



VTO Program Thrives at Three

BARBARA ALLISON | COMMUNICATIONS

Editors note: April is National Volunteer Month. To that end, this issue features several stories about volunteerism.

In his 1989 inaugural address, President George H. W. Bush challenged America with a call to action of a Thousand Points of Light, spurring communities to uplift one another through volunteerism. In May 1990, he founded the Points of Light Foundation. Decades later and sparked by a different need, the Poor Handmaids established the Volunteer Time Off (VTO) program, empowering co-workers to serve PHJC ministries and other community non-profits through paid time off. The benefit gives co-workers 80 hours of paid time off per year to volunteer for worthy organizations. It was part of the PHJC community response to the 2018 flooding in Marshall County. This benefit, for many co-workers, makes

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40 Indiana Children Trafficked For Sex or “Services”

JESSICA BARCUS | MARKETING COORDINATOR

Makes quite a headline doesn't it? You almost hope it's just a line from a new horror movie. But it's not. It is real life for hundreds of Indiana kids and adults. Even more sickening, that is not an all-inclusive number. Indiana does not have a central reporting system so when a report from the National Human Trafficking Hotline says 157 people from Indiana were trafficking in 2019 alone, that is just one agency's report. Ascent 121 reported another 117 treated, all minors, in the same year.

Right now, human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal business in the world, generating \$150.2 billion annually.

There are reported cases of trafficking in every one of Indiana's 92 counties, and in most situations the victim knew their trafficker.

This is not happening “over there” or to “someone else”. It is here and we cannot ignore it.

In 2019 65% of cases reported were sex trafficking cases. That means adults using our children for the unthinkable. Right now, human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal business in the world, generating \$150.2 billion annually.



With such a sickening situation taking place right here where we live, surely you are now wondering how you can help. How can we make it stop? Domestically we report by calling 888-373-7888. We can also take the time to learn. Learn what to do, what to look for.

On April 7, we are participating in a webinar put on by Truckers Against Trafficking, you can sign up at reception. On May 20 we will host Ian Hurst from the Indiana Trafficking Victims Assistance Program as he presents “Human Trafficking and Indiana Youth: Identification, Recognition, and Reporting”. Both events are free to you and a great way to learn how each of us can help get rid of this monster. There are also fliers near reception with more information on trafficking in different service areas. If you have questions about the upcoming events I'm happy to help.

Sources: <https://www.in.gov/attorneygeneral/3463.htm>
<http://www.wbiw.com/2021/01/05/human-trafficking-more-widespread-in-indiana>

A Family's Odyssey

COUPLE SHARES THE STORY OF THEIR THREE-YEAR ODYSSEY
OF COMING TO AMERICA

BARBARA ALLISON | COMMUNICATIONS

As their one-year-old daughter, Emma, babbled, smiled, and dined, Ernesto Almenares and Mayrelis Iriarte shared the story of their three-year odyssey from Cuba to the United States with an audience of Maria Center residents, Sisters, and co-workers gathered to hear their astounding story, which they told through translator Uriel "Chino" Martinez.

On March 7, 2020, Sisters Jolise May and Joetta Huelsmann picked up Ernesto and Mayrelis at the airport in South Bend, Indiana, commencing a new journey for the couple, one of political refugees. A week later, their daughter Emma was born at Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center, Plymouth. The couple emigrated from Cuba, traveling through Brazil, Uruguay, Central America, and Mexico. The often-arduous routes they took through the mountains and rivers were deliberate. They were ways to avoid the drug traffickers and gangs that operate throughout the region.

Ernesto graduated from medical school in 1991 and practiced as a pediatrician in Cuba. He met Mayrelis, a physical therapist, and both were suspect because of their education level and interests in discussing science and free thought. Expressions of free thought and trust in science are verboten in Cuba. So in 2017, Ernesto



began his journey from Cuba to the United States. Mayrelis and her 11-year-old daughter stayed behind. Later, Mayrelis met him alone in Uruguay, a place they did not consider safe for her daughter to await the journey to the U.S.

Crossing into Brazil or Uruguay is a less problematic start since neither country requires a visa, and Uruguay is where Ernesto waited for Mayrelis for nine long months. He began

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MoonLines 1.1



MATTHEW CELMER
MOONTREE DIRECTOR

It is my pleasure to share with you in the first of a new format of updates from our ministry. For those who have been part of this community from the beginning, you might recognize the title of these newsletters, MoonLines. The idea behind MoonLines was that there was a cosmic connection between the birth of the new (at that time) MoonTree Studios and the ongoing creation of the universe. In that same spirit, we will keep you connected with the ongoing creativity here at MoonTree.

