On a Mission from God

Twenty students spend their spring break in Jamaica, where they discover the joy and heartache of serving the poor.

By Catherine Lee
Photos by students Michelle Maurer, Rachael Salamone, and Deirdre Walsh
On a Mission from God

n the back porch at Widow's Mite in Murray Mount, Jamaica, a boy in a wheelchair chews his shirt and rocks his head from side to side. A child with autism sits in a corner, silent and staring.

Catholic University student Christian Domaas approaches another boy, five-year-old Michael, who is strapped into a wheelchair.

After spending an hour with Michael, feeding him lunch, and wondering why he’s not more responsive, Domaas — tall and thin with a crew cut — learns that the child is deaf and blind. The international economics and finance major from Burtonsville, Md., who’s never spent time before with a child with such severe physical disabilities, is upset by the news, but determined to find a way to comfort Michael when he cries. Eventually he discovers that if he leans his head against Michael’s, the boy calms down.

By mid-afternoon on the porch, other CUA students are reading or singing to the rest of the children. Luke Hlavin, who was then associate campus minister for retreats and men’s ministry, is playing his guitar. A young man wearing a knit rasta hat is repairing a rabbit hutch for the children.

After several hours at Widow’s Mite — a residential facility for abandoned children — Hlavin tells the students it’s time to say goodbye. Domaas tears up as he leaves Michael. He’s pensive as he gets on the bus for the ride back to Kingston. On the way, the bus stops at a park in the town of Ocho Rios, where several others talk about patience, and pain.

When a voice over a loudspeaker announced their flight, the students gathered in another passenger’s cardboard cup of tea. Nursing major Karie Kibler hurried over to comfort Michael when he cries. Eventually he discovers that if he leans his head against Michael’s, the boy calms down.

At the end of Mass, students one evening at the hostel and described the journey that brought him to the Caribbean country. With his 14-year-old dog Sligo at his feet and the caw of seagulls outside the window, he said he hadn’t planned to become a missionary.

Born in the Bronx, he came to CUA as an undergraduate and at first lived in a residence hall. Later he moved to a home on Monroe Street, where he was one of the founding members of The House, CUA’s residential community for student ministers now located on campus. Planning to become a university chaplain, he travelled with the baseball team and drove a CUA shuttle.

Walking in the Light of God

The next morning the students attended Mass at Stella Maris Church in Kingston. A warm breeze wafted through the open doors and windows of the church, where tall cactus plants arched the altar and a stained glass window showed a fisherwoman in a boat reaching his arms up to God. In his homily, Rev. Howard Thompson, pastor of Stella Maris, talked about the Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent, Matthew 4:1-11, which describes Jesus’s 40-day fast in the desert and the devil’s efforts to tempt him.

Addressing his congregation as “beloved,” Father Thompson noted that the season of Lent “invites us to walk with Jesus in the wilderness when we follow Jesus, we follow his example by choosing to be a people of prayer.” His reference to prayer was timely for the students, who prayed often — both as a group and with the missionaries they met on the trip. As Hlavin noted, prayer “is crucial to making possible the work that we do. Being a Christ-like person is about being rooted in prayer. It’s hard to be that Christ-like figure if you are not experiencing prayer yourself.”

At the end of Mass, after blessing parishioners who were celebrating birthdays and anniversaries, Father Thompson asked the students to stand. The congregation applauded, acknowledging the group’s service in Jamaica. Scheduled to volunteer at St. Monica’s, a nursing home for elderly who have been abandoned, they got back on the bus, which the driver maneuvered out of the crowded church parking lot. The radio blared a gospel reggae version of “Walking in the Light of God.”

At St. Monica’s, the group met several residents whose few possessions included well-worn Bibles. Eighty-seven-year-old Enid Francis, who had a bent back and bowed legs, picked up the Bible that she reads every day. Wearing a sleeveless floral shift, a black and white hat, and knit slippers, Francis noted, “The best we can do is to give God our praise.”

