**Reflections | Worcester, MA**

**Serafina Bon Tempo a native from Milford, MA and attended Wheaton College**

It's been 5 months since I started my AMA journey in Worcester. I can't believe how the time has flown by. Working with the Sisters has been such an incredible and indescribable experience. Seeing the love they have for their neighbors and the community at large is infectious. Each sister I meet has become an inspiration and role model to me. I learn from them to love the human spirit in whatever way it is presented

Each program I've been a part of has welcomed me with loving open arms. Especially the ESL program. After every class I would tell my ESL students "good job today", they would always respond with, "thank you teacher you do good job too!" Being able to converse with them and learn about their lives through our limited interactions has brought me so much joy. Watching them develop their skills and grow in their confidence has been remarkable. I will truly miss my students and I hope they continue their progress.

Since most of my programs have ended I am spending most of my time in the garden. Being a part of nature it feels like there is always something that needs to be done, something is always overgrown. Thinking about that can be overwhelming, so I go back to the plants in the soil that I put there. I water them, weed them, prune them and talk to them. It is a lot of work and I am constantly reminded that I will most likely not be able to reap the benefits of what I sowed but it doesn't bother me. I tell myself that gardening isn't for me, it's for the glory of God. I would like to cook and eat what I've grown for myself but I like sharing it more. Giving people access to free healthy food has always been a goal of mine and being able to do that with a community garden is a dream come true.

At this moment, I am in New Mexico with our sisters in Chaparral. It's very different here, it is rainy and overcast and everyone is delighted to see it. The sisters speak Spanish to each other and I can understand some of it but a lot is lost on me. I am going to be helping them with the summer camp they run for the community. The first week of the camp is the week the sisters' intake a new group of refugees. Tonight, at dinner we talked about our interactions with refugees; hearing their stories from the people they've met and helped reminded me of all the people I've met seeking safety and prosperity. There is so much wrong with the system in place, but being here with sisters dedicated to giving humanity and love to people in such need of it brings me hope that human migration won't always be as difficult as it is made to be.

**Reflections | Worcester, MA**

**Megan Hickey is a native of Arlington and attended St. Anselm's College**

To describe my AMA responsibilities as “work” would drastically change the word’s definition. My work is being a teacher, a mentor, and a friend. My work is getting the chills when I read my ESL students’ weekly journal entries. My work is learning the harsh realities and beautiful truths of the personal lives of my students. My work is playing card games at mentoring that become so intense, I end up with tears of laughter streaming down my face. My work is making bets with mentees that I can beat them in soccer, trying my hardest, and losing to them anyway. My work is picking up cereal at the Sisters’ house only to end up staying for an hour filled with tea and giggles. My work is listening to the funny, inspiring, or heartbreaking stories shared by the women at the knitting circle. My work is Skyping my director for a monthly meeting and smiling the whole while through. My work is sharing myself completely with the people around me. My work is getting even the shyest of middle schoolers to open up (by talking about boys). My work is inadvertently creating a plethora of inside jokes with nuns (and cows). My work is attending tear-jerking Live Stations of the Cross performed by middle schoolers. My work is sharing meals with people who have become some of my closest friends.

My work is getting to know even the families of the people I work with. My work is attending masses in two languages, and with multicultural choirs. My work is being so incredibly gracious. My work is knowing many of the people at church. My work is being supported, encouraged, and inspired by the people around me every day. My work is waking up every day knowing that I’ve fallen in love with what I do. My work is building relationships. My work is always having a friend to talk to or to laugh with. My work is becoming fulfilled. My work is growing. My work is loving. My work is learning. My work is dreading the day my work ends.

So, if I choose the AMA definition to describe work, then, yes, I work. I work a lot. The programs conclude in the next few weeks, and the end of the AMA year is fast approaching, which means the end of my work—the beautiful work which I have come to cherish—is also fast approaching.  Fear tells me my newfound definition of work gradually fading into society’s definition. But, my heart tells me that the insights and love gained this year have been tattooed on my very soul. So, next time someone asks me what I do, I’ll let them know. My work is living out the instructions tattooed on my heart.