To know where we're going, it's important to know where we've been. For that reason, in 2021, MoonTree is celebrating the 30th anniversary of the 1991 PHJC Pastoral Plan. A beautiful and radical vision for the future of the Poor Handmaid community, the Pastoral Plan paved

the way for not only MoonTree Studios, but the entire community's commitment to integral ecology:

"We stand as prophets called to share an alternative world-view with a society convinced that ownership, consumption, and power are most important. We call for lives of interdependence and inter-connectedness in church, society, and creation. How do we respond? We resist our fears and dare to accept the challenges we find before us: We speak to the present needs of our earth by modeling an Earth-keeping vision and by developing personal and communal spiritualities that reverence creation."

In taking these words to heart, the MoonTree
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Nature Notes

ELSA LITTMAN | MARIA CENTER RESIDENT

It is now officially spring, as of March 20. Angus mothers are calving. Some geese are on the lake, as well as other waterfowl too far away to identify. Spring frogs have been heard some nights in chorus. On warm sunny days, turtles have been sunning themselves on a log out over the lake. A broken branch is dripping rising sap. I called a friend and found him tapping his maple trees as he answered his phone.

The early crocus is past and the hyacinths are about to burst. Daffodils are blooming near the Maria Center entrance. Starlings are busy socializing in and out of holes up in a prayer garden tree.

As I walk along the cattails by the lake, I behold three neat piles of rabbit scat- one black, one brown, and one reddish-



brown! Were they eating beans from the fallen locust pods?

The sights and sounds of sandhill crane, south and east, on the ground, and also high in the sky give me hope for a once-endangered species. Adam reported seeing a whooping crane among them.

A striking sight has been the impressive evidence of the pileated woodpecker. You don't have to stretch your neck, as

the large holes are usually chest height, and the debris from their activity is scattered at the base: wood chips and bits of bark, sometimes large strips.

They have an uncanny sense of where, within the tree, their food can be found. Carpenter ants and grubs are favorites. My first sighting was in late dawn, before bright light, working on a branch on a tree near the outer edge of

the prayer garden. The best examples is far down the walk, almost to the cemetery, on an almost dead locust tree.

They are striking birds, 17 inches long, black with some white markings, and a bright red chest. If you don't get to actually see the pileated woodpecker, the evidence it leaves is impressive.

Happy Spring!



Sister Melanie Rauh Serves in Faith

DON BRIGGS | FRIEND OF SR. MELANIE RAUH

Sister Melanie Rauh has been volunteering with Michigan City's Emergency Soup Kitchen. I often volunteer on Wednesdays, and so I got to meet her.

Our Emergency Soup Kitchen has been serving around 100 lunches, five days a week, for many months now.

Our host church is First United Methodist Church, led by Pastor Nancy Nichols.

We receive surplus food from the Northern Indiana Food Bank and from local vendors. Eric Tannehill coordinates the volunteers and menus.

Last summer, Eric was named a Culinary Hero of Indiana for this and other charity work.

Sister Melanie has a wonderful testimony, and she's a delight to work with.

On Wednesday, we served orange chicken with pepper strips, water chestnuts, and cabbage over rice, with a fruit cup and fortune cookie. Sister Melanie excels at making rice, by the way.

Sister Melanie said a blessing on the meal and for those sharing it as we started distribution. She loves to speak with the diners as we hand out the meals.



Meet Elizabeth Gearhart

BILL BURKE | MARIA CENTER RESIDENT

Maria Center's newest resident, Elizabeth Gearhart, comes to us from McAllen, Texas where she has spent the last thirty years. Originally from New Mexico, she has spent most of her adult life in Illinois and Texas. Elizabeth is a widow with three adult children and six grandchildren. One significant chapter in Elizabeth's life was caring for Victor Alvarez, a remarkable young boy from Mexico suffering from spinal muscular atrophy. She has written about this experience in a book called *VICTORIUS Life*, an inspirational account in which she and three other women cared for Victor during most of his 23 years of life. The book describes a community of love in which the source of the love is a radiant unworldly spirit inhabiting a failing body. One Maria Center resident called the book "amazing," which may be an understatement. A New Mexico friend of mine with a disabled son writes that "Elizabeth's book, Victor's story,



is extraordinary. I have never read anything like that. Please tell her how meaningful, what a gift, her book is for me." Victor Alvarez is unforgettable, and the book tells us more about Elizabeth than a few sentences here can do. It is available in the Avita library. At a later date, Elizabeth will discuss her book and its inspiration, Victor Alvarez

DIETARY REPORT:

Dietary Services continues to hear and respond to the questions and requests of Sisters, residents, and co-workers.

