HEARTS ON FIRE
Service & Justice Trips, Spring 2013

“This trip has changed my life and impacted my vision of the world around me. I will never forget what I have learned this week and will continue to serve. This trip has IGNETED my heart!”

-Detroit Participant
The inspiration for this semester’s Service & Justice Trips newsletter stems from a response we received from one of our post-trip evaluations. The participant talked about how the Service & Justice Trip to Detroit “has ignited my heart!”

St. Ignatius of Loyola, as the story goes, would tell the early Jesuits departing for foreign missions, “Go forth and set the world on fire.” In the same spirit, it is this fire of love that 400 years later is kindled in the hearts of Creighton Service & Justice Trips participants as we mission them forth – fueled by the seven pillars of the program, spread to our amazing host partners across the country, and kept burning as participants return and advocate for a more just world.

Documents from the 35th General Congregation of the Jesuits talk about “a fire that kindles other fires” and I feel this is an apt metaphor for our program. The passion and fire for service and justice felt by students 30 years ago as they went on the first trip in 1983 has been passed along from year to year and is still kept alive by students in the program today. As the CCSJ now gears up for our next 30 years of Service & Justice Trips, we hope this newsletter will shed a little light on an amazing program, this spring’s 18 wonderful host communities, and the 129 amazing participants with hearts on fire.
I remember when my service group got to our site, our leader took us out into the woods. We spent a couple of days cleaning trees, getting a tour, and then cleaning more trees. By the middle of the week, we asked our leader, “How come we have not actually met a local mountain person? We thought we were going to be able to hear stories, and understand their way of life.” Our leader kind of scoffed – explaining that the mountain people really didn’t feel comfortable talking to us. They were extremely timid, felt judged by outside groups, and were uncomfortable with us there.

This was a fabulous experience for us – realizing the invisible barrier that society has put into place between people of different backgrounds, cultures, and economic levels. These feelings were nothing of our wrong doing. We never did meet a local mountain person, but we left with the greatest lesson we could have asked for. We had encountered the inevitable barrier that we were all striving to cross. Some communities will let us in. Others will choose to keep private. Whatever our experience, it is important to walk away asking the same question:

Why do these barriers exist? How do we cross them tactfully?

Throughout my experiences of entering into new communities, I have boiled my reflections into 3 points that might help us to step lightly into a new place:

1. Go in ready to listen. Not to talk. As college students, we are always asked to find the answer. This is your time to stop seeking an answer. Stop trying to fix. Walk in there knowing that you know absolutely nothing about the situations you are about to encounter.
2. Be ready to be vulnerable. We are asking the people that we meet to be vulnerable, to share their lives, to teach us. The same will be required of you. Sometimes we relate best in our brokenness – don’t be afraid.
3. Be ready to jump in feet-first. Participate in everything that your hosts ask and do. And get dirty! When we allow ourselves to dive fully in we are telling our hosts, ” I am the same as you; I can do this too.”

As a recap, encountering a new community is a delicate, and very radical idea. There are preconceived notions about us that we can’t control. Why are you going? What do you want to gain from this experience? I think one of the goals should be to counter the preconceived notions that the people you are serving are different from you. You will learn more about yourself this way, and you can empower them just by listening. Remember that what you do in one week, in the long run, is not going to change their situation. Ultimately they are responsible for their own well-being. Where you go with your experiences from there is more valuable than days of cleaning trees. Just listen. Allow yourself to be touched, and you will, in addition, empower your gracious hosts.
Over spring break I had the opportunity to go on a Service & Justice Trip through the CCSJ to Hubbard House in East St. Louis, Illinois. Eight other Creighton students and I made the seven hour drive to East St. Louis not really knowing what to expect from the week ahead of us. Everything we heard about East St. Louis were warnings to “stay safe” and not to “go out on our own.”

Needless to say, we were excited for our trip but also a little apprehensive about the places we were going and the people we would meet. As an outsider, I was prepared to experience some hostility from the community in East St. Louis, and I knew that the week would be challenging, but I honestly was not expecting to be surprised.

Surprised is an understatement in terms of how incredibly welcoming the people of East St. Louis were to our group. One example of this was on a day where we spent the morning working in a soup kitchen and thrift shop run by St. Vincent DePaul, Catholic Charities. When we first started serving lunch at the soup kitchen, I was overwhelmed by the sad situations that many of the people eating there where going through. The majority of the guests were homeless and many of them had substance abuse problems. I felt like there wasn’t much that I could say to them as I handed them plates of hot mashed potatoes, gravy and ham; so I smiled and gave each of them a warm greeting.

