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The following is an excerpt from Mary Ellen's first e-mail at her new site.

My community has been extremely busy with work, retreats, traveling, and exploring the city. I am discovering so much about myself, social justice, and living in intentional community each day through every aspect of JVC.

I'll start with my volunteer position at Prospect House. The first two weeks were a bit slow as I was learning more about my responsibilities and still introducing myself to my clients. My caseload is 32 strong (eek!), and all of my clients live in the SRO (single-room occupancy) program of the shelter. They rent single 'apartments' (almost dorm-style) on the third and fourth floors of the shelter. Many of them started off in the emergency shelter and were ready for more independent living that still offered a structured environment. To be accepted into the SRO program, the individual must have a diagnosis of homelessness in addition to a history of substance abuse and/or a mental health diagnosis and/or HIV/AIDS. They pay 1/3rd of their income for rent and have access to all of the services provided at the shelter (meals, case management, groups, step meetings, etc.).

My clients are *amazing* people. I did not have much training for the job, but my clients are showing me the way just as much as my coworkers. I am so grateful that the residents have welcomed me with open arms. There are some that I spend much more time with than others, as there is a wide spectrum of need. Some individuals maintain their mental health, have been sober and clean for many years, have full time jobs, and are extremely independent. The people I work with most tend to relapse on a regular basis, have mental and physical health needs, and/or have had extreme trauma throughout their lives for which they have not had enough support. Many of my clients do not know how to go about accessing the services they need, either because they do not realize their own eligibility, or because no one ever taught them the basic life skills that everyone needs to maintain independence.

The clients I have grown closest to have experienced oppression, abuse, and tragedy on a level that I sometimes cannot begin to comprehend. They are some of the strongest people I have ever met. Many have guards up because they have been hurt so often in their lives and they struggle with trusting new people. When they saw the white girl from suburbia come through the doors in late August, I'm sure many of them thought (and still think) I'm the last person who would be able to relate to them and understand their story, but gosh darn it I'm trying.

My residents fill me up every day and give me energy to advocate for them as much as I am able to. At the same time, the obstacles they face and the challenges I see every day are so draining. It's also very challenging to identify the fine line between doing something for a client and helping them figure out how to do it. I can't tell them what I think they need, they have to do that for themselves. It's easy to get into a mode where you want to fix everything, but I constantly need to remind myself that I'm not helping them unless I empower them to want and do for themselves. I make mistakes all the time, but I've realized that that's the best way to figure all this stuff out for myself.

JVC has been quite a journey so far, and I hope this little update has given you a glimpse into it.