

# THE COMPANION

*The Newsletter of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry*

Winter 2020

Issue 30



## Quietly Building a Friendship

By Mark Conforti, 2019-2020 Volunteer  
A graduate of Villanova University



**Mark Conforti**

“Checkmate,” Bob chuckled. I looked up in shock to see a soft grin on the man sitting right across the table. I laughed off the defeat and said, “Wow, I didn’t even see that one coming!” Bob gave a sigh of relief while scratching his greying beard. As he repositioned himself in his chair he asked, “So are you up for another one?”

When I first started my service in the inpatient unit, I met a patient named Bob. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, he was on comfort care and the case management team worked tirelessly to look for a place to have him stay when he was discharged from the hospital. When I had the chance to sit down and chat with Bob, I was captivated by many of his life stories and experiences. He shared about his previous collection of over 3000 DVDs, his carpentry skills, and told the story of jumping out of planes during his time in the military. Although Bob faced a terminal condition and was told many times that he would die within a few months, he continued wanting to improve and grow. He told me that before I met him, he was weak and confined to a bed, but he was determined to keep up his strength. Every morning and afternoon, I would see him walk around the corridors of the hospital floor, committed to complete his 20 laps so that his strength would not deteriorate. Sometimes, I would join Bob for these walks. Nurses and floor techs rooted him on by asking what lap he was on or whether he was up for a race.

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



The 2019 - 2020 service year is a particularly significant time for Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry as we celebrate **20 years of service** with the Sisters of Bon Secours, Baltimore and, most recently, our neighbors in Richmond, Virginia. As we commemorate two decades of God's grace at work in our ministry we invite you to celebrate with us! Thank you for your love and prayers. With your support, we have undergone much growth and change. The members of our first two communities, pictured below, helped plant the seeds for the 95 volunteers who followed them, creating a community transformed by their experiences with BSVM. Former volunteers have then gone on to live in locations all over the world; from Rwanda, to California, to Southwest Baltimore. Through them, the mission of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry and the Sisters of Bon Secours continues to spread. Let us pray that God's love may flow through our ministry and all those with whom we serve for years to come! Please read further to discover how current and past volunteers are learning about love from their neighbors.



In this edition of *The Companion*, ministry volunteers Elizabeth Chen and Mark Conforti reflect on their experiences of loving those with whom they closely share life. At times, we may become excited about the prospect of serving in far-away or exotic places, perhaps envisioning service in grand gestures and dramatic moments. Although one beautiful aspect of service can be an opening to new experiences, Elizabeth and Mark remind us that true service starts right in front of us: in our living

rooms, the breakrooms at work, and within our local neighborhoods. In her alumni profile, Celina Santiago (BSVM 2016-2017) supports this understanding of service by stating:

*"It was such a gift to cook together and share meals with my community members almost every night during my time with BSVM. There is nothing quite like the joy of getting to know others and hearing about their day to day experiences while sitting around a dinner table and sharing a great meal!"*

A common meal and shared home reflect a beautiful metaphor often used to describe community life: through intimate, loving service with those closest to us, the hard edges of our souls are softened. The sharp corners are smoothed as we bump up against each other in community living. We become more compassionate as we face the challenges of serving our brothers and sisters closest to us. It challenges us to have the courage to continue coming to the table, both literally and figuratively, and showing up for those we love. This loving services asks of us commitment, courage, humility, and mercy – for both ourselves and others.

As you continue to read, we invite you to consider how you may better serve those you love every day. How might you be more present to a partner, child, co-worker, friend, and yourself? What unnecessary activity might you sacrifice to better foster your relationships? As we begin 2020, let us take time to remember that the call to serve is a call for each of us, no matter what our occupation may be or where we live. We hope that the words of our volunteers inspire you as you continue to serve your loved ones and communities!



The members of our first two BSVM communities from left to right, Kristine Wollscheid (1999-2000), Alexis Gray (2000-2001), and Vanessa Craig (1999-2000).