**Reflections | Worcester, MA**

**Elliott Simmon-Uvin (2016) is a native of Boston and attended Boston College (he also did a year in the Philippines)**

As I began my year as an AMA in late August, one of my biggest fears I had was whether I would be accepted into the community: Would I be welcomed? Would I feel connected or comfortable with where I ended up? I have realized with any relationship it takes time, and even though I have been here for only six months, it feels as if I've been here for a lifetime. This feeling of being a valuable member to the community has not only stemmed from my ability to be open minded, but the community itself. They have allowed me to be apart of their lives, as I have allowed them to be apart of mine.

Something else I have enjoyed most about this year is having many opportunities to try new activities and meet new individuals. For example, before Christmas I had the opportunity to go Christmas Caroling with members from the Catholic Worker. This allowed me to see another organization that is supporting the Worcester community and meeting new people that are committed to peace and justice. Along with meeting knew folks, I have enjoyed learning about other organizations that are committed to serving the people of Worcester. For me, relationships are an important part of building community. For example, when I volunteered in September at Jeremiah's Inn, I met Gary who is weekly volunteer. After I finished volunteering there, I was still able to keep in touch as we (Meaghan and I), still dropped off cereal for the food pantry every week. After a few weeks, I started to learn more about Gary's life, his struggles, some of his hobbies and his life journey.  It was never a short conversation of "Hi!" and "Goodbye." So far, I have been fortunate to be able to build relationships with many people in Worcester.

The more my relationships develop, the more I see the values of faith, community, service and solidarity in my life.

Aside from the afterschool programs, Sr. Catherine and I had the opportunity to take three of the kiddos bowling after school one afternoon. It was the first time they had ever gone bowling before, so I made the executive decision to bowl Candle Pin. This allowed the kids to try a new activity, practice their math skills by counting the pins and calculating their score, an opportunity to explore Worcester, and have fun. For those of you who don't know, I am a pretty competitive bowler, so holding back was a little tough. In the end, this was a time for the kids to have fun, and me to loose. In fact, Sr. Catherine came out with the W. Once the Third Day Literacy Program and the Mentoring Program started up again I felt as if I had never left. It's great to be back working with the kids in both Third Day Literacy Program and Mentoring. I enjoy starting the week with reading and finishing it with an epic game of capture the flag at mentoring.

One of the most relaxing moments of my week is when I have the time to join the Knitting Circle on Friday Mornings. I have become an avid knitter for someone who re-learned how to knit this year. I never thought I would be teaching one of the PRO's...hint… hint Shelia, a new pattern. I have found knitting to be extremely relaxing and a time when I can think through situations that

are making me frustrated or causing stress. In the end knitting has become my new addiction. You know what they say, “Once you’re a knitter, your always a knitter.”

Cana Community has been FIREEEEEEE!!!! For those of you who don’t know, this means: good, amazing, or unbelievable. I love community dinners because you never know where the conversation will lead or what will happen next. Also, I enjoy the unexpected moments where we’ll break out in singing some ridiculous song, or I’ll spit a rhyme and my Canaanites will jump right in with the next verse. For instance, this week I started to sing, “God is in the Sky, God is in the Sky, God is in the Sky, God is in the Sky….God is in you, and you, ohhhhh God is in the Sky!” After I walked out of the room and finished my verse, unexpectedly Meaghan, Ally, and Kate followed up with “God is testing us, God is testing us, God is testing us, God is testing us.” There is never a dull moment in the Assumption Center with Cana. I’m so happy to be back in Worcester and excited to spend as much time in the community as I before the year-ends. I will forever cherish the friends and relationships I’ve made so far this year and look forward to building on them for the next coming months.

**Reflections | Worcester, MA**

**Megan Hannon is a native of Scranton, PA and graduated from Marywood University**

If you had asked me two months ago what my life would be like right now, I don't think I could have given you much. I was so nervous going into this year, not knowing what to expect for my work and also how living in community would be. I was worried about so many things, that I don't know if I truly was able to feel excited about this year in Worcester until I was actually on the plane leaving Philadelphia headed to Worcester.

