Peaslee Neighborhood Center: A Mission Centered Space

Thoughtful citizens committed to a just and equitable society…

The Peaslee Neighborhood Center has been a staple in Over the Rhine long before the trendy coffee shops and art galleries made their way in. They have been a, not so quiet, witness to the neighborhood as it has transformed over the last twenty plus years. This is what makes it the perfect backdrop for Xavier students to reflect on their service experiences and teach them the true meaning of community.

“Surrounded by community supporters, it was a dream-filled day when Everlene Leary and Kathleen Prudence handed over a check for $209,239.13 to buy the former Peaslee School on December 14th, 1984. The women wanted to keep Peaslee as an educational and cultural resource in Over-the-Rhine. Leary and Prudence were two of the several mothers of children at Peaslee Elementary School when it closed in spring, 1982. A few years prior to the purchase of Peaslee, a women-led effort, including a federal lawsuit, was waged to save the school. They lost the skirmish, but turned defeat into victory; they finally had the keys of hope in our hands.”

“DREAM BIG is what Peaslee’s first mural said. The members of Peaslee have and will continue to dream big.”

For more info on the Peaslee Neighborhood Center visit: peasleecenter.org
“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” – Jeremiah 29:5-7

Grow. Join the community. Plant some roots among those different than yourself. Be fed by that community and feed that community. As you grow, it will grow. As it grows, you will grow. This passage speaks deeply to my life in transition, as I return to the city that shaped me, as I work for a university whose students were heroes to me growing up, as I discover the gifts of Ignatian spirituality and community for my life as a Presbyterian. Certainly more moving than my own personal experience of this scripture was the joy of engaging in reading this scripture with the Ecumenical Ministry Team. Sunday night, we listened together for how Jeremiah’s vision for beloved community might influence our vision for ecumenical community on Xavier’s campus.

Just a few weeks ago, I was a Presbyterian pastor serving a small, multicultural congregation in Oakland, California. My time was dominated by worship planning and pastoral care, transitioning the congregation to its closure over Labor Day weekend. I was the last in a long line of pastor’s over the churches 120 year history that included many decades of decline. Today, I overlook a campus founded long before Oakland was really even a city, pastoring students from a breadth of religious traditions, the second in a short line of ecumenical/multi-faith ministers among a staff with a long history of robust campus ministry. Not terribly long ago, I could not have imagined my new day-to-day reality. My time is dominated by getting to know a dynamic group of students. With roots in a solid Protestant work ethic, it feels almost wrong to enjoy my work this much, and yet I am counting on the joy of this calling to heal the grief of the way my last call ended.

To read entire the blog post titled Settling In…Reflections from a New Staff Member please visit: dorothydaycfj.wordpress.com
Dezrae is a typical high school student in many ways – a new member of her school’s soccer team, the oldest of three sisters, and a huge fan of Twilight. When we first met, I was drawn to her confidence and free-spirited personality. Yet Dezzie isn’t exactly like other girls her age. Although her friends at school have no idea, she is homeless. And her two younger sisters, ages nine and three? They’re homeless too.

Growing up in a suburban neighborhood in Nashville, Tennessee, my life was very different from Dezzie’s. I had everything I needed and much of what I wanted, and I was surrounded by people just like me. Although my family would occasionally serve a meal at the local soup kitchen, it was easy to remain detached from those I met. I administered charity from behind a kitchen counter, keeping my worldview and my heart untouched. If we choose to be blind to the Body of Christ, we can remain altogether unchanged by the poor.

It was during my freshman year at Xavier that this charitable version of Christianity was radically challenged and ultimately transformed. Ten years later, I am grateful to have participated in the pilot year of ConneXions, an introduction to social justice for first-year students. One week, Tom Sheibley, the Dorothy Day House director at the time, took our group to the Drop Inn Center in Over the Rhine. At first, I looked around with something that resembled pity much more than compassion, again feeling grateful that I wasn’t part of this poor, shivering mass in front of me. Pity was easy – it required very little from me. Yet God’s reign is not built on pity but justice. And Xavier was giving me an appetite for God’s reign.

ConneXions gradually taught me, week by week, that charity is only a small part of God’s kingdom here on earth. Sitting in the grass in front of the old Dorothy Day House, we were asked to imagine what it would mean to live not as service-providers and recipients but brothers and sisters in Christ. We were given permission to dream of a world where everyone matters and everyone belongs. We were taught that justice, not just charity, is required of us. And we found glimpses of the beauty and connectedness that come from living into this responsibility of love for one another. I now believe that my life’s work is to become an active participant in God’s compassionate justice in the world and to invite others to do the same: the seed for this vocation was planted on the fertile ground of the DDH front lawn.

