



Chris Kieffer, a volunteer with the Sisters of Saint Joseph Volunteer Corps, works with a student at Hope Hall.

Young people who give a year of service tend to be open to religious life. Who are these volunteers and where are they spiritually?

Conversing with young adult volunteers

WHEN THINKING ABOUT YOUNG VOLUNTEERS today, who they are and what impact faith has on their lives, a quote from theologian Howard Thurman comes to mind: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

I have found in these last 20-plus years that when I could help young people discover what they were made for, what made them come alive, they also discovered a deeper relationship with the world, God, and sometimes the church. My life has been graced to accompany both volunteers and women in discernment for religious life.

Soon after I made my first vows, I and another sister had the idea of creating the Sisters of Saint Joseph Volunteer Corps. We realized that many young people wanted to serve others while being a part of a supportive

By SISTER DONNA DEL SANTO, S.S.J.



Sister Donna Del Santo, S.S.J. has been a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York since 1992 and has served as her congregation’s director of vocations since 2003. In 1996 she began and continues to coordinate the Sisters of St. Joseph Volunteer Corps. Since its beginning the program has had more than 1,000 youth join the sisters from a weekend to a year. Contact Sister Donna at ddelsanto@ssjrochester.org.

spiritual community. They wanted to make a real difference in the lives of others and, in the end, to make a real difference in their own lives, by discovering what made them come alive.

Since our beginnings in 1996, our community of four Sisters of St. Joseph, with the support of our congregation, has had over 1,000 teen, college, and post college volunteers live and serve with us. Some come for a weekend, some for a week, and since 2009, some come for a year or two! Their volunteering is done in the context of community, prayer, and theological reflection—all of this nested in a culture of vocation. We sisters hope to aid these young volunteers on their life's journey and God quest. The stories of just a few of our volunteers give a glimpse of who our volunteers are, what our conversations with them are like, and the vocational impact that these service experiences have.

Kevin: experience with a ripple effect

One of our first groups to come for an Alternate Spring Break (for 13 years) was from Carroll College in Helena, Montana. Many of those students stand out in my mind's eye and in my heart. One student in particular is Kevin Jam. He came twice and served at Hope Hall both times at his request. Hope Hall is a school that serves children who learn differently, who do not thrive in a traditional school. Kevin discovered that he came alive while working with these students. He found that he could relate to them, support them, and empower them to be their best selves; all the while, the same thing was happening for Kevin.

After graduation he felt a call to priesthood and

MY VISION OF VOCATION MINISTRY

When someone asks me what I do, I say I am helping to create a culture of vocation with a preferential option for the young. Or as one friend likes to say, I loiter with intent. This was the call to action from the Continental Congress on Vocations held in Montreal in 2002. This challenge continues to be vital in vocation ministry as my congregation and I help young people explore their lives through the lens of a call, and of a vocation—whether it be to marriage, the single life, or religious life. When we help form a young person in the skills of discernment, as a way of life, all of us benefit.



Kevin Jam holds the Raymond G. Hunt-Hausen Service Award he received from Carroll College in Helena, Montana.

he entered his local seminary. The seminary was not a good fit for him, however, and eventually he left. Yet, Kevin's commitment to the church and her mission remained strong, which led him to secure a degree in theology from Creighton University and to become a campus minister and religion teacher in a Catholic high

school in the northwest.

One day I received a call from Kevin, who told me, "Sister Donna I have been searching for an experience for my students similar to the one I had with all of you. I just can't locate anything that offers what I had, a diversity of ministries with prayer and reflection that included Catholic social teachings—and the opportunity to live in community with sisters. Can we come to you?"

"Of course!" I exclaimed. How could they not come? He and his teens have now come for the last two years, an experience that has made my sisters and me feel a bit like grandmothers! As these young people come searching and desiring to experience a deeper relationship with God, this ministry invites each of us to discover what makes us come alive for the sake of the people of God.

Dannis: still building community

We met our first full time volunteer as a college senior. Dannis Matteson, an anthropology and German major, came to our exam week pizza party, which we hold in our motherhouse every semester for students from Nazareth College. She approached me that evening asking if she could be a full time volunteer at our sponsored ministry, St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center, which serves the uninsured with nearly 200 professional volunteers. Dannis had a great desire to serve those without access to health care and felt the mission of the center would be a good fit for her passion. Thus we embarked on a new chapter of the SSJ Volunteer Corps.

Dannis' inquiry prompted our community to decide that if someone wanted to be a live-in member of the

SSJ Volunteer Corps, he or she must commit to living our life, which is based on simple living, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for the ongoing life of the community. These shared responsibilities include cooking, chores, prayer, and reflection on how we find God in our daily experiences—no matter what faith tradition one is from.