The response I received was not only surprising, but truly touching. They would ask where we all were from and genuinely smiled at us and thanked us for coming to volunteer. Then, one older man named James asked us to join him for lunch. And that day, there in a small, artificially lit soup kitchen, I felt truly connected and part of our larger human community.

James lives a much different life than my group and I do. He experiences poverty, racism and homelessness on a daily basis while we are earning college degrees and sleeping in warm beds, but for that one hour we sat as friends and shared our stories. We shared a meal together and were welcomed with open arms, as guests into a community that only a couple days before we had been afraid of.

It is true that there is much poverty and misfortune in East St. Louis. It is true that the large majority of the community there is African-American. It is true that they have one of the highest crime rates in the country. However, it is also true that there is a lot of life in East St. Louis. There are hundreds of children that are inspired by the portrait of the world’s most powerful country who looks just like them. There are wonderful people like Paulynn, Sister Marge and Pat who work and live in East St. Louis, running soup kitchens, Catholic Schools and homeless shelters. There are hard working parents who are struggling to provide for their children. There are homeless people who care for each other and form “street families.” East St. Louis is a place where people depend on one another and watch out for each other. In every person we met there, whether rich or poor, black or white, young or old, there was soul and there was a very human quality: perseverance.
The Lincoln group poses with their hosts and animals at Shadowbrook Farms. This spring, our 18 trips were hosted by amazing communities that shared their time, their lives, and their fire for justice with the participants.

Who in your host site community provided inspiration and/or challenge?

We asked each participant to talk about someone they met over Spring Break that kindled the fire for them and the group.

“Ben Anderson – Creighton grad/Jesuit now – he said that he loves to ‘unlock the ability for others to tell their story. His passion/drive gave hope to me.”
-Participant, Advocacy Trip Minneapolis, MN

“We loved the sisters that we stayed with and all the people working at Marillac -LOVED. Dedicated, hard working, passionate, selfless”
-Participant, Marillac Center Chicago, IL

“Mary Louise Smith Ware – she was the second person (woman) to refuse to give up her seat to a white person. She did this before Rosa Parks. I got to talk with her and her sister about this experience. She was so inspirational and wonderful. I just felt like I could accomplish anything when I was around her and her sister.”
-Participant, Resurrection Catholic Missions, Montgomery, AL

“I spent an hour and a half practicing English with a man named Alfonso on Friday. We just talked about everything from school, to life in his homes in Cuba and Canada, to his children. It was amazing to see how someone from such a different background as I could be so similar to me.”
-Participant, Whipple House Chicago, IL

Praise from our New Orleans, LA hosts:
“I absolutely love your group!!! We finally got to hang out and have dinner last night. It was an awesome experience. We held hands, said grace, and enjoyed po’boys and some great conversation. I am truly hoping that this experience will be just the beginning of their relationship with SBP! I am so thrilled that I got the opportunity to meet each and every one. They are truly an amazing group with high energy and huge hearts!!! I have encouraged them to stay in touch and engaged. I really think this trip has been a huge success for everyone. I look forward to hearing back from you after you have had a chance to speak with everyone to gauge their feelings about the trip. Thank you again for all your support and dedication to SBP and our clients. I look forward to continuing to work closely with you and the great students of Creighton University.”
Tim Guernsey – St. Bernard Project, New Orleans
Thank You!

Thank you to all who have nurtured our program over the last 30 years! We could not do this without your support financially and spiritually. Students have done their part this year contributing their student fees, speaking at Masses, offering manual labor for donations, and partnering with local businesses to raise money. In 2012, 192 students received $27,810 in need-based and leadership scholarships. We continue to seek ways to fundraise the needed $75,000 per year. We are grateful for your partnership, ideas and contributions as you are able.

Kindling other FIRES and carrying them onward

“We’re so hard to put into words. This entire trip was beautiful, moving, and inspiring. Everything had a purpose and I felt like I grew as a person with each new experience and person that I met.”
-Participant, Resurrection Catholic Missions, Montgomery, AL

“This trip greatly impacted my sense of purpose and solidified my vocation of serving others through my care and love for people.”
-Participant, Daughters of Charity, Detroit, MI

“This trip far exceeded my expectations! I have learned so much this week and have become so much more fired up about advocacy and community organizing.”
-Participant Advocacy Trip, Minneapolis, MN

Want to see more pictures and reflections from the Service & Justice Trips?
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