As a member of the admission team, I am often a prospective family’s first interaction with Xavier, and I take that responsibility very seriously. Not only am I charged with sharing the nuts and bolts about a Xavier education, but I am usually also explaining what it means to study at a Jesuit Catholic institution.

It would be very easy to simply spout the party line: “We are men and women FOR and WITH others” and leave it at that, but I think that would sell the Xavier experience far short.

When I share that statement, I often tell students the “FOR” part is easy to grasp: we have all been given unique gifts and talents and it is our call to share those blessings with the world to make it a better place.

But the WITH? I am your typical first-born child. I don’t need help. I can take care of myself. My parents were learning how to be parents so I often heard “you were our guinea pig.” And that’s really how I lived most of my life. I love to be around people. I am one of those weirdos who actually gets excited when you hand me a microphone and asks me to address a crowd of hundreds. But actually being vulnerable and recognizing that I don’t have to do it all on my own? Preposterous. A waste of time.

Through AFMIX, and through the Spiritual Exercises, I have learned to let my guard down. To really listen. To understand that the greatest gift of the Ignatian pedagogy is to be WITH others and that we are truly better together. Was it a magical two years and suddenly life is that much easier? No, of course not. But I have found myself less guarded with people I trust. More willing to share without fear, and to allow my friends and family the opportunity to know what is really going on in my heart and mind. To have that same kind of relationship with God in prayer.

It was pretty fortuitous that I was a part of the first fully remote AFMIX in the time after Covid. If there’s a bright side to a global pandemic that forced us all to isolate ourselves, it was the fact that we were relearning how to be WITH people again. Zoom connects people, but by its very nature, is still impersonal. You see the face and hear the voice, but all of the other parts of our connection as humans are usually lost. Oddly enough, I did not have that experience with my AFMIX group. We shared our thoughts and our perspectives through the magic of technology and really got to know each other. While I have been at Xavier for 15 years, many of the people on the other side of my screen were strangers when we started. I am proud and grateful to call them friends.

And that’s really what the WITH is all about; to understand that we as humans share a common bond, no matter where we come from or what we believe, and by bringing those ideas together, we can find not only commonalities, but camaraderie and challenge. To reflect on our own philosophy of life and all of the experiences that brought us to that moment and decide, through the grace of God and our own discernment, if that is the path we should continue to follow.

I often say I was Jesuit and didn’t really know it until I started working at Xavier. And indeed, my whole life, my mom would say “God writes straight with crooked lines.” Somewhere in the middle of my AFMIX experience, I realized that what she was telling me all those years ago is we can find God in all things. That was a profound moment. In dedicating my time to the AFMIX program, I came full circle. My then is my now.

Julie Nelson, AFMIX XII