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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The Challenge of Setting Limits

By Leah Ducket
Former Response-Ability Volunteer

Arriving home after a long day of adding, subtracting, vowels, skirmishes and songs, I eagerly anticipated bathing, followed by a cup of coffee and a moment to unwind. Often, to my disappointment, this ideal remained a fantasy. Normally, in our friendly, tropical neighborhood outside of Santo Domingo, (Dominican Republic) doors did not close. The atmosphere, characterized by a free flow of friends, neighbors, and passersby, along with my wide range of duties as a teacher, combined to create a wonderful sense of welcome. However, without making some effort to strike a balance between my duties as a teacher and neighbor, and my own needs, it might have become overwhelming.

My neighborhood, Los Alcarrizos, is a very humble, marginalized barrio of approximately 300,000 just outside of the Dominican Republic's capital city, Santo Domingo. In Los Alcarrizos, people freely enter and leave their neighbors' homes as if they were their own, (during most waking hours). A tiny home with three small rooms for sleeping and a general living area for cooking, eating, and socializing easily accommodates a family of six to ten, sometimes more. In most cases, anyone passing by to visit during meal time surely will be invited to eat with the family in spite of their meager resources.

Entering into this social situation, with North American ideas about personal space and privacy, challenged me to adapt and set limits regarding the openness of my home. In spite of the fact that I grew up in a very small Midwestern town, no one freely wandered in and out of my family's home on a regular basis. Each family, and each individual in the family was inherently entitled to a great deal of privacy. Thus, in my new locality, Los Alcarrizos, I felt slightly uncomfortable when the children and some adults began to tread in and out without any warning.

Understandably, they were extremely curious about us, the new, foreign neighbors who looked and talked strangely. There was no need to knock and ask permission to enter the home of anyone on our street. Consequently, no reason

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Going With the Flow

By James Caparas
Former Christian Appalachian Project Volunteer

Many people will come to the decision of doing long-term volunteer work knowing what they want to do and having some idea of their ideal living environment. That was the case with me. I learned, though, that there is no way to know what you'll be dealing with until you actually arrive at your placement. And even then, change is always at hand.

It would be inaccurate to say that I never settled in while in my community at Inez, Kentucky, despite the fact that for seven months after my arrival I did not have a sleeping area that was permanently mine. Due to the unique nature of the community - which accommodated not only permanent (one-year) volunteers but also large groups of short-term volunteers, I was able to call six different rooms home in those seven months. My work was defined, but its nature called on me to expand efforts into other programs when needed. From the beginning, I was glad that I did not come with any set plans, only expectations.

When I accepted a placement with the Christian Appalachian Project after graduating from the Catholic University of America, I was placed to work with the group's founder, Fr. Ralph Beiting in his Church-sponsored warehouse program in Louisa, Kentucky. It was arranged that I would live with the volunteer community there. I was willing to work where needed, and the program provided a chance to see the different works being done in the mountains. As for the community, Louisa seemed ideal in that it had volunteers right out of college, which was what I expected. I deferred my acceptance to C.A.P for six months, however, and by the time I arrived in Kentucky, my assignment had changed. I would still work with Fr. Beiting, but in his rummage store in Inez, where I would also live with the community there. Although I made a visit to Inez, I was not as familiar with the work or the community. I found myself the youngest by ten years in a community with a married couple, one middle aged person, and one person over 70. Not quite what I expected.

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existed as to why our home should be any different. Additionally, we were teachers, logically great resources for homework questions and extra help. These social realities created difficulties for my housemates and me. We wanted to be 'normal' members of the community; yet, we needed to maintain a minimal level of privacy and personal space in order to deal with our new situation and continue adapting. Essentially, this was not an easy task. We never found any perfect solutions, but we made a conscious effort by setting specific times for tutoring and socializing with the children.

One of my housemates, who had more energy than a roomful of toddlers, had a great desire to have the neighborhood children in during the evening for extra help. I felt guilty for not being enthused and ready to help out at all times. It was difficult to reconcile this with the kids' innumerable needs. Fortunately, time constraints forced us to talk about this issue. We agreed to limit the time schedule to one hour two nights per week. Eventually, this time dwindled even more due to our responsibilities and the general lack of free time. Nonetheless, limiting extra study time did not eliminate the fact that when doors were open, it was a signal that there really was an 'open house.'

Because our doors and windows normally remained open because of the heat made any type of privacy difficult. More often than not, there was no electricity, making fans just a fantasy. Consequently, our doors and windows had to remain open in order to have some movement of air to prevent suffocation. Despite a strong desire for a few moments of seclusion, no one wanted to alienate our wonderful, kind neighbors by closing doors and shutting ourselves off. Nonetheless, we began asking the children to announce themselves and ask for permission before entering. We had to remind them each time they entered for awhile, but, eventually, it became a normal practice at our house. Most of the adults already had taken to the custom without seeming offended in any way. In spite of these efforts to set boundaries and allocate time, it was a constant struggle and source of periodic tension. Once in a while, in order to get some work done or have just a little solitude, we resorted to closing doors and pretending that we were not home. At first, I felt terrible. Yet I knew that personal time was necessary in order to accomplish different tasks and retain some semblance of clarity in my mind about what I was there doing and why. Finding a way to balance my needs with my surroundings in the most acceptable way possible was difficult, but essential.

