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Personal Reflection: An Administrator's Path To Serving and Living the Mission

Sawanee Khongsawatwaja

It can be difficult for University administrators to be directly and actively involved with both the students and the mission of the institution. We asked Sawanee Khongsawatwaja to reflect on how she has integrated the mission as an administrator within the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences at St. John's University. Sawanee joined St. John's University in 2010 as Assistant Dean for Finance and Administration in the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, and was promoted to Associate Dean in 2012. She came to St. John's with a decade of experience in fiscal management in the financial industry as well as in higher education. Because of her commitment to serving the community and helping those who are in need, St. John's was an excellent fit for her.

Utilizing Your Skills to Serve

As an Associate Dean for Finance and Administration, I don't have an opportunity to work with students, in the classroom, or otherwise. I wanted an opportunity to learn about student needs, interests, and opportunities. I felt disconnected from the mission, a primary reason why I work in higher education. My first step to alleviate this, was to offer non-academic service opportunities for the students. As a non-academic dean, I did not want to offer academic service projects related to their studies. Instead, I focused on projects that are relatable and ensure an impact on both students and the community.

In 2014 I was accepted into the University's Vincentian Mission Certificate (VMC) program and completed it in 2016. One of my colleagues highly recommended the program; I was glad I listened and took the initiative to apply. As an administrator at St. John's, this opportunity was not only timely but was a way to engage with other employees as well as a chance to learn more about the history of St. Vincent DePaul. The education component of the VMC program

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was certainly new to me as a non-Catholic and allowed me to think about how I would apply St. Vincent's humility and zeal to service.

The opportunity reignited my passion for serving those in need. I had stopped volunteering due to family commitments and lack of free time, but now, I was more able to give my time for the good of the community and make a difference for those in need. I had first started volunteering with New York Cares in 2002. I

started volunteering during the time I worked for a large financial company and the mission of the company was not relatable and the work that I was doing did not provide me with any sense of contribution. I volunteered on the weekends for only a few hours. Nevertheless, it impacted me tremendously, and much more than working for the large firm.

Why I Volunteer

On September 11th 2001, like many others did, I went to my office which was located on the 49th floor of One Liberty Plaza in New York City. The first plane hit the north tower of the World Trade

Center, and our building shook. My colleagues and I didn't know what was happening so we went to the lobby of our floor and watched what was unfolding on TV. We couldn't believe our eyes. It was happening so close to us that we felt the impact. We started the evacuation process. We walked down the emergency staircase, all 49 floors worth. Again, we took our time walking, joking around, not realizing what was happening. After about 20 minutes, we finally made it to the ground level and out of the building. By this time, a state of panic had set in on Broadway.

I didn't get a chance to call my family. As I was standing in line to use a pay phone, the second plane hit the south building. Later, as I stood there, the tower crumbled in front of my eyes. I ran, dropping all my belongings, taking refuge in a bank on Maiden Lane. Another bystander did the same, taking his jacket and covering me. We were down low on our knees, as there was still some air left near the ground.

Later, as we walked, people at a pizzeria gave out water; people were trying to clean their faces and eyes from the black soot. As I walked on alone, one person stood out. He had a cell phone, and when he finished his phone call, I asked him if I could use it. He handed me the phone. I started to dial, but had no luck. There was no answer. He was kind enough to walk with me and I continued walking uptown.

As we walked, people asked if we were OK — a small sense of caring that meant so much to me. A woman asked if we would like to get cleaned up in her apartment. At that moment, her kindness was what I needed. Of course, I said yes. She invited us in. I took a shower and she gave me her daughter's clothing. I was so grateful for her kindness. There was no way of getting out of Manhattan, so I used their phone to call two people: my Mom and a friend. The family that took me in gave me \$20. With tears rolling from my eyes I took the \$20, the most valuable \$20 that I ever received. This woman showed a complete stranger, someone she had never met, indescribable compassion and kindness.

For the weeks following 9-11, I spent the time

trying to understand what had happened, trying to understand why I was so lucky, why I was shown such kindness and compassion from strangers, angels who helped and protected me when I needed them most. I couldn't believe that someone was watching over me during a time of such major disaster.