**Elizabeth Chen**

## Community Suspended

By Elizabeth Chen, 2019-2020 Volunteer  
A graduate of the University of Notre Dame

The four of us inched our way across the galvanized steel aircraft cable, suspended by our harnesses above a river that glistened with the rays of an autumn sun, a crisp blue sky overhead. We were in the midst of our community building day at Genesee Valley Outdoor Learning Center and as we made our way across the river it was funny to see how we each took on different roles. Behind me, Delaney and Abby sang the chorus to “Wiggle” by Jason Derulo, Gianna behind them laughing occasionally and every so often pointing out how much closer we were to the other side. This moment, among others, is what I picture when I think of my community.

To be completely honest, community life was probably the thing about spending a year with Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry that I was most hesitant about. Knowing myself to be someone who is slow to open up to people, prefers to avoid conflict, and needs time to decompress and recharge by myself, I was worried that I would find it difficult to live intentionally as part of a community. Beyond that, I often feel that I am someone who has a quieter voice, both in terms of my physical voice, but also in terms of my presence. I love to listen, and this makes it easy to listen to others and not have to share much about myself. I was particularly concerned that among a group of people with louder voices than my own, my voice might not be heard. It seemed this might be the case when I learned that all three of my housemates were more extroverted than me.

However, I was surprised by how patient and open my housemates have been with me and each other as we have tried to ensure everyone shares over dinner and spends time together. We also seek to give each other space to spend time alone, as well as to talk to friends and family from home. We started off doing everything together—going grocery shopping, eating dinner, going to the park across the street, exploring coffee shops, exercising—before we quickly realized that this was unsustainable. So we began to explore the idea that it was actually okay to just have two people go grocery shopping at a time. We realized that we did not need four people in the kitchen to help unload dishes, and that we could learn to leave the house in pairs or threes while also spending time all together at dinner or exploring new places in Baltimore. Though we had initially split chores between the four of us, we found we often ended up helping each other with our chores. While I might be in charge of the kitchen, Abby would sweep when she noticed crumbs, Gianna might vacuum the dining room even though it was Delaney’s domain, and so on. It is this willingness to serve each other that demonstrates community life to me. John F. Alexander says that, in a community, our task is to be “good

brothers or sisters” and to use the gift of our ability to clean the toilet, which he calls the “contemporary equivalent of washing feet.” Jean Vanier agrees, saying that a sign of life and love in a community can be found in the “material things” of the home, in the “cleanliness, furnishings, the way flowers are arranged and meals prepared.”

I think this way of each seeking to contribute and care for one another, while we also seek to care for those at our ministry placement sites, has allowed us to begin to see and cherish each other’s individual gifts and strengths. I have personally been surprised by how many times I have been so thankful for my community: for Gianna’s generous heart and unique ability to be so hospitable, for Delaney’s thoughtfulness and sincerity in what she does and says, and for Abby’s bright energy and patient willingness to work with those around her.



**Volunteers in Baltimore work together to travel across a suspended cable at Genesee Valley Outdoor Learning Center.**

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## BSVM – Building a Broader Community

By Emily Thrush, Site Leader

One of the pillars of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry is Develop Community. We help the ministry volunteers build their intentional house community to function like a family might, where each volunteer shares household space, finances, chores, and other responsibilities. We also encourage volunteers to develop their presence in their neighborhoods and broader cities, which means engaging in West Baltimore and East Richmond with intention and thoughtfulness.

The volunteers in Baltimore are part of a wider network of service programs, collectively called the Baltimore Interfaith Partners in Service (BIPS). Each quarter, the various BIPS programs gather over a shared meal and common themes that may arise in a year of service. The BSVM volunteers have been active in BIPS gatherings over the years, and the current volunteers have continued the tradition. BIPS had an opening picnic this September, and the 2019 fall gathering centered on balancing spirituality, prayer, and ministry. We are grateful for a broader community of young adults seeking to serve their neighborhoods and engage with others who feel a similar commitment to the community.



