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Service can change others' lives as well as your own

April Gutierrez | Oct. 20, 2011

"What gifts do you bring?" I asked a young woman named Sandie recently as I was interviewing students for Campus Ministry's faith-based service immersion trips.

"I give the gift of my time," she replied. "Last weekend, I went to Tijuana with a group (of college students). Sure, we went down and did a couple building projects that will improve a home; but the women in the community kept thanking us for to choosing to spend our time, our presence with them. So that is what I offer, that is my gift."

What Sandie is describing is the sense of solidarity she received in listening to the stories of the women of Tijuana.

On the trip to Mexico, a couple dozen college-aged women, various members of the community and I spent a Saturday morning mixing concrete and hanging drywall.

Right before lunch, our community liaison explained that our group is a service group committed to domestic violence prevention, and I could see the fire grow in some of the women's eyes.

The students and women of Tijuana felt the compassion of talking with one another. We put down our work tools and began a conversation -- witness stories of being abused by a spouse or the role of faith and community members in such turmoil. The students were putting a face on what they had learned about domestic violence. The women experienced grace having someone listen to their experience and in knowing students in another country are working to provide resources for women and children in situations similar to their own.

The students also discussed how profound it was to hear these stories, as October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month [1].

I am grateful for the opportunity to walk with people at this particular moment in life -- I am especially grateful to work at a school that embodies the mission and teaches, embraces and offers service and social justice so vibrantly.

Working alongside college students in service, I came to realize that service is most effectively threefold: in service to community, service to those who you are serving with and service to self -- understanding, knowledge and grace.

The gift of presence is incredibly challenging as students prepare for midterms, experience drama with personal relationships, or suffer from incredible loneliness. Presence is also difficult because it requires a level of vulnerability that might expose our seclusion, superficiality -- or sometimes even scarier, our intelligence and beauty.

Service to the community is how many needs are met. Nationalservice.org reports [2] the number of college

students who volunteer is up about 20 percent from 2002 to 2006.

Certainly, colleges and universities recognize the educational opportunity and benefit of serving. Additionally, the study suggests the growth rate of college student volunteers (20 percent) is more than double the growth rate of all volunteers (9 percent), and the majority of service continues to be religiously affiliated [3]. A Jesuit institution such as where I work also connects these opportunities to inward reflection and social analysis, questioning the society that requires us to serve in this capacity.

But in working alongside others, I have many experiences of being served by or serving the people I came with. Certainly, that is my goal as a campus minister who provides service opportunities for students. I provide an opportunity for students to engage the community, but I am there to serve the students as well as the greater community.

Service is essential to a genuine relationship with Christ, as it allows for our faith to be lived out and tried. Many times I have walked away from an experience thinking, If I were not a woman of Christ, I don't think I would return to the shelter I regularly serve in. Needing to be served sucks, and yet I expect those who I am serving to express gratitude?!

If I allow the gratitude to come from God, I free the person in front of me of my neediness. I am also aware of the learning and growth that happens when I am open to meeting Christ and my neighbor.

I am reminded of a friend saying after she got back from an Alternative Break trip [4] that she loves walking with students in this capacity because they leave home thinking they are going to make a difference in someone else's life, but in the process, realize that the people they went to serve changed their own life.

I love accompanying because of the simplicity and opportunity to be seen and see another. Service can provide experiences where we find clarity and peace with our personal decisions.

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