Blog
Spirituality



Maddie Thompson, left, and Madison Thomas, a former Good Shepherd Volunteer, pose with their welcome signs outside of Collier High School in Wickatunk, New Jersey. (Christina Hardebeck)



by Maddie Thompson

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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. We are beginning our 12th round of bloggers: Maddie Thompson is a Good Shepherd Volunteer in Wickatunk, New Jersey; Ali Alderman is a Loretto Volunteer in Denver; and Celina Kim Chapman is a Good Shepherd Volunteer in New York City. This is Maddie's first blog post. Read more about her.*

I spent one of my first weekends as a volunteer in New Jersey surrounded by markers, colored pencils and posterboard and making too many runs to the neighborhood Staples (which became one of my most frequent places to visit). At the time, I jumped into the task at hand without recognizing the symbolism of this weekend and its many trips to Staples.

Collier High School has a creative, tender and beautiful tradition for the first day of school: lining its long and windy entrance road into campus with posters created by Good Shepherd Volunteers. I channeled my love for the arts and embraced this rite of passage, crafting quite a few signs alongside former-volunteers-turned-staff-members before day one commenced.

The day before the students were to arrive, we took a golf cart and traversed the main drive to find the perfect trees to house our posters. Before long, the forest became a gallery of art, showcasing just some of what students and staff would encounter at Collier: acceptance, invitation, community, hospitality, learning, laughter, safety, love and more.

The mission of Collier Youth Services is "to provide at-risk youth a chance to grow toward their potential in an environment that promotes belonging, dignity and hope." As an alternative high school, Collier helps students work toward behavioral, emotional and social growth in a therapeutic environment. My job that first weekend was to welcome new and seasoned students into this environment of Collier.

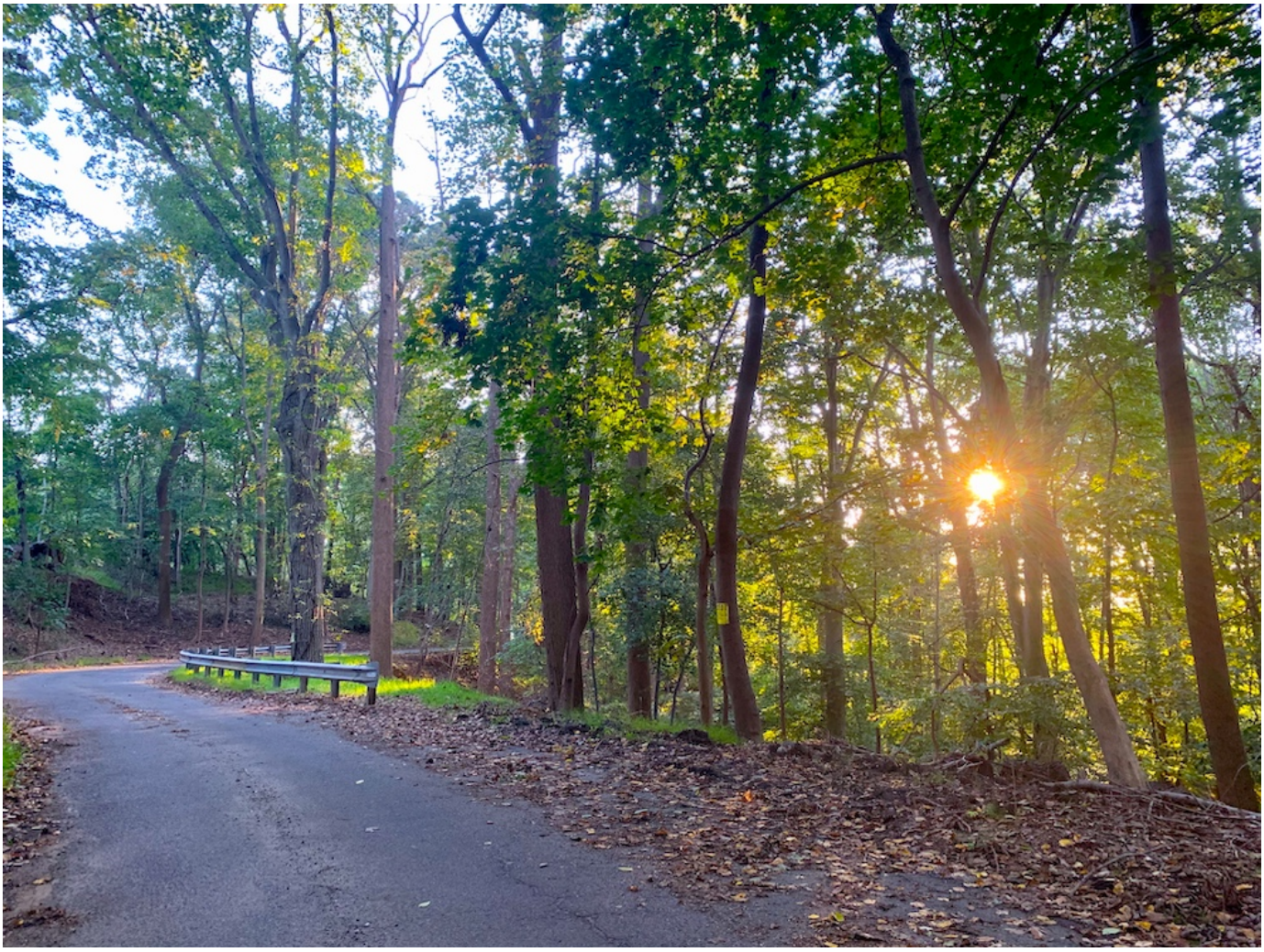
What an absolute gift it was to make that already beautiful (but somewhat intimidating) drive into school a bit more welcoming. I simply did my best to put into color the words staff and past volunteers use to describe this special place. I hoped to bring a piece of comfort, a small smile, or a feeling of safety to the students trekking into school on buses for their very first time or after so many months away.

