

# THE COMPANION

*The newsletter of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry*

Winter 2016

Issue 21



## God's Inescapable Love

By Mackenzie Buss, 2015-2016 Volunteer  
A graduate of the University of Notre Dame



**Mackenzie Buss**

Carving out time to be alone with God in silence is easier this year than in the past. Nevertheless, I've always treasured my alone time as a backdrop for fresh soul discovery and rejuvenation. Having a space that invites me into prayerful solitude is important to me, I seize the opportunity when it arises.

About a month after we all moved into 18 S. Mount Street, I decided to give our meditation room a benevolent face-lift. I cozied up the room with soft blankets and pillows. I swapped the fluorescent overhead light bulbs for warm twinkling Christmas lights. I also recruited the energetic Elizabeth Modde to drag the plush green chair upstairs with me and plop it down beside the window. I was ready to tackle a year of spiritual growth.

Every morning, clad in my cherry covered flannel jammies and sporting my delightfully reliable bedhead I shuffle down the hall to our little slice of meditative heaven to have a chat with God. That half hour really is a 'Mackenzie Oasis'. Armed with my moleskin, 0.38mm muji pen, bible, and blue mug of coffee, I am in my introverted element and ready to ponder whatever nugget of wisdom pops out of God's word that day. I'm a contemplative at heart, so I always have a hodgepodge of philosophical musings sloshing around in my brain. I'm much more comfortable solitarily journaling and reading than I am socializing or sharing, but I knew this year of living and serving in West Baltimore would push me outside of my introspective comfort zone and into a vast, relatively unfamiliar realm of new people, places, and conversations. I thought my spiritual growth this year would come from pure, solitary Mackenzie prayer time, but God surprised me (as He always does!) with something entirely different; I learned to experience God in daily moments of relationship.

Continued on Page 5

*Editor's Corner,  
Olivia Steback  
BSVM Program Manager*

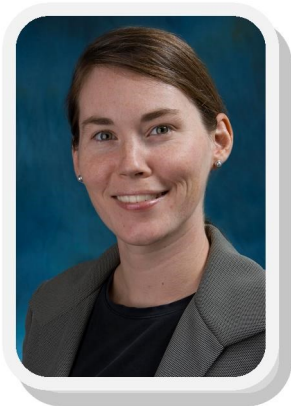


*Even though the soul puts wood on the fire and does this little it can do of itself, the fire of love does not burn. It is through [God's] great mercy that [the soul] sees at least the smoke so as to know that the fire is not entirely dead. ~ St. Teresa of Avila*

St. Teresa of Avila creates a beautiful image of God, one in which God is working within our souls. As a contemplative, she believed that as we open our hearts and allow God to move within us, love grows. We, alone, cannot create this transformation, God acts upon and within us. This process takes place as we rest in God and let go of our need to produce and achieve.

As Mackenzie and Celina reflect on learning through service and the growth of their spiritual lives, they touch on this belief. They reflect on relationships that flow from a ministry of presence and how small acts of service deepen their connections with all those they meet. As they open their lives and resist the urge to fill every moment with action, they create space for God's love. God does not force or push love upon us. God waits for us. In the pages that follow, Mackenzie and Celina both express how BSVM has helped open them to receive God's freely given love.

*Note from the Director,  
Shannon Curran*



We are pleased to announce that Regina Fleck has joined the staff of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry as our Volunteer Recruiter. Regina studied International Studies and Spanish at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland and recently completed a year of full-time service. She served with Project S.E.R.V.E. in Baltimore, an organization sponsored by Catholic Charities. We are excited for Regina to share her enthusiasm for full-time service, particularly service in Baltimore, with young adults across the country. We've already witnessed how Regina's positive energy and enthusiasm are contagious and we appreciate her work in encouraging young adults to discern a year of service with Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry. Please help us welcome Regina to the BSVM community!

It has been a pleasure starting my work as the Volunteer Recruiter for Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry. Ever since my first day when I walked into my office and saw a vase of flowers and card on my desk, until now, three months into the job, I have been shown radical hospitality and support from the staff and volunteers. I am excited to invite students to share in this hospitality through a year of service in Southwest Baltimore. Doing so reminds me of my own year of service at Our Daily Bread, the relationships I formed during my year of service, and the importance of simply offering one's presence. I am invigorated when considering that students I meet may soon have the opportunity to be "good help to those in need" in their own unique way through their ministry in Baltimore.