Last month, *Ripples* published a report detailing the many changes that have happened this year. To that end, the team continues to seek your feedback.

If you have a question or comment about your dining experience, use the comment cards located on your table. When finished, simply place them in the bucket, also on the table. Also, watch your email or mailbox for the next quarterly survey coming at the end of May.

Dietary Services Manager Abby Dunlap-Hundt also noted that the cooks are nearly 40% finished with their online culinary classes, and the Dietary Service Aides will start the courses soon. Additionally, breakfast hours are now 7:30 to 8:45 a.m. on weekdays, and until 9 a.m. on weekends.

Thank you to our hardworking and dedicated Dietary Team for implementing so many suggestions and making great improvements.

More Haiku

DAVID BURKE | MARIA CENTER RESIDENT

My primary hobby is bonsai, the art of little trees in attractive pots. One of the design techniques is to reposition branches by wrapping them with wire and bending them into a desired position. Sometimes we may bend the branch before wiring to decide on an attractive position.

*positioning the branch
bending it here, now there ... Oops! ...
accidental pruning*

Another design technique involves pruning branches that don't contribute to the appearance. Since branches cut off can't be replaced, such pruning involves indecision.

*pruning my bonsai
which to keep, which to remove...
(sigh) I can't decide*

Frogs and bonsai sometimes get intertwined. Often when a bonsai is displayed, a smaller plant, known as a companion or accent plant, is displayed with it to "complete the composition". One morning there was a small frog sitting beside one of my bonsai.

*beside my bonsai
completing the composition
sits my accent frog*

We had spiders, too.

*a tiny spider
self-taught engineer,
artist makes an awesome web*



PHOTO/ CONNOR ALLISON

*that same spider web
I swept away yesterday
reappeared today*

This is a short, but true, gardening story.
(I don't like killing things.)

*I dug a small hole
a tiny spider fell in
I helped it climb out*

There is a similarity among all of us living creatures.

*we're a lot alike
this wee little bug and me
just trying to get by*

(MOONLINES, CON'T FROM PAGE 4)

staff recently finished their Permaculture Design Certificates from the Permaculture International College. This endeavor was made possible by generous donors, and the entire MoonTree staff is now able to operate as permaculture educators and consultants. We have been collaborating with the Greenhouse Manager and co-workers along with the entire Ecological Services department on a new campus Greenhouse design. The goal is to help eliminate the food desert in our area by providing fresh and safe produce for our own community as well as those around us.

As Permaculture can be most simply defined by its three main tenants, earth care, people care, fair share; MoonTree will spend 2021 growing in our permaculture knowledge and skills through educational programs and collaborations and we invite you to join us!

Keep an eye on our social media and website in the coming weeks for the unveiling of our new series of programming focused on permaculture through the interconnectedness of art, nature, and spirituality. We hope that you will come and join us as we “sow the seeds for a more mindful, compassionate, and sustainable Earth community.”



Adam Calhoun of Ancilla College captured this federally-endangered Whooping Crane at MoonTree Studios on March 16. Learn more about this rare sighting at <https://ecology.phjc.org/>



Welcome New Faces

Tonja Gallagher
Dennis Wenzel
Sue Wilhelm

CKLC Admin
CKLC Chaplain
Lindenwood Retreat Development Manager

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volunteerism possible since they could not afford to forego wages, or take time away from their other obligations.

Ever since, co-workers are utilizing the benefit and making a positive impact in many areas. Marketing Coordinator Jessica Barcus is one of them. For the past year, she's helped small business owners develop their marketing strategies by sharing her savvy. "I've been using VTO hours to teach small groups of small business owners free and/or cost-effective ways to promote their businesses to help them come through the COVID shutdowns. I love to share new information about marketing with anyone, so it feels especially good to help these small businesses."

Since January, numerous co-workers and Sisters have volunteered at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center in Plymouth to assist in vaccinating the community against COVID-19. Ecological Relationships Director Adam Thada is one of them. "The most rewarding moment came when I asked one recipient what the vaccine meant to her. Without hesitation, she replied with a single word: 'Freedom.'"

Maria Center Resident Services Manager Becky Anspach also volunteered at the vaccine clinic. Her experience, like Adam's, was one of making an impact. "I recall one story a lady



told when she came to receive her first dose of the vaccine," Becky explained. "She came to get the vaccine because 20 of her relatives had decided to gather last fall for a birthday party, and while she and her husband refused to go because of COVID-19, all those family members got the virus and three passed away from complications. She was deeply saddened to see relatives struggling and to lose some of them, including her mother. She felt compelled to get vaccinated as a way to memorialize them and to share their family's story in hopes of saving others. We've all learned many life lessons through this crisis and hopefully will come out of it better for it, including the need to act on kindness and

mercy to one another."