**Volunteers in Richmond lead the Community Angels project.**

The BSVM volunteers in Richmond collaborated with their colleagues and supervisors at Richmond Community Hospital (RCH) to bring back a beloved Community Angels project. For ten years, the RCH team had coordinated Christmas gifts for families of need in the neighborhood in East Richmond. Staffing changes meant the project lost a point person during the holiday season in 2018, but in December of 2019 the BSVM volunteers were entrusted to help bring the event back. They communicated with local schools, families, and colleagues to offer a family-focused fun event prior to the holiday season, which allowed parents to receive gift cards to purchase presents for their children, and it brought families to the Sarah Garland Jones Center to enjoy festive treats, crafts, and activities in the process.

BSVM staff support volunteers as they work to build community within their homes and within their neighborhoods. As each volunteer shares their individual presence and collective gifts with their neighbors, they grow and receive the blessings of a deeper connection to West Baltimore and East Richmond.

### **Community Suspended** *Continued from page 3*

This is not to say our community is without its own struggles and tensions, because we definitely have many of them. Even as I sat writing this reflection on community, one of my community members came in and began to share her thoughts on how our community could be better. A community of people cannot be a good community if we are not our full selves; if we **are** our full selves, we will inevitably encounter conflict. However, I have also seen how conflict can actually help us grow and develop our full selves if we address it lovingly. James Martin says that because we each have our “own styles of holiness,” we may find ourselves seeing and understanding our callings differently. I am finding that I have begun to understand better who I am through seeing and appreciating my community members and the ways they are both similar and different from me.

As I reflect on the memory of my community hanging suspended over that river in Genesee Valley, I feel a deep contentment about this choice to live in community. Though it was not something I was looking for, this choice to be intentional—to be more than just individuals living under the same roof—has been a choice that has allowed me to begin to learn not only to love those “who live far away,” as Mother Teresa says, but also to do the not-so-easy thing of loving those who “live right next to [me].”



## Sisters' Corner

By Delaney Weiland, 2019-2020 Volunteer  
A graduate of the University of Notre Dame

Hospitality is a theme I have learned a lot about during the past few months. I have received a lot of gracious hospitality. My community members in Baltimore and Richmond and I have been inspired by the work and ministry of the Sisters of Bon Secours. Whether in the form of a hug from Sister Fran or a sweet email from my prayer partner (Sister Kathleen), the act of being hospitable seems to permeate the work and lives of the sisters, and my community members and I want to uphold the same level of hospitality with others.



**Sr. Nathalie Lundolo Ninga and candidate Ji Choi celebrate during the profession.**



**L to R: Sr. Jean Aulenback, CBS, Sr. Nathalie, and current volunteer Josh Gillen enjoy time together after the BSMV commissioning mass.**

One of the greatest senses of hospitality our community has felt thus far occurred while attending Sister Nathalie's profession of her first vows. Her devotion and commitment to God and others was clear as the letter from her family was read aloud to the congregation. Just as striking was the large crowd that filed in to be part of this special celebration. Sister Nathalie stood by the door and greeted each face with the same smile and warmth for all, including my community of volunteers. This was especially beautiful since she has only met us a couple of times.

This small act of hospitality that Sister Nathalie showed represents what all of the Sisters of Bon Secours embody so well. Whether the sisters are interacting with a neighbor in West Baltimore or a guest at their first vows, they welcome and love so well and so authentically. This mission of hospitality is something that we, as volunteers, can only hope to live out more faithfully this year.

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### ***Quietly Building a Friendship***

*Continued from Cover*

Bob carried such positive energy throughout the floor that it was easy for him to make friends with many of the hospital employees. I saw how much the hospital staff cared as they purchased water flavor for Bob to encourage his fluid intake, and saw how a staff member gifted him with a chess-checkerboard game set. I had never played chess before. Once Bob learned this, he wanted to teach me how to play. Most of my visits following this gift consisted of us playing chess together. During these games, we did not talk that much. We just sat and concentrated, mostly on our next move. But there were times that I appreciated this silence. I would often struggle to make a decision on what move to make, and it would ultimately take me minutes to decide what to do next. When my bouts of indecision were prolonged, I would look up to see Bob smiling and laughing and asking me, "So, what are you going to do next?"

