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Idealist, crazy, selfless, naïve, self-righteous, and...

By Matthew Carroll



nity along Virginia's Eastern Shore we worked alongside residents to demolish dilapidated homes so that new and affordable residences could be constructed. Throughout our week, we met with community leaders and held nightly reflections in an effort to understand all we were discovering about the educational and economic issues facing the residents of our community.

Like many of my classmates who experience volunteer programs each year, I returned from my trip on fire. Service to others became central to the way I located myself within the world. I began to volunteer at a school for special needs students and assumed a leadership position within the Appalachia community. This past year I participated in an international service-immersion teaching in Belize.

The person I was began to change.

Former Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., recognized the ability of these programs to change the individual. He said in a speech given at Santa Clara University in 2000 that "the real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become".

At a Jesuit institution, the goal is to produce men and women for others. Encounters with service-learning are crucial for students' understanding of what it means to become just that. Fr. Kolvenbach's message was that the wealth of service-learning and volunteer experiences at Jesuit universities "should not be too optional or peripheral, but at the core of every Jesuit university's program of studies."

Unfortunately, while the availability of service-learning opportunities at our Jesuit universities is extensive, Fr. Kolvenbach's vision of their centrality to student formation has yet to be realized.

Many Catholic high schools and colleges believe so strongly in the value of service that they require all students to participate in some form as a graduation requirement. After calling each of the Jesuit universities in the US, I was surprised to find that although boast of their students' commitment in serving others, few required service of their students.

Jesuit education values "care of the whole person." Core curriculums are filled with a breadth of subjects in order to expose students to ideas they may not have explored on their own. That is why core courses are required.

I ask, why not extend the same standard to service-learning?

Nearly all of the admissions officers at the universities I spoke with highlighted select programs that required service. However, when asked if it is possible for students to complete their four years without service, each responded that it is. While Jesuit schools are often right to believe their students will naturally be inclined to serve others, by not requiring at least some first-hand exposure to service-learning they run the risk of robbing some students of potentially life-changing experiences.

If even one student is affected or changed in some way by his or her service requirement, then is that not worth the inconvenience it may cause those who are not?

Such experiences can light a fire within students, a flame that can spread throughout the world. And after all, isn't that what the founder of the Society envisioned? ■

Matthew Carroll, a graduate of Boston College, is currently serving as a Jesuit Volunteer in Los Angeles with Homeboy Industries.

By the time this article is published, I will have graduated from Boston College and be spending my post-baccalaureate year as a volunteer. When my year is complete, I hope to begin graduate school in order to pursue a career as a teacher in an under-resourced, inner-city school. My friends and family have called me an idealist, crazy, selfless, naïve, self-righteous and everything in between.

I'm not sure who is correct. Maybe they all are in some way. What I do know is that whatever I am, I am so because BC changed me through my service-learning experiences.

My first experience with service-learning at BC came during my sophomore year as a member of the Appalachia Volunteers Program. Meeting each Sunday for several months, members were introduced to the ideas of poverty, marginalization, racism, and inequality in the United States. We attended lectures, held small group discussions, and reflected on what role our faith – whatever it may be – plays in responding to the realities that we were introduced to.

The program culminated in a week-long service and immersion program throughout the eastern US. In my commu-