

MYRA VILLAS 2019

I'm coming up on two months left of my service program. And it truly feels like time is flying by so quickly. These two months will feel like two seconds. In one of my community's recent weekly prayer meetings, we reflected on our experience as an educational endeavor. We looked at it as if it were another year in school, perhaps a very long service-learning project. I thought this was an appropriate way to think back on our time because the Assumption Sisters began with a mission of educating children and opened up several schools, and still run many schools around the world today.

To guide us I asked: What are the most important lessons you've taken away from this year and what is something you still want to learn about more? We took a few minutes to think about the kind of people we were when we arrived and how we might've changed since, drawing on the values that St. Marie Eugenie tried to instill in her pupils in her very first school – strength of character, generosity, simplicity, truthfulness, and courage. For me, the biggest lessons I learned came down to choosing love – when dealing with difficult behavior from children at Kids Kabin, to navigating community life with two new people, and taking the time for self-care.

I have the privilege of working with very imaginative and friendly kids five days a week at Kids Kabin in a great facility that provides so many creative opportunities. As expected, I have to dole out disciplinary measures when kids are not at their best and their behavior is negative and destructive. In these moments, when I sense a problem arising, I need to choose love over anger and bitterness. It is frustrating when a child repeatedly doesn't follow directions. It is irritating when you feel like you're having to settle the same conflict week after week. It is hurtful when you hear personal attacks.

In response, I've learned that things won't always be fair in the sense that the same treatment cannot be given to everyone. Every child comes from a different background with a different way of navigating life. If there is a path of what is morally right, none of us are ever stepping in those footsteps at all times. Some of us stray a little more than others and we need guidance and love to get back on it. Sometimes being too harsh— without recognizing where a person stands, without acknowledging they got knocked off that path somehow (either through their own fault or from the influence of others), without showing mercy and understanding, can lead the person even further from the moral path. I've learned to be more of a judge in these cases. I've learned to trust my instincts, to show compassion, to listen first when I'm inclined to demand, to inquire before I assume, to take a breath and have patience before letting my emotions get the best of me. Like St. Marie Eugenie, I had to believe “in the possibility for good in even the most difficult child.”

Putting three strangers in a house to live together for a year in a foreign country sounds like the premise of an overdramatized reality show that I would not want to watch, let alone be in. Yet, that was my life this year. And of course there were times of drama, but they have been overcome by the times we've struggled

together and enjoyed each other's company. Living in community must always come with sacrifice, which is a form of love. I was used to living more independently before I moved to Newcastle. I decided when I wanted to go grocery shopping and clean the house and schedule events. In the beginning of the year, it seemed like a simple adjustment to make these decisions together. But as time went on, we saw how set each of us was in our own ways and compromise became the most important word. The best compromises came when I knew I was considering everyone's needs and respecting their boundaries and preferences, and I felt that my community was calculating the same. No matter what negative feelings you are harnessing, it is important to put them aside and come together to move forward. It is easy to love someone when you do everything the same way, but it is a rewarding challenge to find a way to love someone who is different.

At any given moment of the day, I know I have a support system either from friends and family at home or from my community here in Newcastle. But I've also learned that I know myself best, and therefore love myself best. Being far from home can make you realize your own strength. I've discovered ways to pick myself up instead of always reaching out. I don't wait for anyone if I want to see a film I've been itching to see. If I wake up at dawn and want to cycle ten miles to the coast, I go for it. If I want to have a pint and watch the sunset, I feel completely content by myself. Not to say I don't invite others, but if no one is available, I know I am comfortable with my own company. Another way I seek out love for myself is simply by going to Mass. It is special knowing that no matter where I am in the world, when I step inside the Church I am surrounded by family and by people choosing to live by Christ's example.

As I look ahead to the next chapter of my life and think about how I can continue spreading the spirit of what I've learned during this year of service, I know I'll always carry the words of St. Marie Eugenie, "**Love never says, 'I have done enough.'**" I have given my time, my hard work, and a lot of love. From that, I am compelled to give so much more.