



To Serve, with Love

By Erin Peterson

Alumni who
embark on long-term
service experiences
have a chance
to use their gifts,
expand their
perspective,
and clarify
their life's path.

Liz Barry, B.S.W. 2016, M.S.W. 2017, has always known that small gestures can make a big impact. But rarely has she seen this truth in action the way she has since she started working with the Office of Refugee Services as part of a year-long service experience with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and Catholic Charities of Tennessee. Her training in social work was a great foundation for working with refugee populations — but nearly every interaction contained unexpected nuances.

This past fall, for example, she was working with Hamid (not his real name), a refugee from Pakistan. Though it was outside of Barry's normal duties — she typically works on job placement tasks — she agreed to accompany him to a doctor's appointment. During that trip, he told her his story. While he was in Pakistan, he said, he and members of his family had been beaten for being Christians. His son had been killed. Smartphone photos of friends and extended family members were the only thing he had to serve as a reminder of them; in many cases, he had no way to get in touch or know if they were safe.

The weight of his story was heavy. But then he said something surprising to her as they waited for his appointment. "He said, 'Thank you so much for staying with me. To know that I'm respected as a human being, that you're willing to be here and go the extra mile for me — it means a lot,'" she recalls.

The experience reminded Barry of the way she wishes to live her life. "We're in a tumultuous time. We might not recognize the humanity and dignity of our fellow neighbor because — maybe — they look different, or they have a different life experience than we have," she says. "But I appreciate the idea that God lives within all people. We need to acknowledge that and treat our peers in a way that we want to be treated."

Every year, a handful of newly minted Catholic University graduates are opened up to experiences like Barry's. Putting their career plans on hold, they choose to spend a year — or more — in service to others through a range of religious and nonprofit organizations. Their service takes them across the country and around the world. It opens their minds, it tests their patience, and it often shapes the rest of their lives.

Emmjolee Mendoza Waters, B.A. 2001, M.S.W. 2009, knows from experience exactly how emotional and life-changing such journeys are. After graduation, she spent two years doing international service herself, teaching remedial reading and being the school librarian in the tiny town of Punta Gorda, Belize. Today, as associate director of campus ministry and community service, one of her responsibilities is to connect interested students with organizations that offer long-term service opportunities.

"The University helps foster experiences that



Jeff Graham

From 2003 to 2017:

217 Catholic University graduates participated in long-term service opportunities around the world ...

in **20** different countries ...

and on **5** continents.

allow [students and young graduates] to be in a relationship with people who are marginalized," she says. "Those experiences allow them to see their gifts and privilege, and allow them to understand their responsibility to their brothers and sisters as Christians." While every experience looks different, alumni who have participated in such service often have similar inflection points, challenges, and transformational moments.

Insight and Illumination

Many young alumni launch into their service experiences with enormous, change-the-world ambitions. But as they look back on their experiences, they realize that sometimes the tiniest moments of humanity and progress are the ones that had the greatest impact.

Just ask **Caroline Johnson, B.S.W. 2015**. Through the organization FrancisCorps, she spent a year in Costa Rica working at Hogar Manos Abiertas (Open Hands Home), a nonprofit hospital that supports abandoned children with severe congenital birth defects. Johnson's responsibilities included bathing, feeding, and dressing the kids. When she had time, she often worked with them on simple academic skills.

She loved all the children she worked with, but admits that a particular kindergarten-age pair stole her heart. Both kids had challenging medical issues: The girl was in a wheelchair and the boy had a skin condition that prevented him from going outside. But they were always game to spend time with Johnson, whether it was listening to her read stories, building with blocks together, or learning new things. Johnson delighted in their progress. "When I arrived, neither of the kids knew their colors very well or were able to count to 10," she says. "By the time I left, they were able to do both of those things. Getting to be in their lives and watch them grow up for a year, from five to six, was so rewarding."

The love that volunteers feel for the people they work with is often both complicated and profound. **Joanna Gardner, B.A. 2013**, for example, had deep relationships with the students she taught at an elementary school linked to a children's home in Honduras called Amigos de Jesús.



Liz Barry



Caroline Johnson



Joanna Gardner



Tim McEvoy



Johanna Cajina

Each day she taught several courses — English, math, science — to a handful of students in steamy, unair-conditioned classrooms. Her students had often experienced incredible trauma in their young lives that had led them to the home, and so they sometimes — understandably — acted out, getting angry, frustrated, or sad. And sometimes Gardner did, too. "I made mistakes, and I wasn't always as patient as I could have been," she says. "But my job was to love them, even when it was hard."

She found herself especially challenged and transfixed by one girl, Natali, whose disability made her sensitive to small triggers in the classroom, but who also loved spending time with Gardner. She says some of her favorite moments were when Natali would tug on her shirt, wanting to cuddle with her friend, whom she called "Miss Joanna."

Gardner worked hard to support and love the kids she was with every day. Nonetheless, she says they were the ones teaching some of the most valuable lessons. "My students inspired me daily with their perseverance, resilience, and ability to forgive me and love me, even when I made mistakes," she says. "I'm sure they taught me more about patience and love than I taught them."