~ Regina Fleck, Volunteer Recruiter for BSVM





## Moving to the Heart of Service

By Celina Santiago, 2016-2017 Volunteer  
A graduate of Villanova University

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ~ 1 Peter 4:10*

As we, the volunteer community, walked and drove around Baltimore during our first week with Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, I could not help but take in everything around me. Entering this new city, I saw block after block of boarded up houses, a closed down library, and a multitude of corner stores, yet few places with substantial nutritious food. I saw deserted lots full of garbage and few people out on the streets, although the days were pleasant. I saw street benches that read *Baltimore: The Greatest City in America* alongside remnants of beautiful brick houses, now with broken windows and surrounded by rubble, visible signs of the changes the neighborhood had undergone.

As my first impressions sank in, I asked myself what I was doing here, once again reflecting on the questions that had been posed to me months prior to my arrival. *What does it mean that you're doing a year of service? So exactly what are you doing this year? Where are you living? Why would you do that?* Others, who had done a year or more of service, encouraged me. *I loved my year of service, it changed my life! I learned more about myself that year than I could've ever imagined.* Now, I was here in Baltimore and the reality of my year of service was beginning to unfold.

I think service has become a buzz word in our society, sometimes glamourized as the 'thing' to do. The widely accepted belief is: whatever a person's motivation may be, doing something will help in some way. As long as the walls are painted, the garden is weeded, the donation closet is organized; good results will be the effect of action.

For a long time, I held this perception of service as well; service equaled action. It meant doing something and thereby accomplishing something. Throughout my college experience of service, my view changed. I began to understand, for the first time, the concept of ministry of presence. I realized after my first weeklong service trip that while these actions were not bad, I learned more from the trip than I could ever give. By making connections with people and being present during everything I was doing and experiencing, I heard the stories of the people and places I encountered and carried these stories with me.

During my time with BSVM, my understanding of service has continued to expand and grow. Service is no longer actions separate from everyday life. With my community members, service is integrated into the very heart of everything we do. It is not something we can step away from. As a community, we serve each other each day, mindfully taking steps to be more intentional in motivating each other, challenging each other, and being present to each other. As a community, we serve our neighborhood by being present to the people of southwest Baltimore. One way that we do this is by picking up trash on our block and enjoying the grassy area across the street. As we learned during BSVM orientation, it is through small acts like this that we can recognize and honor the life and dignity of our neighbors.

Serving within my ministry placement site at the Women's Resource Center is also a daily lesson in evaluating and reevaluating the meaning of service. The Women's Resource Center is tucked away among row houses, a place you would likely miss if you were not looking for it. It is a place where we have the opportunity to help each person feel worthy and dignified as we work together to keep the space clean, intentionally organize the clothing donations, cook the meals and create engaging workshops.

Continued on Page 6



**2016-2017 BSVM Volunteer Community and Andres Gomez, Site Leader (Left) on their fall retreat.**

## Meet Zachary Wiley

### Experience That Led Zach To A Year Of Service:

In October of 2015, I participated in a week-long volunteer trip to Wheeling, West Virginia. While there, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with people experiencing homelessness and poverty. I loved the community that was created by the organization I was working with, and I was impressed by the passion the leaders had for the work they were doing. This experience led me to devote time in my life to service.

### Dream Vacation Destination:

It would be hard for me to choose just one vacation destination. I would love to go back to Puebla, Mexico, where I studied abroad for a semester. But I would also like to go to Europe, since I haven't had the chance to go there yet. No matter where I travel, I try to spend time experiencing the location and getting to know the people that live there.

### Favorite Family Memory:

My family traveled and went camping a lot when I was growing up, and the time we spent camping makes for some of my favorite memories. I like being in new places, exploring, and spending time in nature. I enjoy time sitting around talking without the distractions of everyday life.



