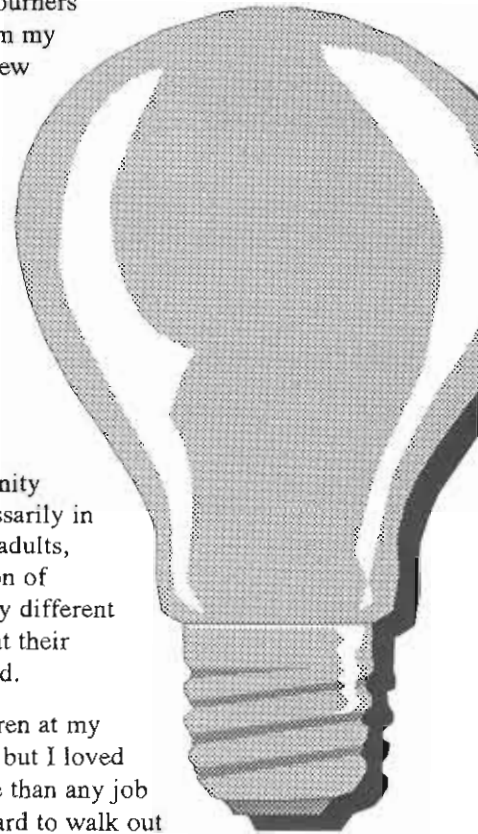
In March of my JVC year, I applied for the *Sojourners* internship and in May, I was invited to be the magazine's research/news assistant for the upcoming intern year. I was thrilled, much more excited than when I joined JVC. This time, I thought, I knew what I was getting into and I WANTED to do it. I wanted the wonderful experience of community again, which had been so hard but because I had lived through it was so much more meaningful. This time I would be the one pushing for a strong community, trying to challenge people to come out of their shells and to share and to be the support for each other. I wanted to move to inner-city D.C. and really LIVE with the poor, because actually in JVC we lived in a pretty middle-class area -- no gunshots at night, no real fear of robbery or mugging, just the occasional moose trotting across the front lawn. And, in a move towards thinking about my future, I was happy about my position because, quite honestly, it would be much more handy to

have an editorial-type job finally listed on my sparse resume.

My year with *Sojourners* was vastly different from my JVC experience -- my new community was in a totally different universe than my JVC housemates. In JVC, five of us were 22, two were 23, and two were 28. In *Sojourners*, at twenty-three I was the youngest again, and the oldest of the six of us was 45. Everyone had had some experience with community living, though not necessarily in a house with five other adults, and everyone's definition of community was radically different and not so malleable that their opinions could be altered.

I missed the children at my daycare job very much, but I loved my *Sojourners* job more than any job I've had since. It was hard to walk out the door in D.C. and see rowhouses rather than the mountains in Alaska, and I missed Alaska's Native American culture too. But living in Washington, D.C. was pretty exciting, especially during the Gulf War when there were protests and marches and chanting in front of the White House. And I really ached for my JVC housemates, the eight people who challenged me and helped me and were, quite literally, my family for an entire year. My *Sojourners* housemates were funny and were good people, and we did eat meals together and struggled to pray together and we laughed a lot, but we did not achieve that amazing connection that my JVC house created. Maybe it was because in Alaska, all we had was each other to turn to, while in D.C., we all knew other people and had the opportunity to expand our social circles.

Now, five years after I came to D.C. for my *Sojourners* year, I can look back and know that those two years were the right decisions for me. I learned so much about myself -- having to live with people who demand community out of me when I don't want to give it, and having to live with others who don't want to give it when I wanted to pull it from them. I'm in touch with all of my JVC housemates, and with four of my five *Sojourners* housemates, and I will always consider them my second families, the people who I became so close to and who know me the best. It is a wonderful feeling to know that there are all these people, my housemates, around the country who I can always go to, and who in turn, can always depend on me too. They were the hardest, the community experiences, but they have had the greatest rewards. +






# What's the Idea!?

## Three easy steps for listening to what you hear.

*Listening . . . . Whether talking with fellow volunteers, listening to co-workers, writing family or reading the newspaper, all these activities require the skill of listening. Here are three steps for improving your listening abilities.*



**Step 1:** Pair up with a fellow volunteer and ask your partner to share an idea, a personal feeling, or a thought he/she has with regard to living in community or working as a volunteer.

