

## **Many Thanks**

To all those who took the time to share  
their experiences and reflections!

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## **Words of Wisdom from Former Volunteers**

How to decide whether to volunteer?

How to determine which program is right for  
you?

What practical advice & information do  
former volunteers wish they had known before  
their service?

## **Reflections on Service**

Individual reflections from volunteers

## **Resources from Campus Ministry**

Thinking about a year of service: Where JCU  
alumni currently serve

Self Reflection: Questions to ask yourself  
and volunteer organizations

Benefits of Volunteering

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## How did I decide to volunteer?

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While I was at John Carroll, especially during my last two years, I became involved with many service opportunities, such as FOCUS, Habitat for Humanity, and Meals on Wheels. I also participated in several retreats and was part of two Antioch retreat teams, and I was a member of JUSTICE. In addition, I participated in several immersion trips---to Immokalee, Florida (where I am currently serving); Big Ugly Creek, WV; Trenton, NJ; and Anchorage, Alaska. These trips allowed me the opportunity to expand my view of poverty and of “the poor,” and ultimately led me to realize that I very much desired to spend an extended period in a structured volunteer program that would allow me to explore issues of social justice and to work directly and to live in solidarity with “the poor.”

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I had been a few immersion trips while I was an undergrad so doing a couple years of service when I graduated seemed like the next natural step. Also, I knew that if I didn't do a year of service upon graduation I would probably never have the opportunity to do so. I kept asking myself, “If not now, when? When will I ever again in my life be able to pick up and move half way across the world?”

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I knew at the end of my sophomore year that I wanted to join a volunteer program. After looking at other options, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps was the only choice for me. I was lucky, I did not struggle with my decision and I had the support of my friends and family.

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During my time at JCU I had the opportunity to participate in several brief immersion experiences; first to Appalachia, and then on Christmas break and summer long trips to Immokalee, Florida. Somewhere in the middle of it all, I realized that service is my passion. These experiences opened my eyes to the injustices that exist in the United States. It's one thing to read about poverty in a FYS or sociology class. It is quite another to encounter poverty and the impoverished first-hand, and to establish relationships with those people who suffer from injustice. As difficult, disturbing, and heart-wrenching as some of those things I encountered on these trips were, I had never felt as satisfied or at peace with myself. I realize now that sense of peace comes from being right where God wants me to be, doing what I've been called to do. So, the decision to volunteer for a year just seemed... right. It was a yearlong experience as an opportunity to deepen the relationship I had established on short-term trips, and to more fully understand the problems and more deeply experience the beauty of the people I had the privilege of working with.

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How did a JCU chemistry major and business minor steer his life from the corporate ladder and dream of financial wealth to a simple life living with those who have been discarded by society? The Ecuador Immersion experience. Offered at JCU for the first time

in the summer of 1998, a friend of mine, who was helping organize the trip, recommended that I apply, that “It would be a good experience for me. Mind you, I was not the hardcore volunteering “type”...so I thought. The experience changed my life. In Ecuador, I learned how to listen to God by being with people who have virtually nothing but each other. At the risk of sounding blasphemous, when I say listening to God, it seems metaphorical. If you do not have the time to listen to your own heart, quiet time where you are alone with yourself contemplating your direction, volunteering may not show itself as a worthy and viable option. Sparing the details of Ecuador, my life has not been the same since.

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When I was a senior at JCU I had a strong passion to help disadvantaged children. Most enjoyable service experiences were helping inner city children throughout the city of Cleveland. I first realized this excitement in October and initially thought about spending a year volunteering after college...The thought of volunteering ended while I considered other career options. When another opportunity arose though to go on a service trip during spring break I immediately signed up to go – thinking that it would help me determine whether a year long volunteer commitment was for me. After attending the week long volunteer excursion to Big Ugly, West Virginia, I was ecstatic. My dad, recognizing my excitement, said to me “if you are this excited about your volunteer experiences, you really need to consider joining JVC (Jesuit Volunteer Corps). Knowing that I had the support of my family, I knew that I wanted to join...

