

THE COMPANION

The Newsletter of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry

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Issue 28



Resting in God's Embrace

By Rebecca Judge, 2018-2019 Volunteer
A graduate of St. Joseph's University



Rebecca Judge

The soft twinkle in Robert's eyes as they swell with tears is a comforting image that I can easily envision in my heart. Robert is a patient with whom I have come to spend much time, as he has considered Richmond Community Hospital to be his home longer than I have. Through spending intentional time together during recreational therapy, and now through spontaneous visits to play card games, read, and share stories, Robert and I have developed a certain way of being with one another. At the end of each visit, we shake hands as he reminds me that he'll be listening for my prayer over the speaker that afternoon. When our hands finally meet, the slight glimmer of tears in his eyes quickly transforms as he furrows his brow to express his concern for my unceasingly cold hands. His gut reaction is to release his hand from mine quickly, but instead, he always settles into the handshake for a moment longer in an attempt to warm me ever so slightly. This short connection with him is an embrace that I always regard as a gift and a small testament to how patients continuously offer healing to me.

One day, I unexpectedly encountered Robert in the hallway near the pharmacy in the hospital. We were both surprised to see one another outside of our usual meeting spot. As I approached him, he extended his arm, waiting for our hands to meet. As they touched, he made his usual comment about my cold hands. But this time, he held my hands in a new way.

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Editor's Corner
Olivia Steback
BSVM Program Manager



*How did the rose
ever open its heart
and give to the world all its beauty?
It felt the encouragement of light against its being,
otherwise, we all remain too frightened. - Hafiz*

In this issue of *The Companion*, ministry volunteers Christian Wood and Rebecca Judge share about ways in which they have opened their hearts and moved into relationships that they might otherwise have been afraid of. Fear is a powerful emotion. At times it keeps us safe, at times it incites the aggressive side of our natures, and at other times, it calls awareness to areas in need of growth. Each year, BSVM staff support the volunteers as they face their fears. Although common fears arise, the volunteers' journeys are individually unique, as well. Their struggles are expressed in diverse and varied ways. It is our mission to accompany them and also to help create networks of people who desire to walk with them as they grow past and through their fear.

Christian mentions two such members of the larger BSVM community, Brendan Walsh and Willa Bickham. In 1968, Brendan and Willa began Viva House, the Baltimore Catholic Worker, which they currently continue to lead. Through their mentorship of and friendship with BSVM Director, Shannon Curran, and their shared mission to fight for justice, Brendan and Willa have been longtime supporters of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry. Over the years, they have accompanied the volunteers and program staff in very tangible ways as they are physical neighbors of the community in Baltimore. We are deeply grateful for their continued commitment to the people of southwest Baltimore and for the inspirational friendship that they offer the volunteers each year.

It is through the love of many: God, patients, clients, coworkers, BSVM staff, and BSVM community members, such as Brendan and Willa, that the fear the volunteers experience slowly melts throughout the year. As it melts, we are blessed to see volunteers bloom and grow in unimaginable ways. Thank you for joining us in this mission, for it is such gift to receive the inner freedom that allows our natures to flourish to their full and loving potential. It is our hope that each of the volunteers experiences such liberation!



Print by: Willa Bickham



**Willa Bickham and Brendan Walsh in
the Baltimore Volunteer House.
Behind: Prints by Willa**

Resting in God's Embrace
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In response to the temperature shock, Robert gently placed my hand in between both of his. He held on to it firmly as we continued to talk. After a minute, he tenderly lifted my hand close to his face and blew the warmth of his breath directly onto my fingers. We both grew silent in that moment as he looked up at me with his soft smile. I thanked him, he patted my hand, and we parted ways.

The intimacy of this encounter struck me; the way he embraced my hand fully with his own felt foreign to me at first. Like Robert's initial inclination to pull away in response to my cold hands, my own gut reaction in response to this loving touch was to pull away from his. It was apparent to me in that moment that it is hard for me to allow others to console me, even in this slight way. I feel much more comfortable offering embraces to others than I do receiving them myself. Despite my hesitation to receive this healing embrace, I allowed myself to settle into it more deeply and peacefully.



Rebecca sings in the gospel choir at her local parish church, Holy Rosary.