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Trying to walk in their shoes for a moment, I imagined what it would be like to return to campus after the last school year: months of remote learning, no in-person sports or clubs, and a lack of hugs goodbye before summer began. I also tried to wrap my head and heart around what it might feel like to be driving toward a new school for the first time, approaching a large high school campus, not knowing the staff or students, and wearing a mask, all while trying to make a good first impression.

Our posters could not offer that physical hug, hand-squeeze or high-five that might provide a bit of comfort in transition. However, they spoke the truth that Collier is a place where each person can find belonging and where "small miracles happen every day," a common slogan heard around the school.

Despite the chaos of school opening amid a global pandemic, creativity abounds: in our welcome posters, in the ways students greet one another, in our emails of encouragement and more. A quote from St. Mary Euphrasia, the foundress of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, came to mind as I witnessed the organized chaos of day one: "Creativity is a sign of life."



The winding road leading to the Collier High School campus in Wickatunk, New Jersey (Maddie Thompson)

Collier is overflowing with this creativity. It is in the trees, the staff, the students, the safety guidelines, the curriculum and more. The pandemic has asked each one of us to use our creativity and imagine new ways of being. After witnessing the creativity of staff and students alike, I can only imagine the lively year ahead. While it may look different than ever before, the Collier community will continue to find beauty, create space and build a campus of inclusion.

As the first day came to a close, I reflected on a prayer shared during our Good Shepherd Volunteer orientation and retreat:

> Oh, Shepherd God, may I be aware and conscious of the divine energy flowing through me, longing for connection with all of creation, as it calls

me forth on a transformative journey of becoming fully human, of being a compassionate, loving and reconciling presence in my relationships, especially with those on the margins.



Madison Thomas, a former Good Shepherd Volunteer, hangs a welcome poster along the entry road to Collier High School in Wickatunk, New Jersey. (Maddie Thompson)

Divine energy flows through this campus, energy that beckons connection and inclusion. The trees know it. The staff members know it. Many of the students know

it or will come to know it soon enough.

Welcoming the students to campus with creative posters allowed me the opportunity to dive into and participate in the authentic Collier community from day one. This tradition of lining the entry to campus prompted me to imagine what it would be like to celebrate each holiday with the same creative energy and hospitality. We have since lined the drive with Halloween greetings and Thanksgiving decorations. Creativity abounds.

I look forward to the year ahead, a journey of uncovering the divine energy in posters, Zoom meetings, socially distanced lunchrooms, creative holiday celebrations, the forest of trees that surrounds me, and places I have not yet encountered. I hear the trick to discovering this divine energy is to "just love," as St. Mary Euphrasia did. I think I'll give it my best shot.

[Maddie Thompson is a Good Shepherd Volunteer serving at Collier High School in New Jersey.]

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