Blog
Ministry



One of the philosophies behind a program we use at the Rose and Blum Close to Home Residences in New York City is SELF, which stands for Safety, Emotions, Loss and Future. Each category is important for problem-solving as youth work toward trauma recovery. (Cailleigh Pattisall)



by Caileigh Pattisall

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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 latest round of the series features volunteers in Orange, California; Nazareth, Kentucky; and New York City. This is Caileigh Pattisall's first blog post. Read more about her.*

I believe that empathy is one of humanity's strongest gifts. A person's ability to empathize with another's situation to the point of wanting to change it for the better is what drives service work.

I also believe that empathy is lacking in today's society. We get caught up in our own lives, seemingly too busy to ask anything more than a passing "Hi, how are you?" and not fully listening to the response, or not quite comfortable enough to reply anything other than "fine" or "good." We get wrapped up in the societal game of making others feel comfortable — to the point of becoming numb ourselves.

A few months before I started with Good Shepherd Volunteers, I made a new friend. Maddie was so consistent checking in on others' "emotional batteries." She always wanted to know, on a scale from 1 to 100, what percentage are you emotionally? And you know, I've never felt so seen.

It felt good to check in with someone.

I went to college to study social justice and communication. I became increasingly passionate about incorporating new methods of restorative and therapeutic justice into existing punitive-driven systems that the United States is so accustomed to. Our jails and prisons are flawed, often producing people who are worse off than before incarceration. They perpetuate a cycle of career criminals, providing no tools or support to people that really need help.



Members of the New York City community of Good Shepherd Volunteers, from left: Mo Berry, Caileigh Pattisall, Maria Jose Miranda and Gabby Kasper (Courtesy of Krystle Powell)

I'm spending my year working as a Good Shepherd Volunteer for Rose House and Barbara Blum Residences, which provide long-term residential and supportive services to youth placed there through family court. Our girl juvenile offenders live at Rose House; our boys live at Barbara Blum. These residences, which act as an alternative to incarceration, are run through Good Shepherd Services, a New York-based nonprofit that seeks to help women, adolescents and children affected by violence, poverty and neglect.

Once I started, I was nervous that I wouldn't have the space in my service site to hone in on how I was feeling. I was still in that societal mindset that professionalism and emotional support can't go hand in hand. To my surprise, the residences actually encouraged it! The program focuses on trauma-informed care for kids, which includes regular community meetings, check-ins, therapy and group

programming.

During the first week on the job, I participated in my first community meeting with the boys. As part of the program, the boys are expected to check in with one another each morning and again in the afternoon at staff turnover. The participants go around and ask each other a series of questions.



Another activity I got to help out with during my first week on the job: organizing school supplies for our residents and their families (Courtesy of Cailleigh Pattisall)

"How're you feeling today?"

Many would answer "calm," "happy," or "tired." "Good" is not a feeling — and if you choose to use this word, you will have to elaborate. This I experienced when I answered "good," so I went on to say that I was excited to be there and to meet everyone.

"What is your goal for the day?"

Many of the youth's goals were to get through the day or to have a good day. If a youth expected to move to another level in the program, their goal would shift to finishing their "phase-up" project or to be able to get a home pass that weekend.

"Who can help you with that?"

This particular question is important for a few reasons. First, it gives the participants space to ask for help. If they have a certain project to finish, this can be the space where they can say, "My youth development counselors can help me with that" or "Everyone can help me with that."

At this point in the check-in, the other participants reply, "I got you."

It was powerful to be surrounded by so much mutual support. It truly created an environment where these kids can be heard and express their emotional needs. This question also allows the youth to take responsibility for helping themselves.

Another answer I heard was "I can help myself with this today." These kids are able to recognize that they have a big part to play in reaching their goals. The choices they make directly affect whether or not they can have a good day. The response from the group was still "I got you," even when they weren't asking for help, which made that feeling of support even stronger.

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"What commitment will you carry throughout your day?"

We practice seven commitments in the program. These include nonviolence, emotional intelligence, social learning, open communication, shared governance,

social responsibility, and growth and change. During check-in, participants can choose what commitment they want to focus on that day.

"What's your safety plan?"

Everyone has a safety plan. This plan consists of things that we all can think about or activities we can do when we begin to feel overwhelmed. It can be as simple as listening to music or looking forward to a phone call with a family member. These are small but significant moments that we can pull from our toolbox to help cope in the dark moments.

I've been at my service site for four months now, and I've already learned so much about trauma-informed care, the juvenile justice system in New York City, and how I can personally be more emotionally in tune within a community. I feel so fortunate to work in a place that promotes all the aspects that go into therapeutic healing.

I'm so excited to bring you all along with me as I continue this journey into next year. In the meantime, don't forget to check in with your own people.

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