Hlavin sat on a bench next to an elderly man wearing a faded red baseball cap and a purple shirt who had his belongings in one of his bags. “It was so beautiful how worn it was,” said Hlavin. “Not that it was ripped. Some of the pages had just worn away from being rubbed and rubbed.” The man asked Hlavin to read some of his favorite prayers, including Psalm 130, which starts “Out of the depths I call to you, Lord…”

“Tears are really powerful.”

Giving People Their Dignity

St. Monica’s opened in 1982 under the direction of Monsignor Richard Alberts. Born in 1930, brother of CUA chaplain Rev. Howard Thompson, he travelled with the students one evening at the hostel and described the journey that brought him to the Caribbean country. With his 14-year-old dog Sligo at his feet and the caw of seagulls outside the window, he said he hadn’t planned to become a missionary.

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dropping students off at the library and classroom buildings. But after the young seminarian failed his theology exams, his superior asked him to take an assignment in Jamaica. Initially resistant, he said he accepted it after having “a religious experience” that hit him “like a thunder bolt” while on an empty subway car headed to Brooklyn. Monsignor Albert, who passed his exams the second time around, says he hasn’t regretted his choice. After 38 years in Jamaica, he notes, “I can only say, ‘Thank you, Lord. It’s been wonderful.’

“You come to a place like Jamaica thinking you’re going to do great things for God, but you realize he’s doing great things for you. When you live among the poor, your own perspective of conversion takes place. It leads you to a deeper understanding of God. They teach you how to really depend on him.”

When interviewed a few years ago by TV correspondent Christiane Amanpour for a 60 Minutes Special, Monsignor Albert was close to tears as he talked about his work. “I just think it’s so very important to touch people.”

I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food

On the day that the students served with the Missionaries of the Poor, they arrived early in the morning for Mass at a monastery where the community of priests and brothers live. Inside the sunny chapel, chimes, bongos, a tambourine, a keyboard, and a couple of guitars lined the first pew. The strong voices and clapping of about 30 brothers in white cassocks filled the chapel. At the Hosanna, they raised their hands, waving them from side to side. The Gospel that day was Matthew 25:31-46, part of which reads: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me…”

“In his homily, Rev. Vincent Salam, monastery superior, noted simply, “This Gospel is our life. This is what we do.” After Mass, the brothers served a breakfast of instant coffee, watermelon slices, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on a patio that overlooked well-tended gardens of blue and white flowers.

Later, groups of students were dropped off at four different Missionaries of the Poor sites in parts of Kingston where shelves lined the streets and stray dogs and goats wandered in search of food.

Bethlehem House, the brothers care for about 65 residents, who range in age from a year to about 25. Many have cerebral palsy and live in cribs arranged in rows. Their limbs are on stretchers, but it still seems as if their hands clench tight. A number of them are teenagers, but they can’t feed themselves. A boy who had just been bathed was brought back to his bed screaming.

Amanda Quigley, fellow nursing major Lizzy Almeda, and biology major Briana Silva fell in line with the brothers, helping to feed them. “I sometimes forget that something as simple as touching can be so important to another person,” says Almeda. “You just don’t realize that you are being washed back with the unending cycle of bathing, diaper changing, and feeding at Bethlehem House. They were patient and gentle, stroking an arm, pulling a shirt over the head of a child who couldn’t dress himself.

When one of the brothers learned that Silva was hoping to go to medical school, he asked her to give several children asthma medicine to inhale their medication as a mist. As their cheeks touched, he sighed and closed his eyes. “I think he finally felt a connection. I have so many people in my life. I sometimes forget that something as simple as touching can be so important to another person.”

Later Almeda would say that she was still processing her mission trip experience, but she had made some decisions. She plans to get her nursing degree and a couple of years of experience to prepare for the possibility of doing mission work.

