

Jenna Jovella | Philippines

I knew that when I graduated from college all I wanted to do was volunteer in the Philippines. I had no desire to look for a job or go to graduate school. I wanted to serve, to grow, and to connect to my Filipino heritage. That's how I found AMA.

Given that I was a psychology graduate, I was assigned as guidance counselor at Santa Rita Academy in Sibalom, Philippines. I lived in community with the Sisters and a couple of Filipina AMAs. I appreciated partaking in communal meals and prayer and having easy access to the chapel and daily adoration. I loved learning more about Filipino culture (especially the food!) and connecting with family members for the first time. Life was simple—one suitcase of clothes, no makeup, no car, and no laundry machine!

Surely in part due to the simplicity I lived, I learned a great deal about myself during my AMA year. I learned about how even though my father is a full-blooded Filipino, I was born and raised in the States, which meant I was socialized as an American—with an emphasis on individuality and personal responsibility. I learned to rely more on myself and my God as a result of being separated from my loved ones by thousands of miles. I learned that questions must be lived and there are no shortcuts to finding the answers that I seek.

After returning to Minnesota, I worked as a chemical dependency technician before pursuing graduate school for a master's degree in educational psychology. These days I work as a mental health therapist in a residential facility for adults with eating disorders. I'm also teaching as an adjunct in my graduate program. I remain grateful for my AMA year in the Philippines—for the experiences it provided me, how it shaped me, and how it allowed me to connect to my Filipina identity.

Melissa Tran Cincuirk | Newcastle, England

It's hard to believe that it's been 10 years since my AMA year in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England, where I worked at Kids Kabin, and a drop-in center for asylum seekers and refugees called Common Ground.

I had so many once-in-a-lifetime experiences during my volunteer year: from hiking along Hadrian's Wall with a dozen pre-teens, to sliding down giant sand dunes with 60+ girls on the island pilgrimage destination of Lindisfarne, to cycling down the street with a pottery wheel attached to my bike and kids spilling out of their houses to follow me on their bikes as if I were the pied piper. Some days bordered on the absurd. I never thought there would come a day when I would say, "Our bicycle-powered balloon pump - and the balloon animal creations we made from these balloons - were overshadowed by a man who built a robotic fire-breathing horse and rode it with flames shooting out of his fingertips."

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Sure, none of these experiences are directly related to my current role as Associate Director of Admissions at a healthcare university. However, every job for which I have interviewed has asked me about my year in England, no matter how far removed from it I am.

A year with these children changed the way I approach problem-solving. As an organized, desk-job kind of person, hands-on activities— especially messy ones, at that - just aren't a natural strength. I always joke that Kids Kabin is an amazing building full of things I'm really bad at doing, namely, unstructured creative projects such as art, woodwork, pottery, dance, etc.. On a daily basis my flatmates (Laura and Abby) and I witnessed these little Geordie visionaries at Kids Kabin thinking outside the box; given minimal parameters, the world was their oyster, and they always found ways to make completely outlandish ideas work. The question was never "why?" The question was always "why not?" From these everyday experiences, I've learned to push the envelope, take more risks, and consider different angles, giving me a valuable skill in both work and life.

When I moved back stateside I was fortunate to find myself living near the Lansdale RA community, and it has been such a blessing to continue our relationship. The sisters have celebrated with us at our wedding, knitted a blanket for our baby, Benny, and were a great source of prayer and support when Benny spent the first six months of his life in the NICU. We can't wait until it's safe for him to meet them; we know he will love them as much as we do!

Elizabeth Koroleski | Worcester

I had almost finished my second Bachelor's without knowing what I was going to do after graduation; on the last day of my History seminar, my professor recommended looking into doing post-graduate missionary or volunteer work. He gave me a link to a list and I found AMA right away. It had seemed to be a good fit for what I wanted to do, so I applied!

I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the AMA program to work in Worcester, Massachusetts for the 2013-2014 year. That year there were five of us total: Rachel and Teresa were in Chaparral, Jenna in the Philippines, and Lauren in Newcastle, England. I was the lone AMA in Worcester for the year, but thankfully I did have one other person in community with me, Monique, who was working on her grad degree at Assumption College (now University) and for six weeks, we had a short-term AMA from France, Pierre!

