Blog
Spirituality



The Organ Mountains in Las Cruces, New Mexico (Provided photo)



by Samantha Kominiarek

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Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015. This is our 10th round of bloggers: Honorine Uwimana is a St. Joseph Worker in Orange, California, and Samantha Kominiarek is an Assumption Mission Associate in Chaparral, New Mexico. This is Samantha's final blog post.*

At the end of September, my first month in Chaparral, I was feeling incredibly and overwhelmingly challenged.

It seemed the only thing I could focus on were the differences between this life in New Mexico and my life in college in Pennsylvania or in the comfort of my own home in Massachusetts.

I did not know anyone well enough to consider them more than friendly acquaintances, and I missed being able to hug my friends and family from college and home.

The view outside my window of cactuses and mountains was unlike the green trees and buildings where I had lived before.



Every time Samantha Kominiarek pulls into the driveway of her home, Casa Maria Eugenia, she stops to admire the beauty of the desert landscape. (Provided photo)

The authentic Mexican food here made my mouth feel as though it were on fire, and the "spicy" Mexican food I enjoyed before coming here seemed quite tame by comparison.

The language I needed to use to communicate with others here was a language I had previously used primarily in classes or in bilingual settings.

Everything felt different. Nothing felt comfortable. I was not sure if I should stay.

I called a thoughtful friend from college, who encouraged me to spend time journaling about these thoughts and feelings. She sent me some reflection questions to consider. The first was: "What were you feeling/thinking when you made the decision to go/start/experience this new thing?"

In my journal, I wrote:

When I committed to this year of service, I was hoping to …

- Build community in Chaparral.
- Form connections.
- Work for love and justice.
- Understand more about immigration.
- Practice Spanish.
- Be immersed in a new culture.
- Learn about a new area of the country.
- Discover more about myself and my journey.

After writing this, I took a deep breath and reread what I wrote. These hopes were actions I was actively engaging in every day during the past month. So I decided to hold on to these feelings and thoughts that made me want to start doing this and give it a little more time.



On the walk back to our classroom after some afternoon activities, Samantha Kominiarek and her students paused for a moment to notice the way the sun bounced off the lockers to create this beautiful sight. (Provided photo)

A little more time turned into a few months, and eventually, I fell in love with this life in Chaparral. This happened through meaningful connections with humanity. These connections, or kinship, allowed me to embrace people and to be embraced by them.

Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, said in an episode of the Civil Conversations Project with On Being, "The measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them. And that means the decided movement towards awe, and giant steps away from judgment."

Once I began to recognize the humanity in all these new experiences, I stopped making myself feel like such an outsider or intruder. This does not mean I completely understand every aspect of the challenges of this community, such as leaving one's country to migrate to a new country in search of safety. However, the people of Chaparral and I still have significant similarities. We can see ourselves in each other.



Cookie Langosa, one of my favorite dogs in Chaparral (Provided photo)

We can enjoy the same empanadas de calabaza from the local *panadería*, appreciate the beauty of the mountains against the blue sky by hiking on Saturday mornings, feel delighted by looking at pictures of cute dogs. We can miss our families in different ways but still long to be with someone. We can feel stressed and know that spending some time mindfully coloring will make it better. We can feel comforted by baking a cake for a deceased relative to celebrate his or her birthday. We can desire to stand outside to watch the snow fall all day.

The reasons I wanted to begin this year of service impacted the reason I decided to stay. Once I moved toward awe and away from judgment, the love and beauty of this community became so much more clear to me. I wanted to be here, with the people of Chaparral.

I have found myself within my students, the migrants, my friends, and what I would now consider some of my most meaningful and impactful relationships. We still all have our unique paths and stories, but that is part of what makes this love so wonderful. Despite the incredibly different life experiences that can feel alienating, we can still discover and learn ways to embrace, love and unite with each other. We can see ourselves in others and also allow ourselves to be seen. These deep connections are kinship.

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New Mexico is still a very different place to live than Pennsylvania or Massachusetts, and that is something I do not believe will change anytime soon. However, now there are people here whom I love so deeply and can stop by their homes or jobs for a hug whenever necessary, and they can do the same with me. I have grown to love the cactuses growing in the yard and the mountains that seem to expand in every direction. The Mexican food is still very spicy, but I can enjoy it in very small, ***chiquitín***, doses. I am continuing to practice my Spanish, and my students like to laugh when I mispronounce a word, but I am learning!

There is so much to experience with awe when we begin to realize how connected we all are.

[Samantha Kominiarek is doing a year of service with the Assumption Mission Associates in Chaparral, New Mexico.]

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.