My encounter with Robert and the word 'embrace' itself has been sitting on my heart for some time now. This year, God has asked me to embrace countless people, experiences, practices, and hardest of all, my own wounds. Before feeling comfortable enough to experience this type of authentic encounter, I was first challenged to surrender. My hands were so used to being clasped together, shielding my heart and preventing others from penetrating it. Moving from my own place of safety and stepping into a place of vulnerability with my heart no longer hidden from others was terrifying. As I opened up to my new community, to the possibility of the changing nature of relationships, to a new position with Spiritual Care Services, and to my new choir family, I learned how to surrender my need for control by emptying my expectations into God's hands.



Rebecca joins an art therapy session.

While on this journey of learning how to surrender in order to embrace more fully, I had to face both my strengths and my weaknesses. During this time, God invited me to fall more deeply into God's arms, and wrapped me in a most loving and complete embrace. I only learned how to embrace others and my most authentic self by first surrendering more fully to God. Like Robert, infusing my stone cold hands with the tenderness of his own warm breath, God continuously turns my heart of stone into a heart of flesh. I experience the rawness of God's touch, and my brokenness is transformed into resiliency.

My ability to embrace others and accept another's embrace is how God has asked me to grow in relationship this year. When I have opened myself to this vulnerability, through hugging a distraught patient, exchanging an "I love you" with a friend at choir, or collapsing into my community member's arms while letting out my own cries of heartache, God has slowly transformed my heart to more genuinely give and receive love. Ultimately, God offers me the most powerful encounter of love when He gives me the freedom each week to embrace God's own flesh in the Eucharist. Receiving God's flesh and responding with an "I love you" teaches me how to embrace His heart with confidence even when it feels uncomfortable, leading me to embrace another's touch and to respond in confidence with that same loving and trusting heart.



Christian Wood

More Than a Road

By Christian Wood, 2018-2019 Volunteer
A graduate of the University of Notre Dame

I like to run and so my first explorations of the city of Baltimore were primarily on foot. After initially starting with routes that were recommended to me by the Program Manager and past volunteers, I began to push the boundaries, finding new and interesting areas to run. Despite the variety of my routes, however, the first mile was always the same: I would run east on Hollins Street until I came to a road that marked the downtown area, after which I was free to roam where I pleased. This road, ironically named Martin Luther King Boulevard, is not simply a divider between west Baltimore and downtown; rather, it is a physical manifestation of the racial and economic segregation that has plagued Baltimore for many years. It divides rich from poor, white from black, security from violence, industry from abandonment. To the residents of the more affluent areas of Baltimore, MLK Boulevard simply marks the limit of their city experience. To the residents to the west, however, it is symbolic of the forces that continue to restrict their freedom.

I hail from the “downtown” side of MLK Boulevard: I come from a loving and financially stable family, have recently graduated from a four year university, and have had a wealth of opportunities afforded to me since birth. Until this year, the struggles of those on the margins were known to me solely through my economics textbooks and stories on the news, and so my vision of west Baltimore was mainly one of crime statistics and the occasional clip from *The Wire*. I came to Baltimore with both this image in my mind and, stemming from this image, a desire to emulate the Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry pillar that I identified with particularly strongly: practice God’s justice. I did not yet know how I would do this or even what “practice God’s justice” could mean for Baltimore, but I soon began to recognize that MLK Boulevard and the socioeconomic segregation that it symbolized were contrary to justice in every sense of the word.

During the past year, I have learned what it means to practice God’s justice from many different people, experiences, and resources. Our neighbors, Brendan and Willa, gave me a blueprint to enact God’s justice in my own life. The two of them created and have worked in a Catholic Worker house in Baltimore for 50 years, and in doing so have fought ferociously for the dignity of their neighbors and their larger Baltimore community. It is not, however, the thousands of meals that they have served or the hundreds of peaceful protests that they have participated in that most impressed me from my time with them. It is rather the way in which they talk about their community members that inspires me. Brendan and Willa have come to know those they serve in a personal way, and through their service have shared in both the celebrations and struggles of those around them. To them, west Baltimore is not simply a series of statistics, but is rather the beautiful murals all around the area. It is the group of individuals who come outside their house to pray on a weekly basis. They encounter the violence and addiction that is prevalent in our area, but it means that they are able to walk with victims of this crime. As they do, these hardships become stories of redemption. The key to practicing justice, as they and BSVM have taught me, is to be present.

In working on our hospital’s inpatient unit, I am given the chance to talk with patients every day about whatever they would like to talk about, ranging from one patient’s fascination with metal detectors to another’s confessions of his struggles with mental illness. Throughout our conversations I have found that in revealing where I am living for this year, a mere three blocks from the hospital, I gain a new level of trust with many of the patients who live nearby. I am suddenly less of an outsider.