During my year I was involved in the after-school mentoring program, ESL classes for adults, Third Day Literacy, the weekly knitting circle (and even relearned how to knit!) and volunteered at St. Vincent's thrift store. I also assisted the Sisters with Sr. Catherine's final vows in October, Thanksgiving food distribution, wrapped and passed out gifts at Christmas, celebrated Sr. Ake entering the novitiate, helped some in the Semillas de Vida Garden, helped Sr. Nha Trang with Vietnamese Camp, and celebrate then-AMA director Michelle's wedding! And of course, you can't forget that in New England, there's a lot of shoveling to be done in the winter!

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Since I was the lone AMA, I spent every Wednesday evening in prayers and at dinner with my “Purple Sisters”. I also did some studies with Ake and Sr. Mary Ann on Mondays, took part in the Taize prayers at Assumption College, and Advent and Lent reflections. My relationship with the Sisters was incredibly strong and to this day I think of them often and just last year I was able to visit for a few days! I was especially close with Sr. Catherine as the two of us developed and led Third Day, we both were involved in ESL, and she assisted a great deal with mentoring. We had lunch together two or three times a week and shared many laughs and deep conversations.

After that year, I have done a few different things and it has taken me a while to finally figure out what I want to do. I am currently living in Indianapolis and attending IUPUI for graduate school as a dual degree student in Library and Information Science and History, graduating in May 2022. I have become more socially conscious after spending a year with immigrants, low-income families, Sisters and Brothers, and in a more urban place than I had grown up. My dream is to move back to Massachusetts, preferably the Boston area, to work as an archivist or as a research librarian at a large institution. A plus to be there would be the fact I’m so close to my Purple Sisters!

Lee Maleno | Worcester, MA

The Associate Missionaries of the Assumption, as it was known at the time, gave me many opportunities for different service projects, community nights, and spiritual experiences. I had opportunities to be involved with youth and teens from St. Peter’s Church in a variety of ways through the Girls with Dream program, teaching Faith Formation, helping in Youth Group, and overseeing the mentoring program. During that year, I became more aware of various backgrounds, languages, and cultures in our world. A few of my favorite times were preparing and distributing Thanksgiving boxes of food, overseeing the mentoring program, tutoring English to a man from Burundi, Africa, and bringing Christmas gifts to families in need. There were many other positive times during my year of service such as knitting with the Ladies Circle, assisting Sister Therese in the Spiritual Library, co-teaching 2nd grade Religious Education, and sharing life skills with teenage girls in the Girls with Dreams program. Also, I liked meaningful spiritual evenings, parties, cups of tea, and goodies with the Assumption Sisters. As an AMA Alum, I have enjoyed participating in Advent & Lenten prayer nights, a special Called to Life faith sharing group, and participating in the great France Pilgrimage! I am now involved with a Discipleship Today group led by an Assumption Sister. It is a joy to be a part of this caring community!

My service year especially at St. Peter’s Church has guided me as I work with teenagers now. I remember learning a very valuable lesson during my year of service, which is do everything with love. Also, I witnessed from the Assumption Sisters a great giving spirit of hospitality. I continue to carry these important lessons into my life and Ministry today. Through the many experiences during my service year, it has helped me in my profession of Youth Ministry and Faith Formation. It guides me to be compassionate to families who are of different backgrounds and in

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different circumstances than me. I also like to serve with a thankful heart as I witnessed as a volunteer. I am grateful now to continue to serve God and his Church and my neighbor as a Coordinator of Youth Faith Formation. I am blessed to work with teenagers, their families, and to guide them in their friendship with Jesus. I look back with gratitude knowing that my journey has beautiful blessings from God, and I look forward to more adventures to come!

Beth Collins | L'Arche England 2006-2007

I've always been a fan of boats and the water, so it was fitting that my AMA year brought me to a L'Arche community in the seaside town of Bognor Regis, England.

In keeping with the nautical theme, L'Arche is French for "The Ark", a community that puts people with and without disabilities into the same boat, allowing us to row together for a while in the residences and the work sites. While we row, we work as a team. When one or more of us becomes hurt or tired, the others row harder and we encourage each other on the journey. We learn from each other and we appreciate each other's strengths. We pray with each other and we take refuge in each other during life's storms.

L'Arche taught me that waves and storms come and go. You can count on it, because that is the nature of life. Community members and assistants arriving and leaving, birthdays and goodbyes, dinners and disputes, and countless occasions for joy and sorrow.

