

***St. John's University's FaithJustice Xperience:
A College Freshman Begins By Putting Faith and Service First
Ansley Schulte***

This August, I had the pleasure of working with the Center for FaithJustice through St. John's University's Freshman Plunge experience. The Freshman Plunge allows students just starting their college career to go away for a week before orientation to participate in community service.

On our first day of volunteer service, my group was sent to the Visitation Home. Founded in 2003 by Denise Reil, the Visitation Home works to give adults with developmental disabilities a place to live in faith and community with one another. As the waitlist to place these adults in assisted living homes grows, the need for places like the Visitation Home only becomes greater. I've worked with kids with developmental disabilities before, but I had never worked with adults so I didn't really know what to expect.

The second we drove up I knew I was going to have a wonderful day. We walked in the front door and one of the residents was already standing there welcoming us and thanking us for coming. We sat in the living room and went around and introduced ourselves. It was awe-inspiring to see that even though these people had been through so much, they were still some of the happiest and kindest individuals I'd ever met. We spent the rest of the day



helping around the house – pulling weeds, sweeping the house, and washing cars, statues and floors. It felt amazing to be able to spend the day giving back to this organization that was giving so much to improve the lives of its residents.

The most powerful experience for me was sitting down and praying the rosary with the residents. As a Catholic, the rosary has always been one of my favorite prayers, but I don't think it ever carried as much meaning for me as it did that day. Every time we finished a decade of the rosary I got goose bumps as we prayed together aloud, "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, lead all souls to Heaven,

especially those who have most need of your mercy.” I was struck with the idea that these people we were supposed to be serving were really praying for *me* and my fellow plungers.

Spending the day working and sharing community with the residents showed me how they experience life to the fullest. They embody love in its purest form, they laugh with a distilled, infectious joy, and their pain makes everyone around them want to heal their hurt. This is exactly what the Visitation Home does.

As Christians, we have a moral obligation to ensure everyone – no matter their abilities – is guaranteed the right to live in a way that allows them to thrive. I think Matthew 25:40 says it best: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me.” We have to see every person on Earth as Christ himself and care for them accordingly.

Beginning my college career with the Freshman Service Plunge allowed me to focus on my desire to do service as a part of being in college, not something to be done separately. I’m able to incorporate my Catholic faith and passion for my university’s Vincentian message of service and justice not only into my school work, but into my everyday life on campus. I’m convinced that my next four years at St. John’s will only deepen my faith and allow me to live in the spirit of serving others.

Ansley Schulte is an Oviedo, Florida native who now attends St. John's University in Queens, New York. She plans to double major in Psychology and Sociology to pursue a career in social justice. A Broadway musical enthusiast, her interests include food, babies, and turtles.

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