## Meet Maria Abigail Cerezo



### Experience That Led Abbi To A Year Of Service:

The catalytic event that led me to a year of service was my service immersion trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico in January of my senior year. I honestly didn't know what to expect from this particular trip because I didn't know much about New Mexico and the justice issues the native people face. However, the people I met during that trip, Jennifer and Louie, completely changed my definition of grace and solidarity. Jennifer was our site leader and Louie is a former Tesuque nation leader. Jennifer helped me to understand that grace means showing love, tenderness, and vulnerability to all people you encounter. Louie, on the other hand, challenged my definition of solidarity. He told us to, "walk the walk, not talk the talk." When he said this, I looked within myself and I realized that I did not walk the walk. After this trip, two things within me drastically changed: my attitude towards interacting with nature, and my thoughts on postgrad service. I became a vegetarian to be more

conscious of what I was eating, and to take a hard stance against non-sustainable farming and ranching practices. In addition, instead of pursuing research or a temporary scribe position, I knew I had to do a year of service to continue to keep my passion for service burning bright.

### Favorite Family Memory:

My favorite family memory was during a family picnic in the Philippines when I was 10 years old. We hadn't been home for 8 years, so this particular visit involved a lot of re-introductions to our aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. The picnic took place in Tagaytay, which is a province outside of Manila. We were inside a valley with beautiful lush greenery, hot springs, and horses. I remember sitting at a picnic table with my cousins eating fried shrimp, rice, and barbecue. Everyone was laughing and having a wonderful time because we were all finally reunited. That was one of the happiest moments of my life. I was able to reconnect with my family, and, for the first time, I felt like I had an extended family. People always asked me about my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, and it was hard because I didn't have any memories of any of them. After that picnic, I finally had answers to all those questions.

### Favorite Free Time Activities:

Everything I like to do is connected to nature. I love to be outside running, biking, hiking, or kayaking. Since I grew up in Rhode Island, I was always about 5-10 minutes from a body of water. I spent so much time outside throughout my childhood and adolescence that I've grown very fond of nature and of protecting it. I think that's why I also love to garden. It's something I do that helps me feel connected to the Earth. Land conservation and sustainable farming/agriculture are two global issues that I am very passionate about, and these issues both relate to the activities that I choose to partake in.



Zach and Abbi are bubblewrapped for an orientation activity.

Of course, many of our lives are quite obviously full of important relationships, this is nothing revolutionary. This year, however, with the distractions, and accessories, and luxuries of my life stripped away, I have come to understand the meaning and value of relationships on a much deeper, more spiritual level. Two authors, Brother Lawrence and Thomas Merton, taught me how to take my contemplative spiritual life, all curled up in the meditation room, and build onto it a life of spiritual action through noticing love and relationships.

My first true encounter with the idea of noticing love came from a book by a 17<sup>th</sup> century monk named Brother Lawrence. It's titled *Practicing the Presence of God*, and I happened to read it right before I came to Baltimore. Brother Lawrence was a French Carmelite with a knack for oozing contagious inner-peace and for noticing the holiness in everyday things. It could not have been a more well-timed reading accident, because what Brother Lawrence taught me was this: "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed." Those words were exactly what I needed to arm myself with coming into a year that was about practicing being present with patients, not the most grandiose or glamorous job-description. And yet, when I spend my few quiet moments alone each morning, it focuses my soul and helps me move through my day noticing the love around me and savoring it.



In this sense, Brother Lawrence has taught me to be aware of God's inescapable love and to be thankful for the gift of relationship it presents. If I truly believe that God is always near me and around me, both "in my business and my diversions," as Brother Lawrence says, then every moment of my life is an opportunity to be in relationship with God and creation. Every experience is a spiritual and relational experience, if I open myself up to it. God's love is inherently relational and is shining through each crevice of life.

This year I discovered that what makes any moment a spiritual moment is not the mention of Jesus, a prayer said, or a scripture quoted. All that is needed is my own spirit's awareness that God's love is available *all* the time. The more I notice that miracle of profound, discoverable love, the more spiritually connected I feel to creation and the better I am able to live and serve humbly within it. On my most centered days, I feel close to God even in the quiet, mundane, or sad scenarios. I find God when I am drinking in the sound of rain on my window, when I'm scrubbing the scrambled egg frying pan before work, and when I am holding a patient's shivery hands during her dialysis. My mornings ensconced in the meditation room are not my only point of contact with God. Rather, those moments in solitude are what reorient my wandering spirit toward relational love and send me off on a daily mission to notice it in every corner of creation.

