

A team of PHJC coworkers, Associates, PHJC and other Sisters, MUAC students, and hotel residents get ready for delivery at Econo Lodge in Plymouth, Indiana.



PHJC Volunteers

CHANGING LIVES

with hearts and hands

By **Barbara Allison** | Communications

*"As each one has
received a gift, use it
to serve one another as
good stewards of
God's varied grace."*

1 Peter 4:10

The wheels of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Volunteer Program have many spokes. I am but one. The hub is undoubtedly Sister Connie Bach. Each Tuesday and Thursday, a room in the kitchen of Cana Hall is a hub of activity under her direction, filling the lives of those who volunteer with purpose and meaning. It's here that a cadre of volunteer Sisters, residents, Associates, and coworkers make sandwiches, pack grocery bags, and fill bins with hygiene products to deliver to two local motels, serving children of God who would otherwise do without.

Since 2018, I've served with the PHJC Volunteers both locally and on three trips to the U.S. Mexico border. These experiences have given me much more than I could ever offer to anyone. On my first trip to the border to assist at a migrant camp in Matamoros, Mexico and a respite

center in McAllen, Texas in December 2019, I witnessed a heartbreakingly beautiful moment when a Honduran mother, Catharina, was reunited with her two sons after five months of separation by the Trump administration. It was the most humbling Christmas gift I've ever received. Currently, a case to continue enforcement of the Migrant Protection Protocols, commonly known as Remain in Mexico, is before the U.S. Supreme Court. How I wish all nine of the justices could witness what we experienced on these trips - the devastation of family separation, the squalid living conditions - and decide the case with open hearts instead of politics.

Not long after my return from our second and third visits to the border, which bookended the initial pandemic lockdown and onset of Delta variant, I began serving with the PHJC Volunteer Food Program delivering food and other basic necessities, including hope, to residents at two motels in Plymouth, Indiana. When I don't see a familiar face on our routes each week, I hope it's because of a new job or a permanent home and not something that's making their life harder.

Seeing the familiar faces is just one of the gifts I've received from this endeavor. At this critical time in history, the confluence of a pandemic, political instability, and widening income inequality, knowing that all it takes to make someone's life a little easier is another person caring is balm for the soul in an increasingly harsh world. Meeting people like Red Rock Inn resident Marie and seeing her eyes light up not from donations but from an enveloping hug from Sister Connie is kindness distilled into its most human form. The pair chat about how Marie's been doing as she reflects, "I so appreciate what you do by giving us food, body lotion, and towels and the people around me appreciate it, too. I can't think of a better way to give than just to let people know you care about them and that they're not forgotten."

It's heartening to meet someone like Economy Inn resident Duane, who became more adept at managing his diabetes with both food he can count on receiving each week and through partnerships Sister Connie's built with allies like St. Joseph Regional Medical Center. I delivered food to Duane for what may be the last time last week; he's moving into his own apartment at Saint Katharina Kasper Serenity Place in Plymouth. Another success story is James, a mohawk-sporting, affable Red Rock Inn resident,



Sisters and Maria Center residents pack cooler bags and grocery bags for delivery to two hotels in Plymouth, Indiana.



who recently got a full-time job, a bank account, and a Kroger card all in the same week. It so much more than food; it's changing lives one encounter at a time.

In my time with the PHJC Volunteers both here and at the border, my heart and mind have expanded through the grace of knowing that I too can be the hands and feet of Jesus in service to others. The greatest gift is the community I've become a part of as a PHJC Volunteer, working with and getting to know coworkers, Sisters, Associates, and residents who I don't encounter daily, who keep that giant wheel of service to others spinning despite the obstacles. The volunteers I've served with have become my friends, not mere acquaintances. They've become people who I can count on and who can count on me. That's something I cherish, much like my friendship with Sister Connie, which has also grown in our service together.