Dannis came from a faith-filled Protestant household; in fact her dad is a Baptist pastor. In the middle of her first year with us, Dannis decided that she wanted to become a Catholic and entered the RCIA program with her good friend and co-volunteer, Alissa, as her sponsor. As sisters, we were a little nervous about how Dannis' family would receive this news. We were delighted when they celebrated her choice, recognizing that what made her "come alive" was to be a woman of God, and her heart took her on this path.

While they lived with us we encouraged and sponsored Dannis and Alissa to participate in the Catholics on Call program at Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago. Dannis said this was a turning point, giving her a vision for her future.

This experience, as well as her life in community with sisters and volunteers, the service she provided to those without access to health care, and the community she found at the center all inspired Dannis to take some big steps in her life.

Today she is a Ph.D. student at Loyola University Chicago and is part of the Integrative Studies in Ethics and Theology with an emphasis on political and eco-feminist theology. She received her master's in theology from Catholic Theological Union as a Bernardin Scholar, continuing the legacy of Cardinal Bernardin at the Catholic Common Ground Initiative. Dannis and her husband, Thomas Cook, (associate director of spiritual formation for lay students at CTU) helped to create an intentional community, the Hope House, at the Port Ministries in Chicago.

The path Dannis' life has taken seems like an extension of the life we sisters shared with her in the SSJ Vol-

unteer Corps. We couldn't be more grateful to have had her be a part of our lives or more proud of the gift her life is to the world!

Alyssa: giving through music

Sometimes the path of our volunteers isn't so clear, and can be at times confusing, as was the case for Alyssa Rodriguez. Every month I go to Cornell and Ithaca College to meet with students and talk about call and service. It was on one of these trips, that I met Alyssa through the campus ministry at Ithaca College. She was interested in giving a year of service at Nativity Preparatory Academy, a middle school connected to the SSJ Volunteer Corps. Alyssa is an accomplished violinist and fiddler and thought that she would someday become a music teacher; serving at Nativity would be a good opportunity to test this desire.

Alyssa enjoyed being part of our community of four sisters and four other volunteers. She liked the idea of sharing life, cooking and prayer, even though it was new for her. When it was her turn to lead prayer, she'd play a piece of music on her laptop, and we would listen and reflect on how the music spoke to us about the presence of God. This style of prayer seemed to speak to the other volunteers, but it was a new experience for a couple of our sisters, especially our oldest, who is 87. In time, and with her hearing aids in, she became fully on board with this experience of prayer!

It wasn't long before Alyssa, her principal, and we sisters realized that teaching middle school was not Alyssa's calling. In fact she was miserable. It seemed that everything she tried was, in her words, a "failure," despite constant support and mentoring on all our parts. One late evening I sat down with Alyssa to discuss how her day had gone; actually I listened while she had a good cry. She had come to realize that she should not apply to graduate school for education. "That's good news. You have learned something very important about yourself—you are not called to teach in a classroom. Some people would ignore that insight and would have continued on their original path, because of fear or family pressure.... The big question is what are you passionate about, what gives you life?"

I already knew the answer to my question because she had burned every meal she ever made and was late for most community gatherings because she was playing her violin rather than stirring the pot or showing up for prayer!



Following her time with the SSJ Volunteer Corps Dannis Matteson continues to serve the church and build community as a married woman.

I looked at her tear-streaked face and asked God to give me the words she needed. “This year we are not going to work on you becoming a teacher, instead we will work on you becoming a person and discover who God desires you to be. Had you ever thought about spiritual direction?”

“No,” she said through her tears. “What’s that?”

I explained how everyone is on a journey, and every person’s journey is spiritual whether they recognize it or not. A spiritual director can help you to discover the holy moments and places in your life, which you might otherwise miss, and help you make good decisions for your life. “One of our sisters is a spiritual director and would be happy to meet with you if you like.”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, “can I call her now?”

“How about you wait until morning?”

Alyssa worked with one of our sister directors weekly instead of monthly, because, as our sister put it, “Alyssa has not been formed for the spiritual life, in fact, for life in general. She only knows her music, and she needs to discover how good she is in order to do good with her passion and gifts.”

Today Alyssa is an accomplished fiddler who teaches others to fiddle one-on-one and in small groups. She plays with a variety of music groups in the Rochester, New York area and works at our local public radio station hosting a music show. Alyssa has discovered what makes her come alive and is offering her life to bring joy to the world.

Alyssa Rodriguez plays the fiddle. Alyssa realized through her volunteer experience that she was called to music but not to classroom teaching.



Tim: nurturing a nascent faith

Volunteers come seeking, desiring to give, wanting to make the world a better place, and usually, if they are

open to God’s grace, discover they themselves become better persons. The trick as a volunteer, vocation director, or community member is to stay nimble, remain humble, and be open to allow God to work in us.

Sometimes a young person comes to us with no faith expression, like Tim Blier, who is the nephew of a friend of mine from another SSJ community. She called me one day to say her nephew, Tim, had taken the long route to complete his undergraduate studies in engineering. At age 27 Tim was asking, “What is my next step in life?” My friend thought that if Tim lived and served in a faith-filled and supportive community like ours, he might find his footing and flourish.