Jonah Cremin-Endes and Christian participate in Patient Experience Week.

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Sisters' Corner

Each year, BSVM staff guide the volunteers in planning activities and prayer that honor Martin Luther King Jr. This year, the volunteers in Richmond chose to join the sisters on this important day. Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2019 was brutally cold. The wind whipped along the streets with an icy sting. Still, the Bon Secours Ministry Volunteers in Richmond gathered to support community members of the Church Hill neighborhood in their call for gun control. They traveled to the Capitol for a rally and educational program.



Virginia has some of the most permissive gun laws in the country, and for many years the Sisters of Bon Secours have been committed to changing these laws.



The volunteers in Richmond join the sisters and community members in their advocacy efforts.

Chris, Fiona, Maggie, and Rebecca joined Srs. Anne Marie Mack, Vicky Segura, and Chris Webb, along with many other community members from churches, synagogues, and organizations around the city, to learn about current gun control measures up for a vote in the Virginia legislature. First, they attended a workshop that helped them to gain a deeper understanding of how expanding background checks will help to save lives. After the workshop, the participants visited their elected representatives to lobby for important changes. They then braved the cold to give witness to this vital issue of public health and safety by gathering outside at a vigil, publicly supporting the need for gun control.

More Than a Road

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Mount Street, where I live, is the street where one Bon Secours patient's son was born. For another patient, it is where she goes to get lunch every Wednesday. To a third, it is the street on which her favorite mural is located, a mural which gives her hope and reminds her of the beautiful side of west Baltimore.

When Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry gave its volunteers the opportunity to live in the community in which we serve, it also gave us the chance to better understand the stories of our patients. It has allowed us to not just identify the struggles of those who live in poverty on a macroscopic scale, but has given us a window into the lives of those we meet, which in turn allows us to see how best to serve each individual. These experiences are what help us to practice justice, for in order to practice this justice, we must be willing to meet each individual where he or she is.

Brendan, Willa, and the patients at Bon Secours have all taught me that we cannot live out God's justice from the other side of the road. Justice is not found in policy efforts or research alone, but rather in relationships formed through a mutual interest in each others' lives. It is similarly not enough to invite the citizens of west Baltimore to the other side of the road; for true justice to be realized, we must be willing to cross Martin Luther King Boulevard ourselves to celebrate and to mourn with our brothers and sisters. This road's namesake embodies Martin Luther King Jr.'s own pursuit of justice. He once told this country that, "We cannot walk alone." It is only together, through radical solidarity with one another, that we can continue to march towards the justice that every man, woman, and child has been granted through the grace of God.

Alumni Profile: Community Lasting a Lifetime

Sarah Ceponis, BSVM 2011-2012 and August Kunkel, BSVM 2014-2015

Sarah Ceponis and August Kunkel are coming up on their two year wedding anniversary and have welcomed the arrival of their first baby. The story of how they got here is a unique one: they met because of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, but served in two different years!

Sarah: I served with Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry from 2011-2012 and spent my workdays building relationships with the kiddos, moms, and staff at the Family Support Center (and the rest of my time cooking, learning, exploring, debating, running, reflecting, and laughing with my amazing community members). Baltimore absolutely stole my heart in every way, from its wonderful people to its beautiful row houses. I moved halfway across the country after my volunteer year, but left my heart behind, and was thrilled a few years later when it fell into place to move back to the city for graduate school in 2014.

August: I served with Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry from 2014-2015 and moved to west Baltimore with an uncertainty of what the experience would bring. I served at the Vascular Lab, transporting patients throughout the hospital and spending time with them on the Inpatient floor. My experience with both service and community was transformational. There were countless memorable moments during that year, but one welcome dinner hosted by a former BSVMer stands out.



Sarah: When I moved back to Baltimore, I really wanted to be connected to BSVM and invited the new community over for dinner to share my love of the city and the program. Little did I know that my future husband would be coming to the door (and if I had, perhaps I would've been a little more attentive and not overdo the burgers on the grill—or so he claims. A fitting critique, to this day he remains the better chef). Months later, when August and I started dating after a chance encounter at a Christmas party, we realized that the earlier welcome dinner was actually my first dinner with what would become my second BSVM community!

