

Living Our Call to be Merciful

“Mercy is entering into peoples’ lives,” says Sister Connie Bach, PHJC. “It’s handing someone a bag of food or standing in line with them at the soup kitchen. It’s being grateful for the opportunity to be in that line with people who don’t know where they’ll get their next meal. It’s about learning how to receive.”

Sister Marybeth Martin, PHJC, adds “Mercy is offering and receiving dignity. It’s learning and teaching. It’s not just one-way; there’s a mutuality. Mercy is transforming our judgments, allowing ourselves to be transformed in the process of serving. We ask, ‘Am I allowing the Spirit in? Am I vulnerable to the Spirit?’”

Sisters Connie and Marybeth serve as co-directors of the PHJC Volunteer Program. “Our goal,” says Sister Connie, “is to help single, Catholic women discern lives toward service.”

This Poor Handmaid tradition began when four German women joined our Foundress, Blessed Catherine Kasper, in professing their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in 1851. Blessed Catherine created a community of women dedicated to caring for poor and sick women, children, and elderly people through very ordinary acts of service.

Discerning a Life Toward Service

The PHJC Volunteer Program is a structured extension of Blessed Catherine’s community-building, updated to meet the needs and expectations of today’s college graduates, burned-out baby-boomers and widows starting new lives. Our program is in its third year, made possible by

the Catholic Volunteer Network’s three-year “From Service to Sisterhood” grant funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Based on a study of alumni of faith-based volunteer programs by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), 48 percent of those surveyed who have considered a vocation to religious life or priesthood did so “during (their) volunteer service.”

There is a connection between merciful service and discerning God’s purpose for your life. “Everyone has moments where we lose our sense of purpose,” says Libby Riggs, PHJC Volunteer. “And the PHJC Volunteer Program is about living into those questions... discerning what God wants for me... walking the path step-by-step... choosing between two or more ‘goods.’”

Libby Riggs’ year-long journey as a PHJC Volunteer grew out of a feeling of restlessness and questioning God’s purpose for her. Libby spent the majority of her professional life assisting people with developmental disabilities. She raised two adopted children, Emma and Adam, now adults, in a small town in Southern Illinois.

Poor Handmaids have always been influential in her spiritual life. When she graduated from high school, she entered the Poor Handmaid community as an Affiliate, discerning the possibility of vowed religious life. But God called her to motherhood instead. Libby continues to be a part of the Poor Handmaid community as an Associate, committing to live the values and charism of Blessed Catherine in any vocation, and now as a PHJC Volunteer.

Through the program, we engage single Catholic women in volunteer service, living in a religious community, and intentional reflection and prayer to help them discern a life toward service, through whatever vocation God has in mind.

Volunteering

Volunteer experiences are ways to engage mercifully in others’ lives. Libby participates in a variety of ways from short immersion trips to PHJC ministries, to regular spiritual companionship of Sisters and



Left: Sister Connie Bach, PHJC, Libby Riggs, and Sister Marybeth Martin, PHJC. Right: Volunteers clean up debris in Holly Springs, MS.

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Libby Riggs, PHJC Volunteer

residents at Catherine Kasper Home, to crisis volunteerism aiding victims of natural disasters.

In May 2016, Sister Connie and Libby joined an inter-community group of Sisters to clean up debris strewn about by a devastating tornado that struck Holly Springs, Mississippi around Christmas 2015. With winds between 166-200 mph, this storm left two residents dead, including a 7-year-old boy, and many homes, businesses, and local attractions destroyed or damaged.

"What struck me was that this disaster hit everyone—not just the rich, not just the poor. It affected everyone in this small town," says Libby. "When we were done working on the home site, we all stood together representing different faiths, and we raised our hands and blessed the home and its residents. We don't know if the homeowners even know that we blessed them."

Locally, in Donaldson, Indiana, Libby blesses the Sisters and residents of Catherine Kasper Home with spiritual companionship. She volunteers by tending to the everyday needs of the Sisters, reviewing their Resurrection Plans (advanced planning care

and directives), helping them get to the chapel and meals, and listening attentively.

"There is one Sister," says Libby, "who is always ahead of schedule. She arrives early to everything. As we were coming up to our time to leave for chapel, she asked me if I had time for one more story. The experience of sharing was that important to her. More important than arriving early."

"It is really touching to watch the Sisters engage with younger women," says Sister Marybeth, "to watch the effect it has on Sisters... they have a chance to share their wisdom and life experience."

Living in a Religious Community

So much of this sharing occurs because PHJC Volunteers live in community with vowed women religious. Libby lives in Assumption Hall at The Center at Donaldson with several Sisters.

"Living in community is not always easy," says Sister Connie. "It means that we choose to bring our whole selves, to become part of local community life, to do chores, and live the daily life. Every day we get up and we intentionally choose to be there. We bring and give our best selves."

"I started volunteering as a way to pay back the Sisters. But it seems like the more and more I give, the more and more I receive," says Libby. "It was a

financially scary decision, and I didn't have to do it. But I've learned that I can live simply!"

Libby has come to know the bravery of Poor Handmaid Sisters. "The Sisters are always forward-thinking. They are prayerful, and they resist fear. I'm grateful for their courage."

Reflecting and Praying

The PHJC Volunteer Program is designed to provide a framework and resources for discerning a life toward service to the Church and the broader world. This year-long experience includes: orientation, a mid-year retreat, regular goal work, support from a spiritual director, an end of year reflection, and frequent conversation with co-directors.

"One of my goals," says Libby, "is to build community in my hall. So, we intentionally share desserts, play games, and create opportunities to get to know one another on a spiritual level through prayer, liturgy, and worship."

Sisters Connie and Marybeth offer resources about prayer, paying attention to God, and vocations. We ask questions like, "How is God calling me to serve today? How does God speak to me in my daily life? And, how does the Holy Spirit stir my heart?"

Envisioning the Future

To date, the program has engaged five single, Catholic women in works of mercy and discerning a life toward service. Those deep engagements are the measure of success—we are connecting and accompanying women in discernment.

Note: At the time of printing, Libby Riggs has accepted the position of Director of the Associate Community for the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. She assumes the role held by Donna Sikorski, who plans to enjoy her retirement!

With an eye toward the future, Sisters Connie and Marybeth hope to grow the program by:

- Growing international volunteer opportunities,
- Deepening participants' knowledge and understanding of social justice, and
- Expanding prison ministry.

To accomplish these dreams, the PHJC Volunteer Program is actively seeking partnerships and charitable financial resources to sustain the program after the initial grant funding ends in 2017. Donors may designate their gifts to support the program. Charitable funding would offset daily living costs such as food and transportation while living in the community, stipends, support for spiritual direction, workshop and training fees for social justice education, and personnel to focus on recruiting volunteers and administration. Eventually, the Sisters hope to offer student loan deferments in order to make discerning a life toward service a viable option for recent college graduates.

"If I had had this opportunity after college," says Libby, "I would have chosen this over the Peace Corps. There's a spiritual element here that you don't get otherwise."

The PHJC Volunteer Program is open to any single, Catholic woman age 21+. We are intentionally seeking women who want to commit three months to a year in this program. Volunteers must be in good health and consent to drug screening.

Applications are available on our website: www.phjcvolprogram.org.

PHJC Volunteer Program

Quick Facts

- Open to single, Catholic women age 21+
- Purpose is to volunteer and discern a life toward service
- Many volunteers are at a turning point in life: college graduation, professional burnout, widowhood, etc.
- Program includes volunteer opportunities, prayer and reflection, and living in community with women religious
- Service experiences are three months to a year in length
- Visit www.poorhandmaids.org/donate-new for online donations