Henri Nouwen was a priest and theologian who spent years living and working in a L'Arche community. He wrote, "Each day holds a surprise. But only if we expect it can we see, hear or feel it when it comes to us. Let's not be afraid to receive each day's surprise, whether it comes to us as sorrow or joy. It will open a new place in our hearts, a place where we can welcome new friends and celebrate more fully our shared humanity."

I'm so grateful to the Religious of the Assumption for my AMA year, and for the lifelong friends I met in L'Arche Bognor. Their love and kindness has helped me to grow and celebrate life's surprises, and to reflect more fully on our shared humanity. What a tremendous gift!

Now my title at My Brother's Keeper is Manager of In-House Programs, and I've been on staff there for 13 years. Matt and I are proud parents to Teddy (6) and Gwen (3) - perhaps they might be called to be AMAs one day, just like their parents!

AMA Liz Haggerty | Newcastle, England

Before becoming an AMA, I was not quite sure what I was going to do after college. Talking with mentors and praying helped me realize I was meant to become an AMA after I graduated, and my life changed for the better.

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I had the pleasure to travel to Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, England to help low-income families for one year at a learning facility called Kids Kabin. I was busy going to various sites around Newcastle either outside on the streets, woods, or beach and in buildings. Kids Kabin is not only a special place to learn hands-on, but a place children and schools can experience various activities like cooking, textiles, drama, pottery, bike repairs, crafts, woodworking, and much more.

While living in England, I had three roommates from all over the world. We worked, cleaned, shopped, and cooked for each other. To start, I was not the most confident cook and thought I would burn the house down, but thankfully it did not happen (the fire alarm did go off once, however). I was able to practice each day and am proud to say I was finally good at cooking.

I did not just learn I could cook. I learned a number of things about myself that year. I learned that my love for God got stronger each day, that biking to places is a great way of travel, I am great at building things, I hate being away from home a long period of time, and that I love to explore unfamiliar places with friends, family, and by myself.

Since beginning my experience as an AMA, I knew I wanted to be an Occupational Therapist. I applied to various colleges and I got in and started to study while I was in England. Fast forward to today, I graduated from Sacred Heart University as an Occupational Therapist. I passed my exam in 2019 and I just started a job doing teletherapy as an Early Intervention therapist.

I am beyond grateful for all the experiences AMA and Kids Kabin has blessed me with from 2016-2017. I don't believe I would be where I am today without being an AMA.

I obviously did not write about everything I experienced but I did create a blog to look back at every moment. If you are interested my blog is <https://myenglandjourney2016-2017.weebly.com/>.

Ellie Stonecash | Chaparral, NM

One of my best life decisions was choosing to move to the border for a year of volunteer work in Chaparral, New Mexico with AMA. Chaparral exemplifies what it truly means to live in a community. It's a place where people welcome you as family, their home is your own, your problem is their solution, and your worry is their concern. I miss the families and sisters of Chaparral. I miss hanging out with them every day and getting to watch them grow up. I miss walking to the sisters for Spanglish lunches full of stories and laughter. I miss our game nights, youth camp activities, visiting people, and going to/hosting pachangas with them. I miss driving to El Paso to work a shift at Annunciation House each week and meeting people from all over the world.

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Knowing and loving a place like “Chapa” has been one of my life’s greatest joys and anyone who knows me knows this! Chapa expands your heart and mind- no one leaves that town the same person. It plants a seed in your soul that only grows as time passes and it becomes a part of you forever. I try to go back to visit whenever I can; I’ve been back 7 or 8 times since my year expired in 2009. We always pick up right where we left off as if I’d just been away for a week or two. I am always impressed but never surprised at what all of our Casa Maria Eugenia families are achieving and how they’re continuing to utilize their unique gifts to give back to their community.

In Chaparral I also learned how critically important it is to be civically engaged. As citizens we have a responsibility to Vote every chance we are given, not just for ourselves- but for all people who are impacted by the decisions of our politicians at local, state, and federal levels.

Volunteering in Chaparral reaffirmed my passion for education, so I currently live in Columbus, Ohio and work at a public high school as a Special Education teacher in World and American Studies courses. I am working on a master’s degree in Literacy and Second Language Studies so that I can obtain my TESOL endorsement and teach students learning English for the first time.