Others, such as co-worker Heidi Allen, are making a difference by helping feed the homeless and hungry in Marshall County through their volunteerism with Sister Connie Bach's Homeless Outreach program.



"I love being able to help pack meals and give back to the community. I love that I can volunteer while I work to help people out that are in need." Like many who've used the VTO program, Heidi also discovered a benefit for herself: "You really get to know everyone that you volunteer with and it feels like a little family. Not only do you get to know your co-workers you also get to know Maria Center Residents and Sisters better. This is an amazing project and I'm glad I'm part of it."

Through VTO, I was able to travel with Sister Connie's Volunteer program to go to McAllen, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico to serve our sisters and brothers awaiting entry into America both in December 2019 and March 2020.

During our first trip, we met Daniel, an eight-year-old boy from Haiti who was staying with his family at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen. He presented our group with a drawing he made from memory of the PHJC Volunteer Program logo, which he saw on our t-shirts the previous day. He was a delight and peacemaker among the other children, as older kids often are. Before his family departed for Florida, I told him God loved him and so did I, wished him a great life, and implored him to hone his artistic talent.

Less than three months later, we returned to the border for

another week of service and community building, right before the country shut down for COVID. On our last day in the Matamoros tent city, several of us broke out in the song *Show Me the Way to Go Home*. A gentleman joined in, singing the verses and chorus in English. Laughter ensued before he got somber and told us how much he loved America and Americans.

Later, fellow volunteer Steve Wienert warmed our hearts when he bought watercolor paper and paints to share with Mia, age 4, a guest at Respite Center from the Congo. For a few brief hours, Mia got to learn from a world-class artist, splash paint at Steve, laugh, and return to her childhood.



AN UPDATE:

Update on Plymouth Food Ministry:

We're now serving second half of trailer court.

To date:

Lunches 1450

Extra Sandwiches 335

Food Bags 1008

Hygiene Bags 300

Moving to serving 100

lunches and moving to 60 food bags with paper products.

All donations of non-perishables and paper products welcomed.

April 7 - Food Distribution

Farm to Family boxes of food - 540 boxes coming.

33 lbs. with milk, cheese, potatoes, apples, onions, hot dogs, taco meat, etc.

Lot C between 5 and 7pm

Free to all. Tell friends, relatives and neighbors.

Marshall and Starke

Counties. If you would like to volunteer, please

contact Sr. Connie at

574-340-6409

(FAMILY, CON'T FROM PAGE 3)

working to pass the time and to survive. It takes money to facilitate safe passage with trusted sources at each step of the way. The two kept in touch via cell phone. As the situation deteriorated, Mayrelis became pregnant with Emma, and the pair decided it was time to leave.

Each country they crossed had its own tariff that needed to be paid before they could exit and then enter the next one. Likewise, each country presented its own challenges during the voyage. Crossing rivers and passing over dangerous mountains was a calculated risk taken to avoid encounters with drug gangs. The most dangerous places Ernesto and Mayrelis crossed through were Central America and Mexico. Throughout their crossing, drug gangs ruled in the cities, often with a heavy hand even for minor offenses.

The journey through Mexico took the couple five months and at the time, Mayrelis continued to carry Emma. On one stretch of the crossing, Ernesto got an eerie feeling from the horse Mayrelis was getting ready to ride into the mountains with him. They switched horses, and Ernesto was eventually thrown from that horse. It was one of the many God moments, as both Rhonda Overmyer, Maria Center Resident Services Coordinator, said at

the presentation and that Sister Connie Bach shares with her volunteer program participants. "God was with you and watched over you," Rhonda stated of the couple's miraculous journey.

Emma was born a week after Sisters Jolise and Joetta brought the couple to The Center at Donaldson. Since then, Emma delights everyone she meets while riding through campus in her stroller. She'll soon flash her smile while walking to greet everyone; she turned one on March 13. Beside their deep faith, the couple credits Ernesto's training in martial arts and Mayrelis' refusal to give into fear, ever. "Just do it-don't think-keep going," the couple told each other when either verged on quitting. Now, Mayrelis' days are busy with raising baby Emma, and Ernesto volunteers at both the Ancilla College Health Clinic for COVID protocols and for Sister

Connie's Plymouth Homeless Outreach Program. Both await their visas for U.S. residency, with the goal of U.S. citizenship.