We interviewed Tim on Skype because he lived at a distance. He was confident he could be a good math tutor at Nativity Prep. And, yes, he could handle community living; after all, he had lived with various groups of friends throughout college and beyond. “Well,” we said, “this is a bit different, you will be responsible to clean a portion of this 18 bedroom house, you will have to take your turn in cooking for the community, and you will need to take your turn in leading prayer every week.”

Silence, then: “Cooking I can do, I made a living by being a short order cook, but leading prayer? I don’t know how to do that!”

We said, “Not to worry, you don’t have to lead the first few weeks until you get the hang of it, and one of us will partner with you until you are comfortable.”

So we invited Tim to come join us. He arrived a few days before I returned from retreat. I received a voice message from him that sounded a bit desperate. “Please call me when you can, I don’t know about living in community...” Uh oh, I thought, what happened?

When I called Tim back, I discovered that the two 80-something sisters I live with started his first experience of prayer with the “State of the Heart.” This is a prayer practice handed down to us by our first sisters in 1650. It gives us an opportunity to search for the action of grace among us and to notice whether or not we are responding to that grace, in order that we might be able to follow God’s desires for us. Tim freaked out. “I don’t use God language. Even though my aunt is a sister, I wasn’t raised in the church; I can’t do this!”

“Can you think about a time in your week that you experienced goodness, kindness or compassion or something that gave you hope?” Yes. “Then talk about that, and you will be sharing the “State of Your Heart.”

Tim needed help to translate the experience into language familiar to him; once he could do that, he could fully enter into the experience, and eventually he would

come to lead this process. The SSJ Volunteer Corps has a vast library on prayer by different writers from distinct traditions. One book that caught Tim's attention was *Daily Prayer with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. He regularly used this book for leading prayer. Bonhoeffer's message is very relevant today, which spoke to our entire community, giving us a rich resource for prayer and reflection.

As time went on we offered Tim the possibility of spiritual direction with a priest friend of ours. He decided to take advantage of this opportunity, even though he had never spoken to a priest before. What became clear through Tim's life in community and through the support of spiritual direction is that he had a deep hunger to grow and to be generous with his life. Today Tim is in graduate school in a local college for engineering and continues to tutor the children he had taught at Nativity. Only God knows where Tim will go, yet after his time with us I know he will have a better foundation on which to stand and make good decisions for his life.

Spiritual hunger

Tim's experience of being raised without a faith tradition has become common. Harvard Divinity School students Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston wrote for *Occasional Papers* (Summer 2017, Leadership Conference of Women Religious) on "The Hunger for Depth and Meaning Among Millennials." They reported, "According to the Pew Research Center, more than a third of Americans between 18 and 35 are now unaffiliated, meaning, when asked on a survey what religious identity they hold, they answer 'none of the above.' What's really interesting is that the overwhelming majority of these 'nones' aren't necessarily atheists. Two-thirds believe in God or a universal spirit, and one in five even prays every day."

This summer ter Kuile and Thurston gathered a group of "nones" to spend two days with nuns in order to listen to each other's stories, learn from each other, and consider ways to collaborate on a common call to serve the unmet needs of the world. The authors made two recommendations: 1. Create one-on-one "eldering" relationships with Millennial community leaders and 2. Create intergenerational spiritual communities

Both are practices we have embraced for 21 years in our SSJ community. For instance we have a "Mass and a Meal" with students from Nazareth College, in which 15 to 20 students participate. They get off campus to come to our convent to worship and eat. For some it is an avenue to check out the church again. By opening our home in this way students see our lives as normal and



Tim Blier with the author (center left) and other Sisters of St. Joseph.

feel more free to stop by when they are in the area.

Offering volunteer opportunities and times to just "loiter with intent" with young people affirms what vocation directors have learned about the ripeness of this group to the Catholic concept of vocation. Following the 2014 study of the vocational impact of volunteering, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate wrote: "While the vast majority of volunteers (89 percent of the men and 98 percent of the women) have not pursued priesthood or religious life, nevertheless this is a group of young adult Catholics to whom bishops and the leadership of religious institutes should pay careful attention. The support, encouragement, and engagement with current and former volunteers can have nothing but positive consequences for dioceses and religious institutes through both the nurturing of religious vocations and the future cadre of local church leaders."

Since beginning the SSJ Volunteer Corps we have been blessed to receive five women into our congregation as a result of their time of living and serving with us. Two of these women have left us to forge happy marriages, and the most recent woman entered our congregation in September 2017. All of them told us that knowing us up close and personal, both in ministry and community, helped them to imagine their own lives in this way. These experiences allowed them to take steps to explore our life more deeply and to discover how God was calling them.

Recalling their experiences leads me full circle to the words of Howard Thurman because he captures well what is happening spiritually for volunteers: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." ■