

SSJ MISSION CORPS

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your support and presence. This year has been a gift for us, living and working together with you. We have witnessed different realities and accompanied good people. Going forward with new eyes, we carry our shared experiences. Know that you have stretched and strengthened us. Our hope is that we all continue to give love to this world in the way you have shown us.

With love and gratitude,
Mary Beth, Caitlin, and Jackie



Radical Response - Mary Beth Schluckebier

In all honesty, the place in which I find myself here at the end of my year with the SSJ Mission Corps is one of half-formed thoughts and feelings. It is a sort of blur of memories, stories, and emotions; some seemingly far too intense to express with words. There is much I have learned, and much I have lost; a lengthy list of insights and lessons learned from the people of this neighborhood and an even lengthier list of my own presumptions and initial ideas that have been lost and replaced with actual experiences of the reality of the poverty here. In my work this year I was given the opportunity to experience the poverty in this city at a closer distance than I had before, but the reality is I have never really been in it. I remain a guest a Kensington. I'd like to think that I shared in the life of the community here, arriving at a certain level of understanding as most guests do. The rather simple fact is that at the end of every day I had a comfortable and clean home to return to, complete with food to eat, clothes to wear, and a bed to sleep on. Most here do not. I also had a family home in Willow Grove to escape to on most weekends and enjoy a delicious meal or two. Many here have never even heard of Willow Grove. In reflection, I realize it was in this travel to and from Kensington and Willow Grove or other parts of the city that I was most deeply affected. It seems somewhat unbelievable that a twenty minute journey could offer such a striking transition in environment. With not even a quarter tank of gas, the gunshots, sirens, needles, trash, and noise become grass, clean sidewalks, trees, and quiet. In these moments of transition, I could not help but recognize the very obvious dichotomy within and around me. There was certainly growth in the realization of this and yet a profound struggle in the reconciliation.

In my position at Visitation Parish as the Coordinator of Social Outreach, I had a variety of opportunities to offer accompaniment, services, and support to the members of our Latino community here. As with all things, some days and experiences were profound, and others more routine and comfortably padded with a numbness to the suffering around me. The access to people's homes and hearts given to me by my work was an incredible gift; an instant encounter with people often in their most vulnerable state. Some days there was only silence when I wanted words the most. Some days I was motivated only by a sense of duty to my work. Other days I was entirely broken by the sadness around me and motivated by a desire and love for human connection. It took several months for me to learn to walk with people's

Jaclyn Newns, Mary Beth Schluckebier, and Caitlin Sullivan
working with Catholic Charities in New Orleans

sadness and not under it. Still, I am learning. So many days, people were constantly asking me for help and each day presented a choice; a choice to simply give to them the concrete object or service which they sought, or to really give authentically with love and from myself. It's a decision between indifference and shared feeling.

Quickly, I discovered that when I entered into the suffering and brokenness of the people around me, there seemed a great sadness in the streets. It is a feeling I can not describe. It is in the trash under the El, in the empty eyes of the addicts shooting heroin, in the desperate expressions of the young prostitutes on the corners, in the drunken man passed out on the pavement, and the old woman struggling to cross the street alone. It is a sadness that permeates everything. It is a raw emotion I have never encountered. Here, the formalities that often allow us to see past the hurt have been stripped away by the poverty drugs and hunger revealing the raw emotions within people. I uncovered a deep desire within myself to experience this human suffering in solidarity, to walk with these people. This demanded a falling in love with the people and world around me. This too, meant bearing a part of their burden, feeling a part of their pain. This, I think, is a sacred love; a love that breaks us and leaves a piece of us behind. It is a love; however, that also sustains us.



As I approached the end of my time at Visitation it did not feel like an ending because so much love remains behind and so much love goes forth with me. My friend Dorian is a twenty four year old maintenance man and self-proclaimed underground artist. Dorian came up from Mexico when he was fourteen, leaving his mother, two sisters, and two brothers behind. His twin sisters had kidney disease and his family could not afford the dialysis needed to keep them alive, so he came to the States to earn money for his sisters' treatments. His one sister died the December after he left. From the day he arrived he has worked to earn money for his family. Just a year or two ago, doctors told Dorian that he too, has the same kidney disease. He has only one functioning kidney left, and he has decided to return to Mexico. I accompanied him to the doctor several times and witnessed as he was told lies regarding his state of health, in an attempt to avoid spending the money on treating a person who is uninsured. We were talking recently about his situation when he told me that, "El amor es más fuerte que todo" (Love is stronger than everything else). He is absolutely right. So, when Dorian returns to Mexico to his mom, and brothers, and only one sister, my love goes with him. And as I move on in my own life journey, I carry Dorian's love with me. In this way, all that we have shared makes us a part of each other.

I remember at the end of a day in early May after visiting several people in their homes, and working in our food pantry, I returned home to realize I hadn't washed my hands. There was a very particular smell to them, a smell that I almost initially failed to notice because it had become so familiar. It was the smell of Kensington, of people's homes, of people on the streets, of poverty. It was not dirty. It was real. That day I had embraced the reality here in mind, body, and spirit. Despite the material poverty, there is a tangible richness of soul in the communities of this neighborhood. Sustained by the love and generosity of these people, I experienced the inextricable bond of Spirit and emotion within humanity. Each day I was prompted to delve into the mystery of suffering and justice. Surrounded constantly by the effects of our flawed immigration system, I was affirmed in my commitment to give voice to the Immigrant community. I realize that the more I learn, the less I find that can be easily explained. Although I am relentlessly questioning the meaning of suffering, faith, justice, and community, it seemed that some of the biggest answers came in some of the tiniest and simplest of moments this year.