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## **How did I select my program?**

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I am able to answer this question twice, I suppose, since I am currently doing a second year of volunteer service. I spent my first year in New Orleans, Louisiana, with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (South region). Besides having previous graduates of John Carroll and other universities recommend JVC, I was attracted to the four values—simplicity, service, social justice, and community. During my service in New Orleans, I realized that I still wasn't sure in what area I wanted to do graduate work. Since my first year had been such a learning experience, I decided that I wanted to do another year of service. While I considered doing JVC for a second year, I ultimately decided upon a year with the Sisters of Humility at their placement in Immokalee. Upon reflection, I realized that three previous short-term experiences that I'd had here were a large part of the reason I decided to do service in the first place.

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First, I have always felt called to service in Africa so I looked for programs in that region. Although I originally wanted to join a faith-based program, I decided on the Peace Corps because volunteers live independently, not in intentional communities with other volunteers. I know myself well enough to know that I would have relied too much on my American community of friends and not have pushed myself beyond my comfort level to

really get to know my neighbors, immerse myself in another culture and learn another language. Second, I wanted to work with those affected by HIV/AIDS so the Peace Corps program was a great match. Third, I have lots of college loans. Since the Peace Corps a government program, my government loans were eligible for deferment.

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This was by far the most difficult aspect of my discernment process. I had narrowed down my choices to JVC and HM (Humility of Mary), but had a very hard time choosing between the two programs. Both emphasized simplicity and spirituality, which were important to me, and both offered some sort of community support system. I think, though, that I knew all along that I belonged in Immokalee. In my previous visits to this horrible/wonderful little town, I had gained some understanding of the issues of the area, but more importantly I had formed relationships with the people, in particular the children, who live here. When I really prayed and reflected on it, I felt in my heart that this was the place for me.

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In deciding between the Newark Benedictine Volunteers and the seven others to which I had requested further information (Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Red Cloud Volunteers, Rostro de Cristo Volunteers, etc.) I chose to volunteer in Newark after a site visit that I made. What made me drive 500 miles from Cleveland and skip a day of classes before finals week? A hand-written letter from a Volunteer Coordinator, Fr. Al, who had taken the time to review my application so carefully that he highlighted and circled information in his literature that would be of special interest to me. Further, after several discussions, I discovered that I would be able to work with high school age students as a teacher and tutor, which was very near my passion.

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One of my concerns with volunteering was the stability of the volunteer organization. A hard question kept rolling through my head, "How available would someone be for counseling, advice, or support if I was having difficulties adjusting, doing my work, or with my faith? The answer at the abbey was, "VERY AVAILABLE" – so much so, that I hardly ever utilized this "safety net". Another indicator I used was the hand written letter Fr. Al wrote to me. It was clear that some programs were in the "business" of volunteering with sending form letters to potential volunteers. Hand-written attention impressed me very much as it was an indication of an organization that valued and cared for its volunteers.

## **ADVICE: For Prospective Volunteers from Former Volunteers**

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If you decide on a program with many service sites in many different cities, try to base your placement decisions more on what your job preferences are and not on what city

you'd be living in. You can make the most of the city you're in, but it's hard to be happy there if you don't really like what you're doing at work.

And once you are a volunteer, keep these things in mind:

1. When packing, less is more. Even though you'll be tempted to take a lot of mementos and trinkets with you, they take up a lot of space. Plus, you'll find during the year that you didn't need them as much as you thought you would. Take a small photo album to share with your roommates and maybe a couple of small trinkets for your desk or dresser. Don't forget a camera.
2. Community is all about living with others in mind. But it may take a while for the chemistry in yours to feel right. Be patient. You'll need to make sacrifices in order to live in a community where everyone is satisfied with home life. You must also be willing to take a risk or two, even if it means telling someone that you're unhappy, which can be very hard to do. Lastly, it's not about *what* you say, but *how* you say it.
3. If your program includes living on a stipend, be prepared for it to be a challenge. Expect that. But don't beat yourself up if you overspend one night or treat yourself to something special. I think the point is to make you realize the difference between true needs and random wants.
4. Really get to know the people you work with. Find out how they got started in the work they're in, why they're doing it, and what motivates them.
5. Be sure to take time for yourself, even though you'll probably have many community commitments. Spend time alone every day.
6. Get to know your neighbors. They can be great community resources.
7. Try to see the full view of the social justice issues that face your city, especially those outside your placement and area of work. Get involved with some of those issues if you're able.
8. Never stop asking questions.

