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All the Good Shepherd Volunteers received sweatshirts at our holiday party. From left: Moe Berry, Gabby Kasper, Maria Jose Miranda, Mackenzie Moore, Erin Hood, Theresa Vaske and Caileigh Pattisall. (Courtesy of Michelle DeMello)



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**Editor's note:** *Notes from the Field* includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with [Catholic Volunteer Network](#), the project began in the summer of 2015. This latest round of the series features volunteers in Orange, California; Nazareth, Kentucky; and New York City. Read more about Caileigh [here](#).

I grew up in Alexandria Virginia, just 10 minutes outside of D.C. I like to describe where I grew up as a "small town, big city" feel. Lots of people and plenty to do, but somehow everyone still knows everybody.

I knew all my neighbors, my best friends were close, and all the jobs I ever had were within walking distance from my house. It wasn't always perfect and I had my share of struggles, but life was good, familiar. Besides four years at college (only two hours away), that was my life. Community-oriented, safe and mine. That is, until six months ago.

I had moved to a new city, the biggest in the United States. I was living with complete strangers, doing [a job](#) that I had no previous experiences to compare it to. Oh, did I mention the one-hour-plus commute each way on the A train? Sounds crazy, which it was, but it was also incredibly thrilling. At first.

Once the excitement began to wear off a few months in, I started to feel the burnout everyone seemed to have mentioned when doing service work. That tired, overwhelming feeling that just hits you. It wasn't because I didn't like what I was doing, or even who I was living or working with. It was an indescribable, overpowering anxiety that I didn't know how to combat.

And I felt silly even admitting it, because I made such a big deal to my family and everyone at home that I was mentally and emotionally prepared for this big life change. I didn't want to admit that, maybe, I was in the wrong place.

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That's the strange thing about comfort zones. I have always felt the need to challenge where I was; I always wanted to advance. This was the first time I grappled with the idea that maybe I was in over my head. I was so used to leaning on people from where I grew up — my family, my best friends. I found it difficult to describe to them what I was dealing with.

Service years, including mine with [Good Shepherd Volunteers](#), aren't like regular jobs, and my go-to support group didn't really know how to support me. Little did I know that I was completely underutilizing those around me who were probably going through those exact same emotions.

My New York community consists of three incredible individuals: Gabby, M.J., and Moe. Gabby Kasper works in policy and advocacy for Good Shepherd Services. Maria Jose Miranda works in Poetry House, serving domestic violence survivors and their children. Moe Berry serves at Bronx LifeLink, helping New York City high schoolers make their way into a college setting.

My larger Good Shepherd volunteer community includes three others: Theresa Vaske and Makenzie Moore, serving in New Jersey at [Collier High School](#), and Erin Hood, who is actually serving near my hometown in Washington D.C., working at the National Advocacy Center. While our work is drastically different, our experiences navigating this social justice work bind us together.

That's initially what led me to a service year — to meet new people I wouldn't have naturally had the chance to meet. I knew if I stayed in northern Virginia, I would've stayed around the same traditions, mindsets and people.



My roommate, Maria Jose Miranda, runs across the street in Times Square after we visited a few Christmas markets and took in the Rockefeller Center tree. (Courtesy of Caleigh Pattisall)

We had our first retreat just before the holiday season, and the topic surrounding it was "community." It was the first time we had all been together since our initial orientation in August. Throughout the weekend, we all had a chance to discuss what our experiences had been like throughout this first part of the year.

Each one of them expressed to me that they had all been feeling that same type of indescribable fatigue. We all share the passion of social justice work, but we also felt



comfortable sharing our own struggles attached to doing a year of service.

After the retreat, I felt even closer to them — and much more comfortable coming to them when I felt those inklings of doubt or uncertainty. It was good to have a support system that shared my experiences.

The phrase "it takes a village" extends far past childhood, but there's a twist. You need to learn how to rely on those new people that come into your life, because there's a chance they have far better tools to support you than those from your past.

Growing up, moving away, it's all a balancing act about what you want to bring into this new life. It's learning how to incorporate traditions from your past, while also embracing new ones from those new faces around you.

The holiday season especially can come with all sorts of mixed emotions. It can be surrounded by feelings of magic, of hope, of joy. The holidays can also bring up feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, missing home.

With me experiencing all of these emotions in the privilege of my life, I was humbled to truly think of what the holidays might be like for the kids I'm currently serving. Teens living away from everything they know, only able to visit on the weekend once home passes were permitted.

This newfound perspective brought up feelings of gratitude I had never experienced before. I felt so passionate about how important the work we do is, creating safe spaces for those we serve to heal from their own traumas.

I felt so lucky to celebrate the holidays with my community in our beautiful city. I'm continuously grateful to work for an organization that truly supports me and checks in on me. I'm halfway through my year of service, and I now find comfort with a community that has my back with whatever I'm going through.



At our Good Shepherd Volunteer holiday party, we shared a meal and exchanged gifts, a great way to kick off the holiday season in New York. Top row, left to right: Maria Jose Miranda, Mackenzie Moore, Gabby Kasper, Theresa Vaske, Erin Hood, Star Cummings and Krystle Powell. Bottom row: Caleigh Pattisall, Moe Berry and Elsie Keifer. (Courtesy of Michelle DeMello)

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. [View the full series.](#)