". . . No one wanted to alienate our kind neighbors by closing doors and shutting ourselves off ."

My work as a teacher posed very similar challenges as I tried to create a blurred boundary between school and home (which was only a few steps from school). As a foreign born, U.S. educated person with somewhat of an ability to speak both English and Spanish, my colleagues and superiors assumed a lot about my capabilities. Sadly, in their eyes, anything and anyone from outside of the country was viewed as very good and sometimes better than anything Dominican. Consequently, my work assignments were demanding ones.

To make matters worse, I am a fairly enthusiastic person by nature. Yet, my first few weeks in the Dominican Republic were very quiet. Thus, when our first meetings of the school year began, I eagerly volunteered to perform any needed task. My housemates and I started helping out on Saturdays in an adult education program where I taught Science and English. During the week, my days were filled with fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade English in the morning topped off by reading, writing and arithmetic as a first grade teacher in the afternoon. In addition, committee meetings, unforeseen errands and some English classes for the teachers created a very full schedule for me. Preserving spare moments was difficult.

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"Going With the Flow"continued from page 1

I remember my first night at Inez as the time that my expectations were pulled from me like a rug from under my feet. But I also remember it as the night when I saw how special my opportunities were. After community dinner, I offered to lead prayer with the bible passage that drew me to volunteer work (Is. 6: 1-8). Afterwards, I was expecting the group to stay together and socialize. Instead, everyone went to bed at 8:30. After the initial surprise wore off over the next few days, I began to develop a respect for people's need for privacy and saw that it was a good chance to develop my own quiet time, to reflect or just relax. Throughout my stay at two houses and two summer camps, I enjoyed staying up late in the prayer or living rooms, to read. If other volunteers were there, I enjoyed their company; if I was alone, it was also satisfying. The married couple invited me to join them at church and I got to meet other C.A.P volunteers who were more similar to me in age and stage in life.

I learned one of the most important qualities a volunteer needs is flexibility. In most volunteer placements, we are placed not only in new work environments; we also face joining a group of strangers in a new living situation. We learn the guidelines that volunteers have

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In the Dominican Republic, the world moves at a pace much different from anything to which I was accustomed. Greetings, formalities, and personal relationships often take priority over rushing to finish a particular task or beginning a meeting on time. In addition, slow communication, often unreliable transportation, periodic protests, as well as extreme heat and rain wreak havoc on rigid plans and scheduling.

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All of these things frustrated and sometimes upset me. I probably never really came to terms with a lot of these factors. However, they did force me to look at the importance of limits. Due to my own workload, a brief illness, and the amount of time it took to accomplish the simplest tasks, like making a phone call, I painfully had to learn to say "enough" or "no" once in awhile. My adult students always needed extra help and explanation. But where, and when could we do it? My first graders, constantly hungry for any scrap of attention they could steal, came to my house daily both before and after class. However, I did need to eat lunch, wash my clothes when there was water, and plan my lessons too. I cannot say that I did not feel terrible about asking my students to wait for me at school while I finished lunch or scribbled down a last minute idea about how to present the letter 'i.' Yet, finding a moment in the day to accomplish everything demanded some limits and separations between home and school.

Essentially, without the slight limits that allowed me to keep my work and home somewhat under control, as well as maintain a sense of purpose, I believe that my time in Santo Domingo would have been much more difficult. Also, it may have been less beneficial for me and for everyone else involved. Therefore, looking back, I see the necessity for striking a balance between my own needs, and my obligations as a volunteer very clearly. I wish that bit of 'windex' would have made the picture so crystal clear about a year ago.

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as my co-worker and I
ed our position with often divergent views. The bargain stores were established to provide poor people with their needs such as clothing and discounted food without making them seem like handouts. In addition to operating the store, my co-worker (whom I'll call "Elaine") and I also had the responsibility of maintaining the volunteer facilities. I gave Elaine the benefit of experience and often let her lead but did not hesitate to put my own ideas in. I would offer some contributions on how to decorate and arrange items in the store, and input as to how to "move" items and how to attract people and interest them in what we had.

"I learned one of the most important qualities a volunteer needs is flexibility."