Of course, some days my morning time doesn't feel reorienting. Sometimes, I don't feel close to God because fears, insecurities, and selfishness cloud my heart. Sometimes I stew in my own feelings of discouragement and worthlessness when things don't go how I plan, or when I fail to 'succeed'. But in those moments, the wisdom of Thomas Merton reorients me, "Do not depend on the hope of results. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."

Before this year of learning through service, I depended on the hope of results. I relied upon academic success and external affirmation for my self-worth. I felt confident when I was achieving and was afraid to fail. I was fully aware of this pathology in myself, but I didn't know how to escape it. Then, I came to BSVM and was recommended to read Thomas Merton! Now, I have come to actually *feel* in my heart the ways in which relationships—not good test scores, pretty clothes, or charming personalities—can save. I experienced this reality and that is much more than understanding it theologically.

On my worst days, when I don't get the results I want from a project at work, a graduate school application, or even from my morning prayer time, it's the little moments of relationship that save me. It's when I see one of our renal patients slowly and steadily pushing another patient in their wheel chair from the lobby up to the second floor clinic. It's when Alex notices I have the hiccups and quietly gets me a glass of water from the kitchen. It's when my community is all snuggled up on the couch writing letters to our loved ones. It's when one renal patient helps me memorize his favorite Shakespeare line, when another says she and I are in the cozy sweater club, and when a third, with a wise yet mischievous twinkle in his eye, shares with me his two secrets to happiness: humility and pancakes.

I am so thankful for that meditation room, pumpkin-colored walls and all. Over this year, that space has seen me giggly and weepy, curious and indifferent, connected and distant. I have learned from both the ups and downs that my workplace, my community, and my home are absolutely brimming with love. Certainly, there is injustice, fear, anger, and heart-brokenness too. But in the midst of the hurt, there is so much potential for love and relationship. When I take the time to let God open my spirit each morning, I notice His love during my day so much more. Even on the darker days, when I don't *feel* God close to me, I can still find hope in relationships. After all, love cannot exist without relationship. Each day living and serving in community proves to me that where love is, God is also there.



Below, **Crystal Truong (BSVM 2008-2009)**, describes her deep and continued connection with BSVM. She reconnected with the ministry and community in October of 2015 during the alumni retreat. As Crystal describes, her time with BSVM and the reunion during retreat, continues to be life-giving. We are grateful for the dedication of Crystal and all of our BSVM alumni community members!



### ***How did your experience with BSVM shape the years following your year of service?***

My experience with BSVM helped solidify my desire to enter the medical field. As a physician, serving others is a daily calling. After my experience with BSVM, I am more aware of the difficulties and barriers many of my patients face and hopefully more compassionate and understanding when I interact with patients. Whenever I struggle with tough situations with patients, families, or co-workers, I remind myself of why I want to be a doctor, a desire that grew during my year of service.

### ***What advice do you have to offer former volunteers as they continue to process their BSVM experience?***

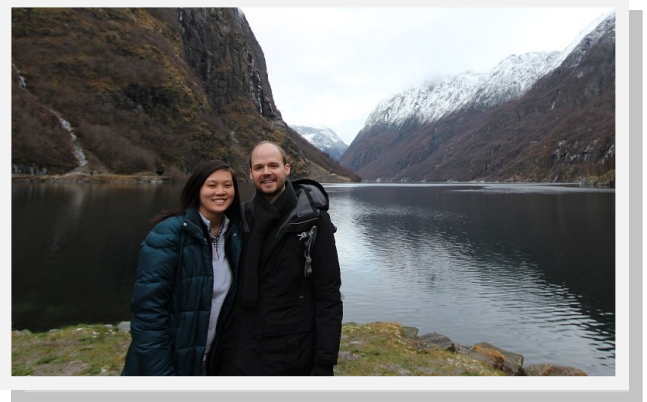
Stay connected with the BSVM community. They are a group of like-minded people who understand what you have experienced. The alumni retreat I attended last year was a great reminder of that, especially when I met the current and former volunteers. The retreat was an opportunity to pause and reflect on our busy lives.

### ***What reading have you found to be informative, helpful and/or inspirational for those wishing to continue to explore the pillars of BSVM?***

Pope Francis is such a great leader and role model. His writings provide much teaching and inspiration, particularly his book, *The Name of God is Mercy*.

### ***What were some of the gifts you received during your time of service?***

My year at Bon Secours was easily one of the best years of my life. The people I met were exceptional, so willing to give of their time, talents, and wisdom. It was a time of great joy with many wonderful friends and mentors.