New Friends, New Dreams – Caitlin Sullivan

America is known for being a melting pot of cultures, the land of opportunity. For centuries, the United States has attracted people from all corners of the world for their share of the American dream. Having grandparents, uncles, and my own father immigrate to this country, I heard the stories of my family's difficult beginnings trying to acclimate to a new culture. Leaving behind their families and the familiar, my grandparents sacrificed much in order to snatch a piece of the American dream for their seven children. For them the American dream would only be possible through the education of their children, which was a dream they lived to see come true.

As part of my year of service at the SSJ Welcome Center for the Sisters of Saint Joseph Mission Corps, I was fortunate to experience the same hopeful determination in the spirit of the immigrants to whom I taught English and citizenship classes. Living amongst an immigrant population in the Kensington section of Philadelphia was both a growing and sobering experience. In the beginning of my volunteer experience, I found myself totally out of my comfort zone, much like many of these immigrants feel themselves. But after teaching many classes and becoming familiar with the personal stories of my individual students, many of whom I have grown particularly close to, I quickly came to realize that the Welcome Center provided a refuge, not only for these newly minted Americans, but for me as well.

Two students in particular exhibited the same hopeful spirit that I witnessed in my grandparents and father. Danh and his wife Loan arrived in this country with their two young children from Vietnam, unable to speak the language but seeking a better life for their family. For several months, I had the privilege of helping them achieve their American dream by teaching them English while their children attended grade school in North Philadelphia. Never before had I witnessed such enthusiasm for the English language. Both Danh and Loan never missed a class and were determined to



study as much as they could. After two weeks of English, they were speaking sentences. Danh continued to practice his English outside of class, incorporating new English vocabulary words he learned during class in stories he wrote about his family and life in Vietnam. I was fortunate to be included in one of his stories, entitled, "My Friend Caitlin." Although English classes at the Welcome Center have finished for the summer, Danh and Loan have both written me emails, in English, telling me about their children and their summer so far.

I am extremely grateful for what this experience has taught me and even more grateful for the individuals I have met along the way. Living in Kensington for a year was life changing, an experience I know I will carry with me throughout my lifetime. The legacy of my grandparents enabled my father to become a lawyer and he has passed this legacy onto me. Now, more than ever, my experiences at the Welcome Center have solidified my aspirations to be an advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves. Law school will train me to be such an advocate and the practice of law will enable me to actualize my goals so that future generations of Danhs and Loans will always have a chance at realizing their American dream.

Unfolding Clarity – Jaclyn Newns

In this time of transition with brown boxes, masking tape, and sharpies, it's easy to label clothes, art supplies, books and décor, and shift them home to their familiar places in Glenside. What is challenging is to box and label the feelings and experiences of this year - the relationships, insights, and growth that have no proper places set aside back at home. I realize it will take a long time to understand all I encountered, living and working in new neighborhoods. The desire for instant clarity is strong, but I am trying to welcome patience with the unfolding of all the meaning this year held. I do see one idea clearly now.

Never again can I underestimate the value of one conversation. Being accompanied through this process, having my voice listened to with openness has been the validation that has kept me grounded and seeking. Talking with many women in the SSJ community, freed me up to understand what I was processing all around me, in regards to the pillars of the program – spirituality, community, service, and social justice. Very recently, I was able to name for myself my need of processing out loud. Sharing where I am is one of my vital, basic needs. We are trained in society to be independent and utterly self-reliant. I saw this very clearly a few months ago, trying to keep up with a sister who was sprinting down Lehigh Avenue juggling milk crates, plants, papers, and shoe boxes, stacked above eye level, fiercely insisting she didn't need an extra set of hands (a common sight this year with certain SSJs). Thankfully, the pile of goods cushioned her spill against the cement pavement. Many of our neighbors walk carrying an even more daunting pile internally. One individual, whom I only spent an hour with, caused me to readjust my perspectives on resiliency and gratitude. Caitlin, Marybeth, and I helped coordinate a Catholic Relief Services food fast retreat for teens of Visitation Parish in April. One fifteen year old, shared with me her past months of running from home, abusing her body in a number of ways, staying in treatment centers, and feeling isolated in loneliness. Her body, weak and shaking, communicated her intense fear, and her deep, dark eyes pained me with her emptiness. Some spirit in her captivated me, and her harsh yearning for love pushed in my heart just how good, safe, and comfortable my life has been. Beyond this year, her story will continue to move me outward, searching for the wide and hidden realities of our world.



I am most grateful for the one-on-one interactions with neighbors, co-workers and students, which gave me opportunities to be the supporter, answering the basic human need to be heard, while growing in awareness. In conversation with the suffering, an open, listening, gentle presence provides the haven, transcending the different backgrounds and life experiences. Unity happened for me in concrete moments this year, when people dared to be counter-cultural, risked being vulnerable, and chose to co-exist. In these instances, when myself and others became inter-dependent, glimpses of unifying love resurrected divine strength through human brokenness.

Moving forward, I will be starting in August as campus minister at Villa Joseph Marie High School in Holland, Pennsylvania. Shaped by experiences of ministry from the Mount, The University of Scranton, and The SSJ Mission Corps, I hope to facilitate opportunities for students to engage in open spaces of spirituality, community, service, and social justice. To all the Sisters of Saint Joseph, I am so deeply grateful for your support, guidance and love. Your mission for unity will stay with me and continue to nourish my work. Living and working with you, I came to know the meaning of true hospitality. You will always have my deepest respect and gratitude.