It is through my current work as a university minister at the University of San Diego that I had the pleasure of meeting
Dezzie. Over the course of a week, seventy USD students met her and eleven other guests at Interfaith Shelter Network, a faith-based homeless shelter that I helped coordinate. This week was transformative of my own understanding of justice as the privileged and the poor sat down together. Every night felt a bit like God’s heavenly banquet when the homeless guests played host to these students of privilege, welcoming them with open arms to their table of plenty. There was no kitchen counter for students to hide behind, though they did prepare some delicious food to share. Over taco salad, student stereotypes were challenged by the honest, hilarious reflections of Dezzie, who, at fourteen years old, spoke with heartbreaking clarity about the sufferings and joys of her life.

In a follow-up reflection with some of the participating students, a young woman named Jessica talked about her sorrow for the world as it is and her desire for the world as it should be. She asked why she is able to go home at the end of the day when others go without that right. She wondered how, in the midst of such human connection, guilt for her privilege still existed and what she should do with this privilege. Ten years after my visit to the Drop Inn Center, I still find myself asking these same questions.

Yet with this hunger and ache for justice, Jessica also expressed gratitude for the real joy that she experienced at the shelter. There were moments there of pure grace that reminded Jessica, and reminded me, that to sit with the suffering of others is often to simultaneously be welcomed into their deepest joys. I am forever grateful for people like Dezzie, people who let me pull up a chair. Interfaith Shelter Network and ConneXions both show me that the kingdom of God is among us if we simply sit down with one another like the family that we are.

We used to know Elizabeth as Libby, someone highly involved in programs from Peace and Justice Programs and Campus Ministry. She started as a shy, first-year student on the Getaway retreat and graduated from XU having participated in or having led many of the programs of those 2 houses. She’s now a Campus Minister at the University of San Diego (lucky her, right?).
**Student Spotlight: Elizabeth Rahner**

**Why did you choose to come to Xavier?**

They have a great nursing program, it was the best option for me financially, and I could visit home as often as I liked to remain a part of my younger sibling’s lives. I also had a very influential meeting with a senior at XU, Rachel Stoney, when I was a senior in high school. She was president of the student club Life After Sunday at the time and invited me to attend part of their spring retreat to get a feel for the group. Having attended public school I knew that I wanted to really nurture my Catholic faith in a more intentional way where ever I went to college, and she introduced me to a community that I knew would greatly encourage me in that respect.

**Why did you choose to get involved in the CFJ?**

As part of wanting to increase my involvement in my faith I wanted to somehow be able to share that with campus. My primary involvement in the CFJ, Catholic Ministry Team, allows me to do just that--coordinate campus-wide events where students who are interested can learn more about what it means to be Catholic. I’ve also enjoyed engaging in service through programs such as STAR and Community Action Day that the CFJ helps facilitate. And of course there are some great people working there :) (always candy on Katie’s desk!).

**What have you learned through your engagement with our office?**

I have learned a lot about planning events and working with various people in the process—definitely valuable experience for life. I have realized how difficult it can be to plan a meeting that works with many schedules (heightening my respect for the staff!), and also gotten more comfortable with being a spiritual leader, e.g. in group prayer/reflection times. Learning more about dialogue and how to approach it with a healthy mindset has also been an outcome of my CFJ involvement.

**What do you hope to do during the rest of your time at Xavier and what do you hope to do after graduation?**

As a nursing student, my primary goal for the rest of my time at XU is to keep up with my clinicals and classes, but of course I plan to continue my involvement in Life After Sunday, CFJ's Catholic Ministry Team, and tutoring for the LAC. Community Action Day the next 3 (!) semesters is a must of course, and definitely some basketball. I also am excited to participate in the Encounter retreat this winter and Alternative Breaks this spring. After graduation I hope to work for a couple years in a local hospital to gain some nursing experience and then return to school to become a Family Nurse Practitioner and do medical mission work, possibly in the inner city (following my Dad's example).

**Where did you grow up?**

Cincinnati! I consider Over the Rhine to be my neighborhood of origin—lived there for my first ten years until our family outgrew the two-bedroom apartment we had (my Dad is an inner city family physician at Crossroad Health Center and wanted to live with the people he served). We’re now in Mt. Washington on the East side of town.

**What's your family like?**

I’m the oldest of 8 kids, 5 girls and 3 boys. Needless to say there is rarely a quiet moment when we’re all at home, but it’s usually a lot of fun. My parents have done an incredible job raising us, providing for great experiences both together and on our own, and rooting us all in faith. As I get older I appreciate their choices as parents and their characters as people more and more.
As you know... the Magis Society is new and possibilities are endless of what this network can become. If you have ideas about any of the following, please contact us. What would you like to see in future newsletters? Have an article in mind that you could write? What opportunities would be interesting to you through Magis? How can we help you continue the journeys of deepening your spiritual life, pursuing justice, and promoting pluralism?

GOT IDEAS?

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