

10-1-2005

# Student Profiles: Jodie Bowers, John Carroll University

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### Recommended Citation

Calloway, TaLeiza (2005) "Student Profiles: Jodie Bowers, John Carroll University," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 28, Article 17.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol28/iss1/17>

## Being part of the joy and pain of the homeless

By TaLeiza Calloway

**S**aint Benedict Joseph Labre, you gave up honor, money and home for love of Jesus... Help us to set our own hearts on Jesus and not on the things of this world... Enable us to see Jesus in our poor brothers and sisters and not judge them by appearances... Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, poor in the eyes of men and women but rich in the eyes of God, pray for us.

This prayer opens the Friday night journeys of service for the "Labre vets" of John Carroll University. The Labre Project, bought to Cleveland's Jesuit university by graduate student Jodie Bowers, is dedicated to bringing friendship and food to the homeless of Ohio's largest city. Each Friday students, faculty, and staff members gather to pray and to prepare food. They then set out to make the rounds. The participants vary from week to week, but Bowers is a constant.

Bowers remembers his first time with the Labre vets, walking in the dark down railroad tracks and seeing a badly scarred, bare-chested man sitting on a crate. The group introduced themselves and so did John\*. They hung out, and when the visitors were about to leave, John offered a prayer: "Thank you, God, for blessing and watching over me. Thank you for allowing the people of Labre to visit and bless others who are less fortunate." Leaving John, Jodie wrestled with the thought, "How can someone who has so little be so rich?" Bowers quickly decided, "I want to be a part of the joy and pain of the homeless." He is.

As students load the university van, they talk with obvious anticipation about whom they hope to see on this trip and what they experienced on previous expeditions. They speak of Federico's singing, Charlie sharing how his wife taught him to read using comics, Terry regaling the group with his tales of nocturnal weekend adventures.

Less than a half hour later, in a gritty downtown neighborhood, Dave,



### Jodie Bowers John Carroll University

a tall, husky man wearing a backward ball cap, ambles out of his makeshift camp when he hears Jodie call his name. Dave shakes the hand of everyone. Then he conducts a tour of where he lives and says, "In a few weeks, I'm going to Florida to visit some family." It's a frequent refrain with the homeless we visit. They tell you about being uprooted. They tell of the violence they have suffered. It may not all be true, but the violence is certainly by no means imaginary. John, Jodie's first homeless friend, was set afire by teenagers – it took him months to be able to sit upright.

"The people we need to look after the most in the community are the ones we neglect the most," says Bowers passionately. He believes Labre is on track because: "We go to

them and are their visitors. We affirm their lives and offer them dignity. We try to share friendship, compassion, a listening ear; instead of fearing them, we try to dissolve the us and them and create an us and us. We ask their name and it goes from there..."

Bowers graduated from Cleveland's St. Ignatius High School in 1997. He graduated from Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles with a degree in finance and marketing. He joined the workforce with an automotive manufacturer, but soon felt "I needed to do something more fulfilling."

After three years, he left his job and joined Ignatius' Alumni Volunteers Corps. He also became part of the school's Arrupe House community outreach program. During this time, he met Tim Grady, Arrupe House's director, and Jim Skerl, a theology teacher at the school. They introduced Bowers to Labre and he was hooked.

Approximately 20 members of the university community go out on weekly trips to bring food and themselves to the homeless. When Bowers is asked why he does it, he tends to reverse the question: "Why do people not do Labre? I do it because there's a need out there. I've built relationships with these people; I consider them my friends. In the world we live in, you cannot not help others."

Bowers is in religious studies at the university in University Heights, and he's looking to campus ministry. His ultimate vision is to open his version of *Romero Center*, a force for social justice and the beatitudes.

*TaLeiza Caloway, who graduated from John Carroll University this May, plans to pursue a career in journalism.*

*\* names of the homeless have been changed.*