

Emily Shurilla

Jesuit Volunteer Corps, New Orleans (Catholic Charities' Refugee Resettlement Program, Orientation Coordinator & Case Manager)
Humility of Mary Service, Immokalee, Florida (Guadalupe Center After-School Program, Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, and Shelter for Abused Women Immokalee Outreach Office)

From a journal entry

Recent events have me reflecting a lot on how lucky I've been to grow up in America, but how unlucky at the same time. Even as a woman in America, I have the privilege to be what I want, wear what I want, go where I want, love whomever I choose, and express myself freely. What blessings those are, ones that I rarely gave thanks for. At the same time, I live in a country whose government is a world superpower. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem that that power has been used purely for good. Foreign policies enacted years ago could quite possibly be directly responsible for current terrorist threats and actions.

And there are days here in Immokalee when my heart just feels like breaking. Shelby and I were cleaning one of Lucy's offices and came across an envelope of pictures. They were all of a woman who'd been beaten, taken to be used as evidence. A boy in Shelby's group is always saying he's hungry and that it's because no one makes him dinner at night. One of my children couldn't get his school pictures taken because his mom didn't have the money. One of my little girls can't count above 3 without help. A dog followed Shelby and I home the other day and it had quite obviously been beaten by a man because it wouldn't come near Jason. A Chinese man that Sr. Maureen is trying to get out of INS detention sent a thank you note and a handmade cross, which she let me keep since I'd been working on his case. The farm workers continue to be exploited by the produce companies. And the list goes on...

Yet amidst all of this poverty and despair, in Immokalee and all over the globe, I fight to keep my optimism and to remember the long list of blessings, bright lights, and beautiful things in my life. A spontaneous hug from one of my kids. Mail from a friend. Yoli's commitment to the Guadalupe Center and to us. Sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico. The Coalitions' determination to fight and win the battle for justice. My health. My family's love and support. A delicious dinner shared with my roommates. The privilege to serve others. Quiet mornings. Long walks. Memories. A good cup of coffee. Talks that last until 3 am. One of my kids telling me that they missed me over the long weekend. Again, the list goes on and on.

The simple things in life are what matter most. They should be appreciated and acknowledged, especially in times like these. And it humbles me to realize that so many people in this world don't even have these simple things to be thankful for. There is so much to learn from the people in this town, those who live in abject poverty. The very people whom society has forgotten possess a profoundly beautiful spirit that society could do well to imitate.