**Step 2:** You as the listener now repeat back, as faithfully as you can and in your own words, what you heard the partner tell you.

**Step 3:** Now ask your partner for feedback as to the extent your summary accurately mirrored the partner's feeling and thought. Then reverse roles. Repeat with fellow volunteers as helpful.

*"What Am I Doing Here?," continued from page 1.*

have to teach myself these math lessons every night before even thinking about a lesson plan? I wonder if they know how terrified I am? Why am I so terrified anyway? Is it because I really don't know what I am talking about? Why do I get so frustrated, even angry, with students? Maybe even something as mundane as, am I really going to eat rice and beans three meals-a-day for the next year? All these questions, perhaps, can be summed up in the following: What am I doing here?

It's not that I didn't have these questions. It's just that it was easier for me to think about sending a letter to someone asking for a package of basketball nets than it was to consider my qualifications -- not to mention the requisite faith -- to teach theology. Sending a letter for some balls for the neighborhood kids was easier than trying to figure out just how their poverty fit with my questions about faith and justice and service. Also, it was easier to think about fixing a washed-out road than it was to think about why I was there, what I could offer, and what this all had to do with my relationship to God.

Try as I may have, I didn't leave Belize without at least starting to come to terms with these questions. It was, in fact the same students I oftentimes so

feared that helped me begin to understand so many of these questions. My point, however, is not to shed light on some great revelation I had about faith, justice or service while in Belize. My point isn't only to say that these questions were of great challenge and a huge part of my learning experience in Belize. I wish I had had the courage to begin trying to answer them earlier. I wish I had had the courage to listen to my students, my colleagues, and even the neighborhood kids sooner, rather than closing myself off those initial weeks behind thoughts of grass, nets, balls, and washed out roads.

It is worth noting, I think, that in those first couple weeks I could have sworn one of those neighbor kids would run up to me saying, "Can I have some change, gringo?" (da me vuelto gringo"). Not until I slowed down, stopped and listened did I realize he was asking, "How about a spin (ride), friend?" (da me vuelta, amigo"). Had I listened a bit sooner, I may not have had to worry about that washed out road. †

## WORKSHEET QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Judy describes how her housemates, "had a spectrum of family backgrounds" with their own "habits and routines." Describe how your habits and backgrounds are similar and/or different with those in your community.

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2. Living in community with people having different backgrounds and expectations also helps some volunteers experience their personal limits. What, if anything in particular, have you learned so far about yourself because of the differences you have encountered in sharing community life with others?

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3. Judy was not comfortable with "check-ins." What about community life are you uncomfortable with?

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4. Denis spoke about his initial days of volunteering, when he found himself readily noticing things that needed fixing. When you first arrived in your volunteer setting, what were some of the things that right from the start you noticed could be improved? Any thoughts on why such external fixables came so readily to mind?

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5. Denis mentioned being terrified about teaching. How did you feel about starting your volunteer position? How do you currently feel about your job?