Eva Castilla | Chaparral, NM

Eva Castilla, who served in Chaparral in 2004-In the Winter of 2004, I left my home country Spain to live in Chaparral, NM with a group of women I had never met before and did not know much about. I never expected how much I would learn about myself from that experience. I would be their first AMA and my main role was organizing activities for the community, more in particular for the young, something I had never done before. Talk about learning on the job! And what was created could not have been done without the support and love of the Sisters (extraordinary women who inspired me every day), so many people from the community (especially the kids, teens and women - in memoriam, my dearest Lupe) and dear Kristin, the second AMA who joined us several months after I arrived. I will always keep in my heart the time spent with them and the love I received.

Not only did I grow as a person in Chaparral, but I also got engaged to the love of my life During the last days of my AMA cycle, my husband and I decided to get married. We have been living in Texas since I said farewell to Chaparral, and I have my own business supporting entrepreneurs who want to make a difference in their communities. We will be moving to Spain in 2 years, but not before we make a stop to say hello to the Sisters I love so much.

Kate Stone | Cork, Ireland

After graduating college back in 2010, I felt that God was calling me to more and I thought it was a good time in my life to travel and step out of my comfort zone. I started exploring

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volunteer opportunities and applying to organizations but after several attempts, nothing seemed to be working out. I remember clearly a morning in April 2011, I was starting to become discouraged and worried because many application due dates were already past. In that moment, I started crying and praying to God that He would lead me to where I was supposed to go. A few minutes later, I came across the Associate Missionaries of the Assumption.

Through this amazing organization, that September I set off on my journey to Cork, Ireland to volunteer in a L'Arche community. Within this community, I lived and worked with adults with intellectual disabilities, as well as volunteers from all over the world. In the 15 months I spent there, I learned more than I could have ever imagined. I witnessed the beauty of living in a community, the joys of sharing life and loss, and the gift of every life. I received more that year than anything I could have given. It taught me the beauty of simplicity and the importance of celebrating every small moment.

After returning to New Hampshire in December 2012, I knew I wanted to continue to work with individuals with disabilities. My experience provided so much clarity and I was greeted by my fellow AMAs through a beautiful retreat to reflect on our year. That following Spring, I began working at a school for students with autism in Massachusetts and then eventually started working for my current company as a registered behavior technician. In 2016, I went back to school to pursue my master's degree in education/applied behavior analysis and now work in public schools as a BCBA (Board-Certified Behavior Analyst). My experience through AMA had a tremendous influence on my life and I am forever grateful for the Sisters, my fellow AMAs, and the community in Ireland who were part of an experience that I will forever hold in my heart.

Caitlin Goodhile | Kids Kabin, England

It's been 6 years since I lived in Newcastle, England as an AMA working at the Pendower Good Neighbor Project. And it's even crazier to think that my first experience with AMA was almost 10 years ago. I certainly didn't realize it at the time, but my story really started my freshman year at Assumption College when I started volunteering with the after school mentoring program in Worcester, MA (Shout out to Kristen Simmarano who convinced a few of us to join :)) I was fortunate enough to volunteer with the program all 4 years of college and had some incredible mentees.

During my Senior year at Assumption, I knew I wanted to do a year volunteering after I graduated and after doing some research, AMA seemed like the perfect fit!

So, that is how I found myself packing up as much as I could and moving to a whole new country. The year I spent in Newcastle was filled with so many incredible, unforgettable experiences. Camping in the woods in the country with our boys group, exploring different towns with our Pensioners Lunch Group, a weekend trip to the coast with our girls group- even

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marching/dancing in the New Years Parade in Newcastle! Living and working in the same community was so different than what I had been used to. It allowed me to become completely immersed and experience life in such a different way that I had ever been used to. There were certainly challenges I faced in adjusting to a different way of life and even a different culture, but these challenges were such an important part of the experience for me.

Even though 6 years have passed since my time in Pendower, a piece of my heart will always be there. My year in Newcastle really grew and shaped me to be who I am today. I grew in my independence, I realized that I could do anything I set my mind to and it solidified my passion to help others.

When I moved home, I continued on my path in the nonprofit world. Currently, I am working as a Development Manager for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in Northern New England. I am so thankful for my AMA year spent in Newcastle and for the people I met, that have truly made a lasting impression on my life!

Laura Buggy | Newcastle, England

How do you sum up the experience of a lifetime? One that you are frequently reminded of and brings a smile to your face?

