Blog
Ministry
Social Justice



On a walk along the Hudson River in the Palisades Park in New Jersey, I am incredibly grateful for all those who have traveled with me this year. Being a Good Shepherd Volunteer has been quite an adventure! (Courtesy of Celina Kim Chapman)



by Maddie Thompson

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Wickatunk, New Jersey — May 5, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

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 Maddie's final Notes from the Field blog post.*

As I write my final blog post for Global Sisters Report and approach the end of the school year at Collier High School, I reflect on the many stories I have encountered throughout my volunteer year. The Collier community has welcomed me with open arms and gifted me with its stories as I partnered with students individually in tutoring sessions and contributed to a class as an active member of a cohort.

As our days together this school year come to a close, I find myself growing sentimental and cherishing the smallest of moments. Greeting students each morning as I take their temperatures on their way into school, I am cognizant of being one of the first faces they see as they walk through the door. With my smile behind the mask, a compliment of some sort, or even a calming head nod, I try to offer a small piece of thanks to our students for letting me be a part of their journeys this school year. These small moments of connection in the morning prepare me for a day filled with adventure in different classrooms and across campus.

On Friday afternoons, students engage in one of Collier's clubs, which include a variety of activities, including socially distanced volleyball, cornhole (beanbag toss game), meditation, and anime appreciation. A couple of Fridays ago, I joined the hiking club on a walk along the Collier trails. As we journeyed through the woods of campus, I joined in conversations with students and staff as well as embraced moments of silence, appreciating the surrounding beauty. I watched as the students hiking in front of me took in the sights, smells and touches of nature along the trail.





Left: All of my senses were engaged while journeying along the trails of Collier with the hiking club. I loved seeing all the green growing on the forest floor and the trees beginning to bloom. Right: I relish moments when I can reflect on the movements, lessons and growth from this year. I took time the other day to look out over the Collier property and enjoy a cup of tea while thinking about the many experiences this year. (Maddie Thompson)

This physical walking with students in hiking club seemed to parallel my overall experience of journeying with students throughout this school year in a pandemic. Gratitude overwhelms me when I consider the progress and growth I have seen students make this year despite the many obstacles in their way. I will forever be thankful for having a front-row seat to watch our students learn and practice social skills, find excitement in a new art form or creative project, connect with peers after experiencing isolation, discover their voices, and grow in confidence.

As I help prepare for end-of-the-year activities like senior team-building day, senior retreat and graduation, I feel as though I am about to read the end of a new favorite book. However, I know I am only approaching the end of a great chapter. Our

students have many more chapters ahead of them, each filled with plot twists, exciting moments, hardships to overcome, character development and more. Their time at Collier and even this year during a pandemic are simply chapters in their beautiful, messy life stories.

Serving at Collier has allowed me to glimpse small pieces of our students' worlds as they invite me into their stories. It has been a privilege to learn even a bit about who they are as young adults, creators and dreamers. I have treasured the gift of learning about who these young people are and what makes them come alive: the style of movie they prefer to model in film class, their favorite dessert in the lunchroom, their intended career, their go-to music, their hidden talents or their sense of humor.

Advertisement

Collier is a place where students learn to tell their own stories, reflect on past chapters and build a future full of adventures. Watching students lead their lives and learn to embrace their stories has been a true treasure that I hope to never take for granted. Doing life and school in a pandemic is not easy or normal. Yet our students inspire me with their resilience and hope. They continue to pick up the pen and write their own stories.

At Collier, social workers, teachers, aides and other staff members continue to amaze me in the variety of ways they accommodate our students and their many different needs, especially this year. I watch staff choose love, time and time again, as they adjust their lesson plans, tone of voice, classroom space, body language and more for our students. Staff members go out of their way to not only meet our students' needs, but also to create an environment where each student can thrive.



I visited Hot Sand in Ashbury Park, New Jersey, with former Good Shepherd Volunteer Christina Hardebeck. (Courtesy of Christina Hardebeck)

My hope for staff, students, friends, family, strangers and self is that we may find pride in our own stories and gratitude for those who have helped to shape them. As we come to the end of our current chapter, in whatever shape that might be, may we find a sabbath rest in the form we know best — or in unsuspecting and surprising ways. May this rest meet us where we are and fill our cups to the brim with energy to continue partnering with others as we work for a more just and loving world. May we find the strength needed to care for our community, our clients and ourselves.

May we learn to celebrate the beautiful moments of our own stories: new relationships, moments of growth, healthy boundaries, setting goals, overcoming obstacles and more.

Writing for Global Sisters Report has been a gift of engaging in reflection, noticing the little moments and cultivating gratitude for all those who support me this year. I think most importantly, however, this role as writer has opened my eyes to the story I am living and the stories I am invited to join all around me. What a gift it is to connect with others, grow alongside new friends, and embrace our individual and collective story!

To my Collier community, thank you for letting me be a part of your beautiful, messy and still-unfolding story.

- 

  A creative outing with one of my community support people, Christina Hardebeck, had me feeling lucky to have such neat experiences and memories as part of my volunteer year. I am incredibly thankful for the new friends I have

met this year. (Maddie Thompson)

- 

  At Hot Sand in Asbury Park, New Jersey, where former Good Shepherd Volunteer Christina Hardebeck and I made sun tiles out of colorful glass pieces, I chose to create a rainbow as a symbol of hope for the future. (Maddie Thompson)

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