Tim McEvoy, B.S. 2013, says that sometimes, a single classroom session can feel transformational. McEvoy taught mathematics and science to high school students at Bishop Kenny High School, a Catholic school in Jacksonville, Fla., through the Alliance for Catholic Education. He was also an assistant coach

for the school's soccer team. McEvoy was thrilled when he was able to teach mathematical concepts in ways that stuck with his students.

Yet even when mathematical progress sometimes felt nonexistent, he worked hard to frame his experience in what he saw as a larger calling. "I had to trust that this was something I was called to do; not that I chose it, but that these students were chosen for me by God," he says.

Privilege, Challenges, and Community

Long-term service can have a life-changing impact, but it comes with countless challenges. The way that participants react to those difficulties — understanding them, embracing them, and using them to change their perspective and lives — makes all the difference.

For example, **Johanna Cajina, B.A. 2015**, joined FrancisCorps and spent a year at a home for at-risk girls in Costa Rica called Niño Con Cariño. The home was for kids from families with single moms who struggled to make ends meet. During the week, the girls would stay at Niño con Cariño. On the weekend, they returned home to their families, often with milk and bread provided by the organization. Cajina cooked many of the girls' meals — beans and rice, hamburgers and salad — during the week, and was an attentive listener and mentor for girls who often had few other people to turn to.

A naturally cautious introvert, Cajina understood that she'd have to step outside of her comfort zone during her stay, so she made a checklist to stay accountable. The to-do list included some simple tasks for herself, like trying new foods once a week, but also more difficult challenges, like learning not to shy away from conflict or give in to demands. It was a problem she'd long struggled to overcome.

The changes she made were incremental but real. Sometimes, she says, just saying no to a girl requesting an extra serving of fries at mealtime felt like a test. "They would look at me with puppy eyes," she says with a laugh. "I wanted to give them the fries! But instead I gave them something healthy."

Experience by experience, test by test, she learned to stand up for herself — whether it was asking others to pitch in with the dishes or sharing an idea she'd long kept to herself. Her fellow volunteers were so moved by her steady progress that one day during a meeting, they literally applauded her efforts.

When Cajina came back home — emotionally stronger, thrilled and humbled by her experiences, and deeply grateful for friends and family she had often taken for granted — it was as though she had returned an entirely different person. "Saying goodbye to my parents [initially] was one of the hardest moments, but they were so happy with how much I grew," Cajina says. "My mom described it as a 180-degree turn."

Gardner, meanwhile, loved being able to teach students in Honduras, but she admits that the living conditions took some getting used to. "We didn't have hot water, and the electricity went out a lot," she says. Every other day, she had to carve out 30 minutes from her schedule to wash her clothes — by hand.

Her service allowed her to understand in a visceral way what privilege truly looked like. "You don't realize how your experiences change you until you get back [home] and look around," she says. "I don't look at my country the same way. I don't look at the water that comes out of my tap the same way. And I really hope that never changes."

Understanding these experiences was often made easier by regular conversations that participants had with fellow volunteers in long-term service. Participants typically live in shared, modest living quarters. Even if they headed off to different jobs every morning, they returned home each evening to dissect, discuss, and understand their days.

Barry, for example, says a nightly dinner habit has made a big difference in her time in Nashville. "[Our community] has dinner together every night, and we go around sharing a 'rose' and a 'thorn' from our day — where we were challenged and where we grew in our understanding of the people and community we serve," she says. "We all work in different placements and have different perspectives, and this allows us to share what people in our city are facing each day."

A Way Forward

As long-term service volunteers process their experiences, they often chart a way forward that they couldn't have anticipated before they started.

Gardner says volunteering at Amigos de Jesús made her realize that she wanted to find a way to change the rules that kept so many people at a disadvantage.

Right now, she's in her second year of law school at Rutgers University, and is particularly interested in immigration law. "My whole perspective on the world changed [through long-term service]," she says. "I kept thinking, 'How do systems keep so many people — people with potential and resilience — down? How can I level the playing field for them?' Law is a place where you can make a difference on a bigger scale."

Similarly, Johnson saw a path forward that would allow her to have a meaningful impact. During her time working with kids in a children's hospital, she learned how challenging it was to provide a clean and safe environment for children in countries with limited resources. Gloves for changing diapers were often in short supply, and sometimes the diapers were, too. Kids often had to share clothes. "These were things that felt so basic," she says. "I thought, 'There's got to be a better way to do this.' There are holes in the healthcare system that we have got to be able to fix and fill, and improve so that no child suffers," she says.

Today, she's in her second year of graduate school at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. She is studying global health and is working on a longitudinal study of the Zika virus focused on adolescent mothers and their babies.

Of course, for many long-term service volunteers, the experience leads to a more direct way to follow the path they started. Barry is still in the thick of her service experience, but her time working with refugees from around the world has made her want to leave her perch in the United States to go out into the rest of the world. She has connected strongly to Nashville's Bhutanese community, and hopes to become a Peace Corps volunteer so she can serve in Nepal, Bhutan's geographical neighbor, where many Bhutanese refugees live before resettlement to the U.S., and learn more about the culture, language, and people. "I've learned so much about the power of compassion and the importance of standing up for what's right," she says. "This experience has taught me so much about my values and beliefs — and how I can continue to foster them." **CU**



Did you take part in a long-term service experience?

We want to hear your stories! Email us at cua-magazine@cua.edu and tell us how it made an impact. We'll publish responses in an upcoming issue of the magazine.