Eventually, case management found a home for Bob to be discharged to, and I realized that I would need to say good-bye to a good friend. Although I was upset to say good-bye, I knew Bob's new home would give him the independence that he would never be able to achieve in the hospital. Once he left, I realized that I not only missed the conversations we had shared, but also the silences. It was in those moments in Bob's room that I learned to appreciate the little things about him, like the way his laugh carries or the way he looks when he is deep in thought. I may not see Bob on the hospital floor again, but the life that he shared with me allowed me to see how I can share my life with others.

## Alumni Profile

### Celina Santiago, BSVM 2016-2017

In May of 2019, Celina received a Masters of Public Health from John Hopkins University. She currently works in The John Hopkins School of Medicine. We are grateful that she remains an active local alum!

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

Be intentional about sharing your experience with others. Allow the reflections you had with your community around BSVM's pillars and your service time continue to shape the way you view your experiences after BSVM. Even if you are no longer in Baltimore, get involved in the community you are living in and connect with organizations and community members wherever you are. I think that we live in a society in which we can become so isolated; during BSVM we really had to combat this mindset and lifestyle. I think it is important to carry on some level of community building.

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



**Celina with clients from the Bon Secours Woman's Resource Center.**



**Celina shares a hug with her Site Supervisor, Serena Bushrod.**

I really enjoyed reading *Not all of Us Are Saints: A Doctor's Journey with the Poor* by David Hilfiker as a part of our BSVM formational readings, as well as, *Strangers at my Door: A True Story of Finding Jesus in Unexpected Guests* by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (While not part of the curriculum, BSVM staff recommended that I read this book during my BSVM year). I think what struck me most about these books was the way they put words to a lot of what I was experiencing as a ministry volunteer. Though the writers' stories were different from my own, there were unexpected commonalities in regards to sharing life communally and in sharing life with those living on the margins. While reading these books, I often had moments when I thought, "Wow, someone else has experienced and understands this sentiment too. I had no idea previously how to conceptualize what I have been feeling."

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

As I continue to process my service experience in the years following my time with BSVM, I realize I received a lot of gifts from the year. This includes the openness and acceptance of the community members with whom I worked. I think adjusting to my new environment took some time and knowing what to say and how to interact with our clients at the Women's Resource Center felt unnatural for a while. But I continued to be persistent and genuine, and I was received with that openness and acceptance. This has since given me the courage to continue to pursue relationships with people even when it is slow or hard. I learned that relationship building involves a willingness to see the world from another person's perspective and invite them to see the world from yours.

It was also a gift to slow down and live simply. I think I underestimated how radical of a change that would be during my BSVM year, but in the years since, I have realized how freeing and yet how limited living simply can be. Lastly, it was such a gift to cook together and share meals with my community members almost every night during my time with BSVM. There is nothing quite like the joy of getting to know others and hearing about their day to day experiences while sitting around a dinner table and sharing a great meal!



## Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry 2019-2020 Is Off To A Great Start!



L to R: Mark, Nancy, Liv, Jenna, and Josh explore Richmond.

Madison and Liv work hard to keep the volunteer house and yard in good shape!



Delaney blows bubbles with children in the Bon Secours Family Support Center.



Delaney, Gianna, and Elizabeth enjoy community building time at Genesee Valley Outdoor Learning Center.



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**Cover Photo**

Left to Right:

2019-2020 ministry volunteer, Mark Conforti, enjoys time with Sr. Regina Flatley, CBS.

Photographer: Paula Hastings, Volunteer Recruiter

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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; Paula Hastings, Volunteer Recruiter; Liesel Rupprecht, Program Coordinator