

Volunteer Service – Embraced and Engaged

I was 24 years old when I had my first experience alone in a foreign country. It was Peru, and I lived and “worked” at a parish in Lima, the capital. The parish was run by Americans and the priests of the St. James Society and so there was some familiarity with English and my own culture if I hung out at the rectory. Initially, that was all I wanted to do. In reality I was terrified of Peru, its people, its culture, and its language. One afternoon I was hiding away in my room and decided that I wouldn’t get anything out of this experience unless I forced myself into what was unfamiliar and uncomfortable. There was a grammar school attached to the parish grounds and I decided I would venture over there. It must have corresponded to their recess time because all the children were outside. When they saw this “gringo,” they all came running toward me and my first reaction was to run away from them. But within seconds they had all overwhelmed me, embracing me about my waist and legs. With huge, uninhibited smiles they looked up at me and in the small amount of English that they had learned over their short course of life, they proudly spoke and questioned, “What’s your name?,” “I am Maria, and I am seven years old.,” “You are from the United States.” They embraced me and consumed me with great elation as if I was a piece of rich, chocolate cake. I was carried away by their joy and found myself laughing with a sense of deep fulfillment.



The children knew something innately that most of us forget as we grow up. They knew that the richness of life comes from embracing that which is new. It opens our hearts and minds. It provides new perspectives for understanding ourselves, others, and the world. It replaces the crippling that comes from fear with the vibrant wonder that comes from hope. I learned that day that I should never allow my discomfort or insecurity to limit my experience, but that I should see every new encounter as a revelation of the beauty of life. Most importantly I learned that I, like those children, needed to joyfully embrace and engage those different from myself if I was to discover profound meaning in life.

Now, 33 years later, I see my story in Peru played out among the volunteers who come to Honduras. They often arrive with that deer-in-the-headlights stare, not understanding how to fit in or communicate. Like fish out of water, it is a grueling challenge. But soon, they somehow make a connection and there is a transformation of their character that yields a deep sense of joy and fulfillment. This does not simply happen for them, but it happens for all who find the will to embrace and engage them, just like those children in the schoolyard in Lima, Peru. Personally, I feel so privileged and honored to witness this among the volunteers and those who they have come to know.



Shoulder to Shoulder is founded upon volunteer service. That which has been achieved in health care, education, and development, could never have been achieved without people of great generosity and commitment. Health care workers, builders, lawyers, social workers, professionals in public health, teachers, and those simply committed to service have offered time and talent that has consistently yielded opportunity and growth for desperate people confined by obstacles of poverty and inequity. For these very real, measurable gains (the physical existence of buildings, health care services, quality education, nutrition services, mission experiences, tools, and so much more), we need to be grateful to people who have shown courageous commitment to be agents of change. But for that which is unmeasurable -- the changes of the heart among all those embraced and engaged -- we must be ever more grateful. That which has been brought about or will be brought about because of these relationships -- this is really the hope for a new world.

Shoulder to Shoulder is no different today than it was in 1990. We still have an absolute dependence on volunteers. It is what sustains our mission. So many people tell me that they wish that they could only do what I am doing. If it wasn't for this, or it wasn't for that, then they would leave everything behind and volunteer. They seem to be saying that they want to follow their heart, but instead need to follow something else. I'm not sure what that "something else" is, but I have a suspicion that it is not real. It is a figment of fear. Perhaps, it would be best to rediscover the motivation of those children on the playground. Embrace and engage that which is new and different and find a profound sense of joy that will transform your life and the lives of those around you.



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