

A RENEWED SENSE OF COMMUNITY – PART 2

After joining a community, building and strengthening that bond is so important to maintain unity. I was so fortunate to become close friends with my fellow AV volunteer Rugile. Our household became smaller in the summer when our third volunteer had to leave early, but the two of us kept on with regular meals and activities. Our friendship grew from a mutual respect for each other, trusting that the other cared just as much about keeping a sense of community in our smaller group of volunteers, that also included two others who lived across town. Over time we knew we could depend on each other for support. I would try to give advice and boost her morale for her university applications or when we were homesick, it was nice to share stories from our respective home countries. We could talk about frustrations and victories at Kids Kabin.

The biggest sign that we grew together was that we could be in conflict, but we were always able to settle them quickly. Sometimes that meant we discussed a solution together, sometimes that meant someone quietly comprised. One time it meant having a mock boxing fight in the garden. At the end of the day, we both agreed we did not like to disappoint the other and tried our best to have each other's backs.



When I started volunteering in Newcastle, I was worried I wouldn't relate to people from the area. Sometimes when we strive for solidarity, no matter how well-intentioned we are, we stand at an edge where we understand the pain and turmoil, but we cannot feel the weight of it. Living a volunteer service year is unique in that it can sometimes distribute a small amount of that weight onto you. When someone else's struggle becomes your struggle, you are called to be an ally and have to act. When a friend opened up to me about depression, or another about family trauma, I knew I had to be an open ear but also help them find resources to deal with their issues. I felt my responsibility as a community member to make sure they felt heard and supported, which might not be something I would be as confident to do in the past. It was also a sign that I could relate more than I originally imagined.

Farewell outing with some of the Kids Kabin staff and volunteers.

Community building doesn't just happen in the first weeks doing ice-breakers and fun events. It forms when you're facing hardships and tough moments when you don't always know what to do. I could have brushed away my friend's problem because that was easier as an individual. But as someone in my community, I tried to make sure this friend had other people looking out for him.



A view of the fish pond, flowering trees, and solar bulbs in Sr. Sylvia's beautiful backyard garden. One of my favorite places to spend down time and reflect.

I was the last one to move out of the volunteer house. The morning of my departure, I woke up early to tidy up the house and have one last "cuppa" in the garden. It was a quiet morning. Kids were out of school so I didn't hear any families preparing to send them off. There was only the familiar sound of the leaves brushing on the tall trees behind the backyard and early birds whistling. The temperature was typical for a cool, Newcastle day. Many meals were eaten out here. Many afternoon naps on a sunny day. Many stars viewed late nights with friends. Many little talks whenever I ran into one of the Sisters there, too. For the last time, I took it all in. I was overwhelmed with all sorts of emotions. It was sad to leave a place that became my home, but I felt content and was grateful for everyone that made it feel like home.

My suitcases were packed and standing by the front door as I waited in the living room with some of the Sisters for my taxi to arrive. We took last minute selfies, looked at a photo album with memories from the year, and Sr. Pat even did a quick repair on the boiler. When the driver arrived, they stood at the edge of the fence to wave me goodbye. As soon as I shut the door to the car, tears started rolling and I was sniffing. The driver looked in his rearview mirror and saw me tearing up. In an attempt to make me feel better, or maybe because he recognized an American accent, he asked the usual friendly questions.

"What brings you to Newcastle?" - "I was volunteering at a charity here in Walker."

"Where did you come from?" - "I'm from America, near Chicago."

"How long have you lived here?" - "Almost a whole year. But I'm going home now."

"Only a year? And you're already sad like that?"

The last answer surprised him the most. Only a year. Eleven months, to be exact. Eleven months ago I stepped into a community, nervous and excited to see what would unfold. In my departure, I hold countless memories, lessons, and bonds that have shaped me into a more understanding and confident person. I am moving to a new city and starting a new job, ready to embrace the experience of a new community once again.

Though I am not physically present in Walker anymore, I know I will forever be a part of the community from what I have contributed in the few months I lived there. I leave with so much hope for all of the good that will continue to come from everyone I have met. It truly does not feel like a goodbye, simply a "see yous lata".

Myra Villas, serving in Newcastle 2018-19