Upon arriving at the airport in Boston, both Liz and I were wrapped in hugs immediately by Beth. We had just met her and here she was giving us the most welcoming and comforting hugs a person can get when in a totally new and strange place, or so I thought. Later that night we had dinner with the sisters for the first time, and again, we were wrapped up in such welcoming and comforting hugs. I had just met all of these people and I immediately felt ok with whatever would be thrown at me this year, because I knew that I would have all of these people supporting me. This first day of orientation, of being in Worcester, MA, I knew I belonged here. I felt in my heart that I belonged.

This feeling of belonging continued after that first day and continues today. When we (Liz and I) were introduced to the St. Peter's Church Community, we were embraced by the parish and welcomed as "one of them". This also put me at ease with the work I would be doing, knowing how much support and prayer was coming from the church for the programs we would be working with. Also, all of the various organizations we helped with in the first few weeks we were here embraced us and welcomed us whole-heartedly into the Worcester community. I think all of these experiences of being welcomed, of feeling like I belong, prepared me for all of the work I have done and will be doing this year. These feelings are something that are felt in the heart and speak to me in such a different way.

The middle of September meant the start of the mentoring and ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. I was excited to get started with both, knowing that the bulk of my time, and quite possibly my energy, would be spent with these programs. September 20th was the first day of ESL, and for the first two classes I was "just" assisting the teacher, or so I thought. The first day I helped out with what I could in the lesson, assisted the students while the teacher was working with someone else, what I thought to be pretty simple things.

The next day, September 21st, was the first day of the mentoring program. Some of the first kids at the program were the daughter and son of one of the students in the ESL class I was helping with. The woman had spoken about her children the previous day as she was introducing herself to the class, so I had heard a little bit about the kids. When she walked in to drop her kids off for mentoring she was extremely excited to see me and then said to her kids, "I want you to meet my teacher, this is my teacher." She was so proud of the fact that I was her teacher and that I, as her teacher, was able to meet her kids, and just the tone in her voice made it evident how happy she was with all of this. After the mother left the daughter said to me "So you're my mom's teacher?! That's so cool! I like that you're my mom's teacher." I realize that although I felt what I was

doing in the class was minimal; I had connected with this woman on a much deeper level, which she had then relayed to her kids through a simple introduction. I have my own ESL class now. It is exciting to be teaching on my own now, and I also hope that I can have a similar experience connecting with my class. I know whatever it was that happened in that first day of ESL had some affect on her and definitely impacted me. Hopefully that will stay with both of us as this year continues.

I think right from the beginning, all of the feelings of welcome and belonging were showing me what I needed to know for this year. It all was showing me how to welcome others and make them feel like they belong, to connect on a much deeper level. While we may not always speak the same language as someone, we can always connect on the much deeper level, the language of the heart, and in that way we all speak the same language.

A song, "I Was Here" by Lady Antebellum, which I only heard for the first time a few days ago really spoke to me about what I really want to do this year, and I think I am on my way to doing what this song talks about. I also feel that this year, while I may touch some hearts, I feel like so many people will touch my heart, I know so many already have in such a short time.

**Reflections | Worcester, MA**

**Afton Caterina, Worcester, MA (October 2010). Afton is a native of Michigan and graduated from St. Mary's University in Notre Dame, IN.**

Serving in Worcester these last two months, I have met so many people that are worthy of at least a one-page reflection in the AMA newsletter; everyone has taught me something, everyone has shown me the face of God in different ways. It's really quite a challenge to narrow it down. In fact, I don't think I can, so I'll just tell you about the most recent person I met, if you keep in mind that I get to meet people like this almost every day.

On Wednesday mornings, I go to the food pantry at Saint Peter's parish where we do most of our work. (On other days we teach ESL, we mentor, we help out with youth group and confirmation classes, among many other things.) Well, I was working at the food pantry this week, doing my job of taking tickets and handing out groceries in exchange for smiles and thank-you's offered in different languages, when I was approached by a scruffy-looking black man. He was dressed in ragged clothes, his hair was wild and unkempt, he was missing his two front teeth and he had a small piece of paper in his hand.