August: When you think about doing a service year, I think you expect that, to some degree, you'll form uniquely strong and lasting relationships. I feel lucky not only to have gained four community members, who are now some of my best friends, but also to have met the person I'd spend life with after moving away from 18 South Mount Street. In many ways, living in community helped me realize the importance of relationships and gave clarity to what I most value. Our shared experience of reflection and growth brought on by BSVM gave our relationship a strong foundation.

Sarah: When August and I got engaged (in Patterson Park!) and started planning our wedding, there was never any doubt that we wanted to get married in Baltimore and incorporate our Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry experiences into our wedding day. We especially wanted to invite our larger world—our extended family, college friends, coworkers, and everyone in between—into the neighborhood central to our story. Transfiguration Parish is just about a mile from the hospital and Family Support Center, and I'd attended mass there often during my year with BSVM. When we set up a meeting with the pastor to talk about possibly hosting our wedding at Transfiguration, his exuberant reply sealed the deal. He literally walked us from his office into the church, threw open the doors, and turned on *all* the lights for us, an echo of the way we'd been welcomed into west Baltimore from day one.

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Alumni Profile

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August: Both of our wedding parties included BSVM community members (thanks Andy and Brittney!), and we intentionally chose music and readings that spoke not just to our love and commitment to each other, but also reflected many values we'd deepened through Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry—especially community, simplicity, and social justice. And two last interesting facts: all our readers AND our cantor were Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry friends (thank you Shannon, Co'Dale, and Gina!), and our incredible celebrant Father Joe Muth shared the mission and the spirit of the ministry.

Sarah: We even had the opportunity to choose a beautiful venue just a block from that first welcome dinner I hosted for August and his roommates, at a maritime museum in Fells Point operated by Living Classrooms, an organization that provides hands-on education and job training for Baltimore city youth. To this day we're still reliving the joy of our wedding celebration and how it captured so much of what we love about each other, Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, and Baltimore, and set the groundwork for our future together.

August: The way community was lived out during my year with BSVM was one of the most important parts of my experience. I learned to be more present, and bear witness to the struggles and triumphs of those who lived with me as we shared meals, did dishes, and supported each other in the mundane to the sacred. Likewise, we practiced being present and supportive to our wider community and the many neighbors next door or down the block. In many ways, living in community was like practice for marriage. Sarah and I are continuously surprised at how the values we gained from our experience in BSVM have shaped and guided our early days of marriage.



BSVM alums, Meghan Krueger and Alexis DiGasso, celebrate with BSVM Director, Shannon Curran.

Sarah: So far, we have navigated the complexities of creating wedding and baby registries, setting up a home together, and making major career decisions, and in all these steps have found ourselves falling back on lessons learned from Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry. Whether asking minor questions like, “Do we really need this?” about a nursery gadget, or asking much bigger questions like, “Does this deepen our commitment to social justice?” about a job offer, we know the ministry has and will continue to shape our future. We're especially excited, at the moment, to add one small person to the world, and can't wait until she is big enough to hear the story of how her life began, really, in west Baltimore.

Baby Elodie greets the world!



BVSM alum and staff share in the joyful wedding occasion.

BSVM Continues to Grow in Baltimore and in Richmond



The ministry volunteers in Richmond and Site Leader, Steve DeLaney, create a new garden.



Mara Scarbrough, Site Leader, Emily Thrush, and Paula Hastings participate in the Baltimore CeaseFire movement.



Jonah Cremin-Endes greets a patient at his ministry placement site, the Renal Department in the Bon Secours Baltimore Hospital.

Paula Hastings gathers with patients at her ministry placement site, the Behavioral Health Unit at Bon Secours Baltimore Hospital.





The volunteers enjoy time with Srs. Mary Shimo and Rose Marie Jasinski at the crab feast.



Mara Scarbrough walks with her students at the Bon Secours Family Support Center.



Rebecca Judge and Richmond Community Hospital staff member, Mike Gannon, share their musical talents with a patient.



Jocelyn O'Kane checks in with Jean Lipscombe, a Bon Secours Baltimore Hospital staff member.



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1525 Marriottsville Road
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Cover Photo

Left to Right:

2018-2019 Ministry Volunteer, Mara Scarbrough, walks with her students near the Bon Secours Family Support Center in Baltimore.

Photographer: Liz O'Neill

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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 Richmond, 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; Emily Thrush, Site Leader, Baltimore; Steve DeLaney, Site Leader, Richmond; Regina Fleck, Recruiter; Liesel Rupprecht, Program Coordinator