Finding God in the Poorest of the Poor

Amber Henry, a rising senior and an English major from Miami, approached Monsignor Albert, a young woman living on a bed at a Kingston nursing home, and asked if she’d like to have her hair braided. Kimisha, whose thin legs protruded from a cotton nightgown, waved her off, saying, “No, miss, I have HIV.” She said she was having a bad day. Undeterred, Henry, who was wearing a long skirt and her hair in a ponytail, sat on the floor next to Kimisha’s bed. Little by little, they got to know each other.

As a member of the women’s group Gratia Plena, Henry leads discussions on Saint John Paul II’s Theology of the Body Kimisha, probably just a few years older than Henry, was living on the street when the Missionaries of Charity brought her to the nursing home about 2½ years ago. Henry braided Kimisha’s thinning hair and painted her toenails a shade of pale green. Kimisha called her new friend “Amba.”

During their time together, Henry said repeatedly, “You and me, Kimisha, this is our day together. We did your hair and painted your toenails. The two of us are friends. We’re hanging out.”

Kimisha giggled; she even laughed a little and finally acknowledged that she was having a good day after all. And that — the inevitable saying goodbye to a new friend Henry knew she probably would never see again.

“I think he finally felt a connection. I have so many people in my life. I sometimes forget that something as simple as touching can be so important to another person.”

Meanwhile, Almeda — one of 10 siblings who was home schooled until she started high school — was struggling with feelings of despair. She was knelt on the floor, looking through the slats of a crib at a girl who was grieving. Hoping to calm her, Almeda sang softly, but the girl continued to gaze up at Almeda, a gegurian young woman from Walpole, Mass., who leads homeless food runs on Sundays for Campus Ministry; said she couldn’t help thinking about her siblings. “I felt so helpless. That’s a rough realization, knowing that maybe there’s nothing you can do.”

Later in the week at Widow’s Mite, she was with a boy named Leeson whose hand was covered with bite marks and calluses from being chewed constantly. He couldn’t talk, but he could hear, running his head at the sound of a bus on the road or the clamor of children playing outside at a nearby Catholic elementary school.

At one point, Leeson touched Almeda’s face, pulling it toward his. As their cheeks touched, he sighed and closed his eyes. “I think he finally felt a connection. I have so many people in my life. I sometimes forget that something as simple as touching can be so important to another person.”

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me…”

The best we can do is give God our praise.

Mission Trip Memories

If you would like to share your mission trip experience and the life lessons you learned, please email them to cua-magazine@cua.edu and we’ll share the best ones in the fall issue.

Mission Trips on the Rise

As a sophomore, Amanda Cardali, B.A. 2014, participated in a spring break mission trip to Costa Rica, helping to paint a chapel and volunteering at a children’s camp. At the end of her junior year, she spent a week in El Paso, Texas, where she and other CUA students learned about Catholic social teaching through service with institutions that serve Mexican immigrants.

When she returned from El Paso, she began exploring the possibility of doing a long-term service after graduation. At the end of August, she started training for two years of service in either Guatemala or Africa with the Franciscan Mission Service. Cardali, a theology major from Pasadena, Md., says her time at Catholic University taught her that “being among the poor means caring for others. We are called to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world.”

Participation in mission trips has increased significantly since CUA started offering them in 2001. That year 14 students went to Guatemala. In 2013 – 2014, 87 students went to Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica, and Jamaica on spring break or at the end of the school year. In the past, students have also served in Guatemala, Panama, Honduras, Tanzania, and Ecuador. In addition, Campus Ministry offers the El Paso trip and the University provides opportunities for students to join Habitat for Humanity trips around the country.

Rev. Jude DeAngelo, O.F.M. Conv., University chaplain and Campus Ministry director, notes that “a mission trip is a life-changing experience that prepares our students for service to those in need. The students challenged at the Heart of the Gospel and the social teachings of the Church into their lives and to encourage change in the lives of those around them.”

Web Extra. Visit cua-magazine.cua.edu to watch the interview with Monsignor Albert and view additional photos of the trip.