I sometimes felt a resentment between us: from her that I did not have enough initiative, and from me that she was so determined and driven but not enthusiastic. We disagreed on fundamental issues. Then we would talk about our differences and though we may never have expressed it overtly, we probably based a final decision on its impact on the lives of those who visited us. We were working for the people and it would not do to let the store suffer. There are some ideas which I am sure we would still disagree on. I have begun to try to be as organized as Elaine tried to be, but it will take a while. Elaine is still a friend, and when I think of my time in Inez, I know that I learned a lot from her.

Even though my placement was not what I had expected, I have never felt that I made the wrong choice in joining C.A.P. I experienced some frustration in my work but always looked forward to the opportunities I had to go beyond the boundaries of the store and the activity center.

I think Eastern Kentucky has needs, and each of us can fill particular gaps, sometimes permanently, sometimes long enough for some one else to take over. One of my housemates in Inez spoke truly about discernment. Decisions by themselves can not be right or wrong. We make neutral choices, and it is up to us to make right or wrong out of the outcome and where it takes us.

I am grateful for all the different projects I worked on in Kentucky and look forward to returning one day to see more places, meet more people and help put an end to the poverty and despair that burden Kentucky's wonderful people.

WORKSHEET QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Leah had work, community and extra activities to balance. She found it quite challenging. How are your efforts going to strike a balance?

2. In a culture where constant hospitality is the norm, Leah and her housemates struggled to set boundaries with their neighbors. If you were in her community, what would your position have been?

3. Establishing boundaries is a challenge for most volunteers. What has your experience been?

4. James had certain expectations about his work and living environment as a volunteer. He soon learned, though, things would be different. What were your initial expectations as a volunteer? How close were these expectations to actual reality?

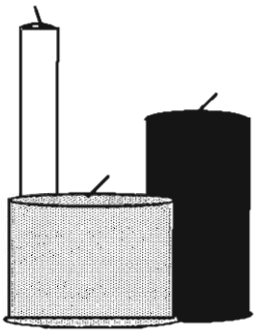
5. James and Elaine had different views and experienced conflict in the beginning of their work experience. What has been your experience with the people you work with?

6. People differ in their need for privacy and in how they value "quiet time" for themselves. How do you rate yourself as needing privacy? To what extent are you satisfied with how you use your private time?

Gifts and Fun on a Volunteer's Salary

Most volunteers don't exactly have money burning a hole in their pockets. A typical volunteer stipend is only $80.00 a month. It doesn't sound like much. But thousands of volunteers over the years have developed creative ways to have fun on a volunteer's stipend. Below are some recipes and gift ideas that are not only within your budget, but pretty cool too! Enjoy!

Candle Making



Ingredients:

1 Large pot of boiling water
1 large coffee can
plain wax (available in craft stores)
coloring (crayons, food coloring, or dye for candle making)
empty milk cartons, wick, pencils

Bring pot of water to boil. Place wax in coffee can. Place coffee can in pot of boiling water. Allow wax to melt. Add coloring of preference. Line up milk cartons. Cut wick to extend from bottom of milk carton to top (with extra room to tie a pencil around the top of the carton so that the pencil lies flat across). Pour wax into milk cartons. Allow wax to harden at least 24 hrs. Peel away carton and you have a homemade candle!

Decorating Ideas: You could add dried/plastic flowers, sea shells, ice cubes, etc.... after you pour the wax. Or add small pine cones and flowers to the outside of the candle after it has dried. Instead of milk cartons you can use small glass containers to permanently hold the candles.

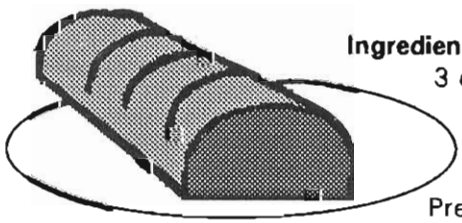
Important tip: Do not pour any of the wax or water that the wax was boiled in down the drain.

Kalu-aha

Ingredients:
5 cups sugar
3 1/2 cups boiling water
1 2 oz. jar of instant coffee
1 tsp vanilla
1 qt. of vodka (quality of vodka matters **not**)

Dissolve sugar and coffee into boiling water. Remove from heat. Let cool. Add vanilla and vodka. Pour into decanters or bottles. Makes 2 quarts. IMPORTANT: For best results, let the kaluaha age for at least one month. The older it gets, the better. Makes a great holiday gift.

Beer Bread Recipe



Ingredients:
3 cups self-rising flour
1/3 sugar (or half sugar/half honey)
1 can of beer (skunked beer works just fine)

Preheat oven to 350. Mix together above ingredients. Spoon into greased pan. (bread, bundt, or angel food cake pan.) Bake for 30-40 minutes. Until top is hardened.

" . . . .Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?'
'Here I am,' I said; 'Send me!'"

The words above, taken from Isaiah 6, inspired James Caparas as he discerned a commitment to volunteer service. Think back to your own discernment process. What words, people, or events sparked something inside you? Why are you a volunteer now? Come together as a community and each person take a few moments to share your thoughts.

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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, 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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