I'll start from the beginning - deciding to do a year of service instead of getting a job upon graduating college was not the obvious choice for me. For the majority of my senior year, I focused on looking for a job since I felt that was the "right" thing to do. During the job search process, I mostly felt dread which obviously isn't a good sign but I kept focusing on that path. After attending a volunteer fair on campus, I felt excitement for the year after college for the first time! Although AMA was not represented at the job fair, I found the AMA program in the Catholic Volunteer Network booklet I received at the volunteer fair and knew it was a program I wanted to look into further. After that, I knew the year of service was the right decision for me but still felt doubt due to societal pressure. I feel incredibly grateful I made this decision and never regret delaying starting my career! This is the first lesson I learned from my year of service: following YOUR path is much more important and rewarding than following the path expected by society!

For my year, I was in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, and worked at Kids Kabin (an after-school center for youth ages 7-13) and Common Ground (an asylum seeker and refugee center). I really enjoyed both experiences and they certainly pushed me outside my comfort zone! At Kids Kabin, I worked mostly in the cooking and art sessions. Being a naturally shy and reserved person, I did not have much experience being in charge and being confident as an authority figure. The sessions at Kids Kabin were smaller in size which offered a great opportunity to practice these skills and build confidence. The staff was also very encouraging and supportive! At Common Ground, I helped out in the reception area - greeting clients, helping with phone calls, giving out

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food parcels, and engaging in conversation. There was a lot of time spent just “being”. For someone who was used to and valued doing doing doing, this was a big challenge and such a great learning experience. I learned the value of being present and simply sitting with one another, sometimes with few words exchanged. Being far away from everything familiar, my family and friends really made this hit home.

Living in community was also another big part of the AMA experience for me. Everything from meal planning and sharing meals (I still make some of our favorite recipes!), reflecting on our days (and initially our confusion of the Geordie dialect), splitting up chores and trips together to explore England and Europe was made better by sharing it with my fellow AMA volunteers. We had a lot of laughs over our shared experiences such as the washing machine locking our clothes inside and not being able to change the bayonet-style lightbulb! With the help of Google to find an instruction manual and/or the Sisters/Brothers, we were able to solve these and similar problems. Anytime I google a home issue now, I smile and remember back to these experiences which help bring light to otherwise stressful or confusing situations. Having the Assumption Sisters and De La Salle Brothers nearby was a great comfort and joy...just the right level of independence and support. We joined them for morning prayer and breakfast each Friday which was a great touchpoint in the week and faith-building practice. We shared many other meals together and went on a few excursions to explore the North East together which are memories I will cherish forever.

Everyone I encountered through AMA was very helpful and supportive...from the orientation in Worcester, MA to London, England, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. The Sisters and lay staff in each location were a large part of what made the experience great! This experience increased my confidence, expanded my worldview, increased my understanding and appreciation of religious life and so much more! Even now, 10 years later, I am still in touch with my fellow Newcastle AMAs and am so thankful for all the Sisters and others who made this possible for myself and continue to do so for other current and future AMAs!

Abby Goodson | Newcastle, England

While 2020 seemed like 10 years on its own, it is hard to believe that an actual decade ago, I was halfway through my year abroad in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England volunteering with AMA.

As I was finishing up my senior year of college, I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do. With just a couple months until I received my BFA in graphic design, I wasn't sure a full-time designer job was for me. I was an active member of the Catholic Campus Ministry at my university (shout out to App State CCM!) so I began looking at Catholic volunteer opportunities domestically and internationally. A year with AMA was just the opportunity I was looking for.

During my volunteer year, I worked at Kids Kabin and at a local, Catholic primary school. I had the opportunity to work with kids of all ages and abilities through both of these experiences. I

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learned how to write a grant and received funding for a collaborative quilting project. I pulled a trailer with a pottery wheel on it behind my bike for “street sessions” where neighborhood kids could come and make and create right outside their front doors. I helped pre-school students learn their letter sounds and practice their counting. I worked in our clay classroom and began to understand the power of teaching children to be creative. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and learned what I was capable of.

My year volunteering with AMA taught me so much and helped me discover my passion for education. I am currently an art teacher with a public school system in North Carolina. Ten years of teaching later and I still pull from some of the things I learned at Kids Kabin all those years ago, especially, while teaching through a pandemic. This past year has reminded me, like my year with AMA, to be flexible, roll with the punches, come up with creative solutions to problems, and most of all, that children are resilient! Just like my year with AMA, I'm reminded of what we are all capable of, even when pushed out of our comfort zones.