**Crystal with Fiancé Zach Eberbach**

Continued from page 3

The translation of Bon Secours is "good help." In the short time I have been here, I have learned that "good help" will mean something different to every single person that walks through the doors of our Women's Resource Center. In our society, driven by achievement, learning to serve by being present is often difficult. The most important thing I may do today is to take my time making breakfast for our ladies, knowing that it will not solve each problem that they carry into the center, but also knowing that in each, "Hey the eggs are really good today, what did you do to these eggs?" I learn more about what it means to be intentional, to be present, and to serve wholeheartedly as Christ did.

As we walked and drove around Baltimore during our first days as a community, it would have been silly for us to think that we alone could change an entire city; a city with a long history that led to the great disparities we saw. Even so, I am beginning to understand that through serving here we have the opportunity to see something new. We have the chance to see a place forgotten by many, a place many people touring Baltimore will never visit and people living in other areas of the city will never see. I could have visited the city of Baltimore many times before coming to live here and I still would not have seen Baltimore the way I see it now, the way I will see it one year from now. Service is not about creating something out of nothing, but about being present enough to actually see the life and lives hidden by claims that there is nothing here and honoring this life and the lives of those we meet. The stories of those we encounter each day become the story of the Baltimore that we see.

# Alumni Corner

## BSVM White Coats

The BSVM community is proud of all our alumni members. Here are some of our alumni who have recently taken steps to continue their journey with service in medicine.



Patrick O'Neil (BSVM 2013-2014)



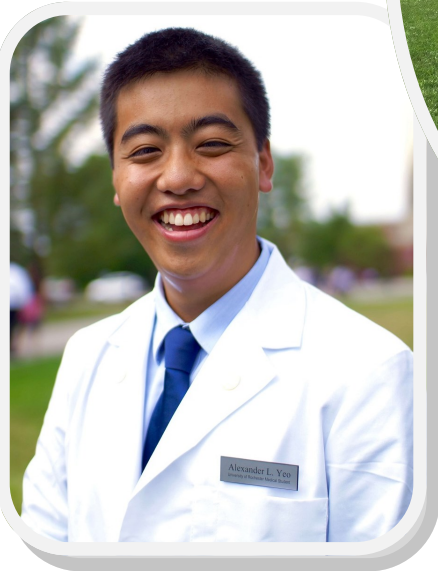
Nicole Campion Dialo (BSVM 2013-2014)



L: August Kunkel (BSVM 2014-2015)  
R: Andrew McAsey (BSVM 2014-2015)



Elizabeth Modde  
(BSVM 2015-2016)



Alex Yeo (BSVM 2015-2016)



Eugene Kim (BSVM 2012-2013)





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**Cover Photo**

Commissioning of 2016-2017 BSVM Community  
with Sr. Rose Marie Jasinski, CBS

Left to Right:

Faith Yusko, Zachary Wiley, Maria Shibatsuji  
Amanda Scanameo, Celina Santiago, M. Abigail Cerezo

Photographer: Andres Gomez, Site Leader

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**Our Mission**

Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, sponsored by the Sisters of Bon Secours, provides the opportunity for women and men to participate in the Sisters' commitment to justice in radical solidarity with the poor, the suffering, and those most in need. By sharing the Bon Secours charism of compassion, healing, and liberation, the ministry nurtures and sustains full-time volunteers in their personal and communal journeys towards transformation through service with others.

**Support Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry**

**Share your time and enthusiasm.** Your personal presence is one of the best ways to support the program. Please consider sending a letter of support and interest, an invitation for site-seeing in Baltimore, or an invitation to dinner with your family.

**Support the program financially.** It costs about \$16,000 to support one volunteer for the year, including rent, health insurance, stipend and funds for community support. In addition, we are trying to make some improvements to the volunteer residence. Monetary donations or gently used furnishings for the volunteer house are greatly appreciated.

**Donations are tax-deductible and can be sent directly to:**

Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry  
1525 Marriottsville Road, Marriottsville, MD 21104

**BSVM Staff:** Shannon Curran, Director; Olivia Steback, Program Manager; Andres Gomez, Site Leader; Regina Fleck, Recruiter; Marie Truffer, Admin. Assistant