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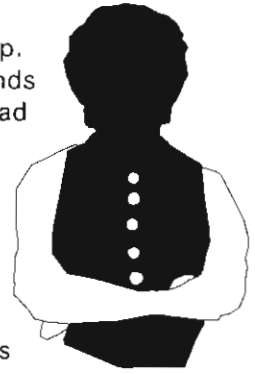
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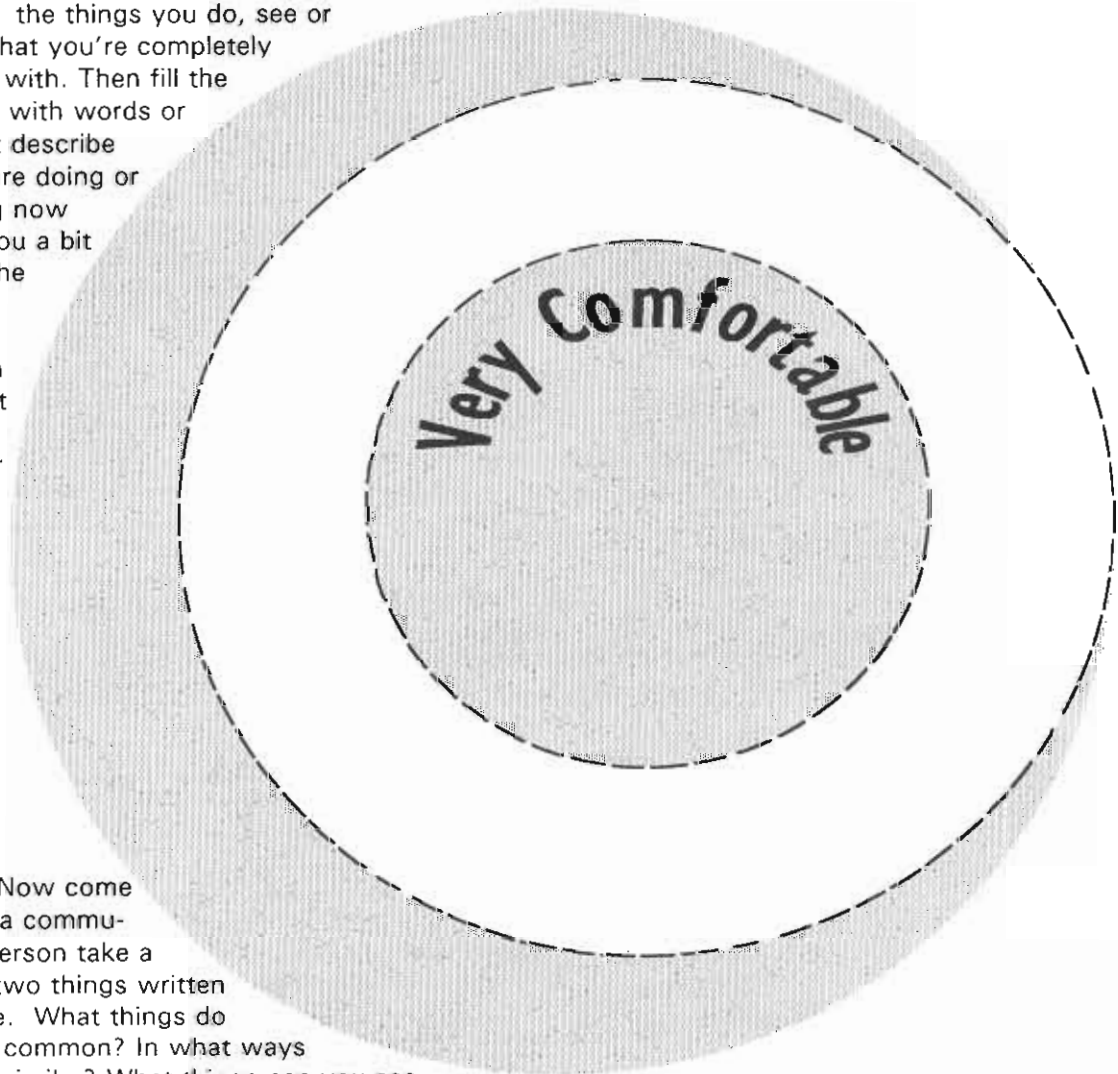


# Expanding Your Comfort Zones

**Part One:** Let's set the stage...You can do this first exercise alone or with a group. It's very simple. Stand up and fold your arms. You've probably done this thousands of times. It feels pretty normal. But now try to fold them the opposite way (instead of left over right, fold them right over left and vice versa). How does that feel? It's a little strange, isn't it? As new volunteers, we're constantly asked to fold our arms in a way we're not accustomed. We can usually do it, but it's not always comfortable. Use the exercise below to identify those things you do that fall outside your "comfort zone."



**Part Two:** Let the circles below represent your "comfort zone". The very center is the safest and most relaxed part of your zone. As you move away from the center, you move further and further outside your comfort zone. Fill in the circle below with words or phrases that identify the things you do, see or experience that you're completely comfortable with. Then fill the outside area with words or phrases that describe things you are doing or experiencing now that make you a bit uneasy. In the shaded area beyond, put the things in your life that are far outside your comfort zone.



**Part Three:** Now come together as a community. Each person take a turn telling two things written in each zone. What things do you have in common? In what ways are you not similar? What things can you see yourself becoming more at ease with as time goes on? What things are simply not going to change? Challenge one another to expand that zone of comfort in certain areas. In what ways can you help one another? Save this exercise and look at it six months from now. Take note and discuss any changes you notice.

# What would you like to see in the future issues of Shared Visions?

Let us hear from you! Send your comments, suggestions and ideas to:

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## *Shared Visions*

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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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