"Are you a Christian woman?" he asked me. I raised my eyebrows and replied, "yes…?" not knowing exactly what to expect after a question like that and curious of what being a Christian was going to get me into with this guy. At my "yes", he was immediately at his ease and his body language almost said "Great! You'll understand this!" He showed me the small piece of paper he was holding and told me it was something that had come to him while he was waiting for his turn to get his food ticket. The paper was blank except for a few lines that said (something to the effect of):

"True love is going through every day, no matter how hard things get or how painful it is, and trusting that God will take care of you, because that's why He came to this world".

It was very simple, but profound nevertheless. Where did that faith come from? What made him think to write it down while he was sitting there? Why did he share it with me? It was almost as if he showed me his whole life in that little phrase. He gave me an asking look, as if he wanted my opinion of it. I told him that I definitely agreed, and he gave me a huge toothless smile, almost looked relieved, and told me that he had just found the Church. He had been lost, was wandering, was in trouble, and someone told him to come here. He had found God, and was looking for someone to share Him with, I suppose. He seemed so pleased that I had taken the time to talk to him about what was on his mind, what he thought of his God and to know that he could find some fellowship here. He was undeniably poor, probably had close to nothing and maybe nowhere to live, yet he seemed to radiate contentment as he walked out with his small bag of groceries. He was so happy having nothing but the love and security he found in the Lord and the fellowship he had been able to find at the food pantry that morning.

So far this year, I have learned that when you actually get to spend time with people who are different from you… they don't seem so different from you. When this man approached me I

saw him through the world's eyes, as his situation would describe him. Soon, though, I opened my eyes and I saw that he was my brother in Christ, and a man that describes his relationship with the Divine as one of "true love". I can see that I need to work on recognizing my neighbor in the people that I meet. I could have successfully brushed this man off and avoided talking to him if I wanted to, but I'm glad that I didn't, because in him the Lord provided me with another teacher, another glimpse of His face, and another opportunity to learn to love like the Christian I claim to be.

**Liz Clayton, Worcester, MA (April 2007). Liz is a native of Florida and graduated from Florida State University.**

I came to Worcester knowing only a handful of Spanish vocabulary: about the same speaking level as the average 5 year old who watches Dora the Explorer. After nine months in Worcester I have only learned the word for shark: tiburón. So I was a little unsure that I would be able to teach a class of ESL. But since I wasn't asked to teach a class of ESL until five minutes before that class began, I didn't have too much time to be worried about it. I walked in, set my things on the desk, flipped through the book and asked the students uncertainly, "So, do you want to start with the vocabulary?". With pens in hand ready to take notes they just said, "You're the teacher." I was completely intimidated. I wanted to correct them: I am not a teacher. I haven't had any training. I don't know how to teach English, I only know how to speak it!

I may have had my doubts, but my students didn't appear to have any. They believed that I could teach them the difficult verb tenses, confusing grammar rules, and mysterious idioms. They greeted me each class with "Good morning Teacher!" and left saying, "Thank you for the class Teacher." One of my students even brought me – not just one – but a bagful of apples every time we met. They were so eager and ready to work so hard to learn English and I was so touched by the faith they had in me to help them that I didn't want to let them down. Before long I found myself enjoying the class and looking forward to Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Not because the past unreal conditional tense was so interesting to talk about, but because I had a front row seat to watching my students as they steadily worked closer to a goal that is so important to them: speaking English fluently. I am honored to have had even a small part in that process.

I am reminded of a quote by St. Philip Neri: "Cast yourself into the arms of God and be very sure that if He wants anything of you, He will fit you for the work and give you strength." Working up the nerve to teach a small class of ESL may not seem like a very big triumph but like a lot of things this year it took a certain amount of trust. Trust in myself; that I was capable of more than I thought and more importantly, trust in God; that he truly would fit me for the work he asked of me.