



BEING PRESENT TO ONE ANOTHER

PEANUT BUTTER AND JELLY SANDWICHES OFFERING CONNECTIONS

DEBORAH CARLSON-DOOM, LV 95-97

While I was only a volunteer for two years, the impact of my experience has formed much of my life.

Twenty-five years ago, I was first introduced to my volunteer experience, and many of those initial moments are ingrained in my memory. When I was nearing the end of my senior year at College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minnesota, I went to New York City to visit and determine if the placement would be a good match for me. It was the first time I had been to NYC, and I was traveling alone and was apprehensive.

I had to take a flight to Newark and a bus to Penn Station where Brother Ed Phelan, whom I had never met, was going to meet me pursuant to some sketchy directions. I recall sitting in a waiting area in Penn Station surrounded by pigeons and a feeling of the truly unknown. Brother Ed walked in, and we were promptly off in a 15-passenger Highbridge van to, of all the places, FAO Schwartz to get a quick birthday present, followed by Highbridge Community Life



Deborah Carlson-Doom, LV 95-97, back right, and Colleen McGeehan, LV 1993-94, back left, vacation with their families at the Jersey Shore.

Center to meet people, a brief driving tour of the South Bronx, prepping for a birthday party and then the birthday celebration. At the end of the evening, I called my family to let them know I had made it. From the tone of my voice, my parents concluded, “You are going there, aren’t you?” They were right. **There**

was no way I was going to miss out on experiencing that chaotic, exciting, love-filled place. That visit and the subsequent years opened my mind and heart to new ways of knowing myself, having relationships with others and finding my place in the world.

Those relationships were formed over two years of intensity and communal living. The same year I moved to the Melrose Lasallian Community, Jonathon Kozol published *Amazing Grace* highlighting the grave inequities and injustices of children and families living and surviving in the South Bronx, our neighborhood. The suffering of people was obvious to us as we lived and worked in our neighborhood.

Perhaps most notable was recognizing that the service we were providing was affecting our lives more than the lives of the people we were serving. Nevertheless, we continued to witness, experience community and serve as much as we were able.

One of the commitments of our community at Melrose was to make two loaves of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches each day, wrap them in napkins, and hand out two per person as they knocked at the door. Every day we made the sandwiches, and every day the doorbell rang and we handed out every sandwich, providing us daily, poignant physical connection with the most needy in our community.

Working side by side to make and wrap and distribute the sandwiches was sticky, time consuming and felt like an act of Communion for those living in and out of the house.

Over the course of 25 years, I have moved many times, married, experienced the death of a spouse, remarried, had children, completed graduate school and had several different jobs. Through each of these life-changing joys and tragedies, Lasallian Volunteers

and Brothers from those two years were by my side. The relationships remain integral parts of my life, influence my decision making, support and challenge me, and call me back to myself. I am uncertain why the relationships forged over those two years have endured more deeply and authentically than many others. Upon reflection, I believe that it is the type of hard and never-ending work, relying on and caring for each other, bearing witness to unbelievable struggle and injustice, gathering to pray and have conversations about poverty and race, and sharing meals and laughter and tears that opened me and others up to have true and deep relationships that abide the stretch of time and distance.

Over the summer, my husband and I joined Colleen McGeehan, LV 93-94, at the Jersey Shore. We brought our children; she brought her daughter and her nieces and nephews. As we sat on the beach and watched our children, whose lives have become entwined, it was obvious that Lasallian Volunteers has reached beyond just one generation, as our children commence another generation of Lasallian family connection.

Deborah Carlson-Doom, LV 95-97, served in New York City at the Highbridge Community Life Center and lived in the Melrose Lasallian Community. She lives now with her family in St. Paul, Minnesota, and continues the work of human and Christian education with special needs youth. A version of this reflection was first presented by her at the Huether Lasallian Conference in 2019.