Ultimately, though, remember:

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. The point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

*--Rainer Maria Rilke*

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My decision to become a volunteer in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I could have never imagined how much I would grow in “only” a year. My experiences from JVC have touched my life in so many ways it is hard to put into word. My days as a volunteer, my community, my clients, and the JVC values are treasures that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

“If you have come to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together.”

*--Aboriginal Activist Sister*

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1. If you are not sure you want to join a service program, apply anyways. This way you won't regret not applying and it keeps your options open.
2. Talk about it with anyone and everyone. This will allow you to fully recognize your feelings about doing service.
3. Listen to your heart. Don't do what other people think you should do or what everybody else is doing.
4. Talk to the program directors or regional coordinators to find out more about the program. And voice your concerns; they are well equipped to help with the discernment process.
5. Location of the program should be among the least of your concerns. You may or may not like the location of your program but, remember, God will be with you where ever you go.
6. Be open to doing something you have never done before.
7. Find the program that is suited to you. Research each program so you can understand what it really is about. Don't base your decision solely on other people's experiences; they do not have the same desires, goals, dreams, strengths and weaknesses as you do.
8. Don't stress too much, life is way too short.

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**On discernment:** Gather as much information as possible about different programs. Talk to former and present volunteers to get a feel for what a year in a particular program is like (keep in mind, though, that every experience is unique). Recognize your personal preferences and have an idea of what you want out of your year: Do you want an international or domestic program? Do you prefer to live in a community or alone? How important is spirituality in your decision? How much structure do you need or want? What kind of work do you want to do? In the end, though, I think the best thing to do is remain open and follow your heart.

**On the actual experience:** Be flexible. Realize that you don't know everything. Try to remain positive. Cry if you need to. Be supportive of your community and co-workers. Respect those you work with. Be honest with those in your community. Be gentle with yourself and others. Make friends. Immerse yourself in the city you're living in. Journal. Take pictures. Take good care of yourself...remember, you can serve your household community and the greater community better when you do so. Be ready to be changed.

**Be willing to take risks,** but remember that God helps those who help themselves. Every time I have extended myself, outside of my comfort zone, I have found tremendous rewards. The very first, was volunteering in Ecuador. The next, which seemed like a headfirst dive, was my year in Newark. The year in Newark forced me to take other risks. I engaged in conversations, recreation, and work with people from all over the world- from

the African parish of which I was a part, to the Spanish/Portuguese restaurants and sections of Newark, to the Projects, to the African-American Catholic/ Baptist services I attended on Sundays.

Another risk was being “white” and living in a neighborhood with people of different ethnic origins. I felt like I stuck out everywhere I went. I did, but that risk was actually a benefit I believe to be common in volunteer work. People recognized me as a volunteer and extended open arms welcoming me.

**Heart vs. Mind:** I am a very “head” oriented person; i.e., a person whose logical, linear thinking mind overpowers what his heart is saying. Volunteering makes little sense to those of us who are stuck in this perspective prior to a volunteer term. “What possible lasting effect can I have on another or a community as a volunteer for one day, one month or one year?” After a year of service, however, it will be quite evident that both the mind and the heart can exist in harmony, that the mind’s logical ends and the heart’s sensitive ends can be unified in purpose to achieve the same goal.

Giving a year of your life can seem like a lot but is miniscule in comparison to the rewards on the back-end of the experience. Only taking the risk will allow you to fully understand my perspective on this matter.

Try some volunteering now, today! One evening at the Catholic Worker Drop-In may be all it takes to feel the heart related rewards of volunteering. This can be the proverbial “carrot dangling out in front of the mule coaxing him (you) into moving forward (with volunteering)”.

**Volunteering overseas:** I was very tempted to volunteer overseas but felt pulled by my family to find something in the continental United States. It was a great source of frustration and conflict within me. I felt as though my skills were needed much more overseas in the third world than here in the first world, economically prosperous U.S. I have learned this to be untrue. My father, a well-traveled and respected writer, contributed this bit of advice during my discernment process: “There are people who need help everywhere. You can only help so many, and those that you will help need it just as much in places here in the U.S. as they do overseas.” I learned this, in fact, through volunteering in Newark and now living in the Bronx. There are sections of the U.S. that have reminded me so much of the places I experienced in Ecuador, that the two seem seamless.

**Receiving more than you give:** A common theme or quote that many of the volunteers that I know, myself included, is that “for every day you sow in volunteering, you reap ten, hundred, even thousand-fold rewards.” You feel as though you take more away from the experience than you have received.

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### **I wish someone had told me...**

- How much I would change. Even after a month, I’m realizing how much this experience is changing and will change the way I look at the world. It’s an amazing

mix of frustration, beauty, loneliness, joy, fun, hard work, struggle, and loveliness, and it's by far the best thing I've ever done.

- To pack less clothes and more books. Travelling internationally to a rural site, it's really hard to now try to get things that have to do with my hobbies – reading, fishing, playing guitar, etc.
- Take the GRE or GMAT before graduating and doing a year of service. This way scores are on record before you forget the information. This also makes it easier to apply for grad school when completing the year of service. I was so focused on the difficulty of leaving my community that I had a hard time finding the motivation to study and take the test.
- That it's okay to lean on community members and the volunteer program staff for help and guidance.
- To make sure that I took time to journal and write friends. I still need time for myself and for my relationships back home.
- That being honest with the volunteer organization about my needs and expectations is okay. I was so afraid that the Peace Corps wouldn't take me if I didn't sound 'flexible' that I ended up at a site that was a poor match for me. Luckily, I was able to transfer to a different work environment, but I could have avoided the hassle from the beginning.

### **What was helpful...**

- The amazing people in my life who were supportive of my decision all the way, who were and continue to be interested in my decision to volunteer and the experiences I'm having here.
- Knowing that although my family was not supportive, I was thankful that I found support from other JCU seniors who were making the same decision to serve.
- It was helpful to know that even half way across the world, I was still only an email away from my family.
- Planning my family's first visit to see me. Even though I had not left yet for the Peace Corps, knowing that I would see my family within 8 months gave me something to look forward to and made saying goodbye a little easier.
- My three roommates and I were all applying to volunteer programs. Each of us invited our parents up to campus and we all went out to dinner. We didn't press the volunteer issue with any of our parents but we made sure to bring it up in conversation which I think was helpful. It was helpful for me to get my parents used to the idea of me volunteering for a year. I think knowing that there were other parents who were also going to miss their kids and deal with the same issues of

worry and concern somehow made them deal with the news a little more easily. It also made me seem like I wasn't the only 'crazy' person choosing this path after graduation.

- Being in a community of volunteers who were all doing similar work was really helpful. We had similar struggles so we were able to relate to one another and we were also able to help one another with our (teaching) lesson plans.
- Making arrangements for my parents to be able to speak with a volunteer who had served in Africa was very helpful. After they asked her questions about her experience and learned about the safety precautions she took, they (finally!) felt more comfortable with my decision to go there.

### **What wasn't helpful...**

- "Why would you want to do that?!?" I struggled a lot with my family's concerns for my well-being as well. Especially now, with all the scary stuff that's going on in the world your parents will probably be worried about you going far away from home. I found the most effective thing to do was to seize the opportunity to educate my family about what I was doing and why. The knowledge that I would be well taken care of (i.e. that I wasn't going to be living in a cardboard box in the street by myself for a year) helped put their minds at ease. It also gave me the chance to educate my family about some of the issues Immokalee faces.
- People who just didn't "get it." Family friends, who I think were trying to be supportive, would say, "Good for you. Go save the world." I think they were trying to be nice, but at times it seemed condescending and wasn't helpful.
- I wish my friends would be more interested in the people and community in which I serve rather than how hot the temperature is here and what exotic safaris I can go on
- I was so excited about volunteering that I didn't think at all about what I would do after. I applied to grad school at the same time that I applied to JVC. When I got into JVC, I dismissed grad school altogether. While I would have made the same decision to volunteer, I would have requested the grad program to defer me for a year so that I wouldn't have to reapply and get more transcripts, letters of recommendation and such. I'm not looking forward to having to go through that process all over again.