Over the next several months, there were calls for volunteers to help clear the debris and many other opportunities. There was no doubt in my mind that I had to pay it forward. I began to volunteer with New York Cares and the American Red Cross again. I did whatever they needed me to do. I served meals to other volunteers. We would meet at the headquarters in Brooklyn, then ride the volunteer bus into the zone. I used my skills to help. After a couple of weeks of active search for survivors, they were now searching for remains. During these times, I was honored to serve meals to those who searched. Their actions were unwarranted, they weren't required to do it, but they did it because they wanted to. I served the meals because *I* wanted to. We were all doing something that had both minor and major impacts, and we couldn't imagine it any other way.

A few months had gone by. Volunteers were still needed. This time, it was not serving lunch but to help with all those who have been affected by this disaster. As a volunteer with financial background, they placed me on the check writing team. I must have written hundreds of checks that weekend to help families pay their rent, food, or business subsidy. My husband is bilingual, so he was able to be at the forefront. He conducted interviews of the residents and business owners, who weren't English-proficient. Without a translator, these individuals may not have been able to receive the benefits that they were in need of. Both of us were able to use our skill-sets to help those in need and at the same time, provide some hope when these individuals needed it most.

Fast-forward to 2014. As part of my Vincentian Mission Certificate program, one of the requirements was to complete 60 hours of service. As I completed this requirement and learned more about St. Vincent DePaul and his philosophy of

teaching, it reminded me of the many times that I volunteered and all the new people that I met over the years. I thought that that this would be a great opportunity for my graduate students, who often times were not offered such valuable chances to serve. This is the primary reason why I started to lead my own service team for students.

Vincentian Mission Certificate Program

The Office of University Mission offers all full-time employees the opportunity to participate in the Vincentian Mission Certificate (VMC) Program. This 16-month professional development program has been highly successful since its first cohort began in January 2007.

With its focus on Education, Service and Reflection, the VMC program is designed to empower St. John's administrators, faculty and staff to live the Vincentian Mission as Mission Leaders. Previous cohorts of the program have proven vital to instilling a sense of Vincentian service and leadership throughout the University community, bridging the gap between a theoretical understanding of our Catholic and Vincentian mission and its practical application in today's society. Throughout 16 months, VMC members demonstrate their commitment to the program by attending training sessions on Vincentian and Catholic identity, monthly Vincentian reflections, a capstone retreat and 50 hours of community service — two thirds of which involve direct contact with the poor. Upon completion, VMC members are awarded a Certificate of Service reflecting the significance of their achievement.

This experience allows St. John's University staff, faculty, and administrators to not only provide better service to our students, but to become role models who will perpetuate St. Vincent's legacy, inspiring others to action. As St. Vincent wrote: "Our vocation is to go not into one parish, nor into only one diocese, but throughout the earth." (St. John's University, 2018)

New York Cares

Prior to joining St. John's, I had an opportunity

to volunteer with a few New York based organizations such as the American Red Cross and New York Cares. New York Cares is the largest not for profit service organization in the New York City area. My VMC experience drove me to integrate this previous volunteer experience with my new St. John's career. In New York Cares, I found a rewarding opportunity to not only serve, but help our students find service themselves. A true New York City service opportunity, "...New York Cares now designs and runs 18,000 projects a year at 1,300 nonprofits and schools across all five boroughs. The organization...is now a part of the fabric of NYC, and serves as a symbol of New Yorkers' spirit" (New York Cares, n.d., p. 6).

It is our hope that our students will live the St. John's University Vincentian Mission (St. John's University Mission Statement, 2018). New York Cares helps our students understand how important this truly is, especially in the context of the population in New York City.

New York Cares mobilizes New Yorkers to meet the immediate need of NYC's most vulnerable populations, from the City's homeless to the hungry to the isolated. Services includes coat drive, meal prep and delivery, socializing and physical fitness with seniors, food pantry distribution, disaster response, and winter wishes. (New York Cares, n.d., p. 12)

Fresh Produce and Lessons Learned

In December 2013, I led a small group of 10 students to a NYC Housing Authority for service opportunity with New York Cares and City Harvest.

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the largest public housing authority in North America, was created in 1935 to provide decent, affordable housing for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers. NYCHA's mission is to increase opportunities for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers by providing safe, affordable housing and facilitating access to social and community

services. More than 400,000 New Yorkers reside in NYCHA's 326 public housing developments across the City's five boroughs. Another 235,000 receive subsidized rental assistance in private homes through the NYCHA-administered Section 8 Leased Housing Program. (New York City Housing Authority, 2018)

It was a cold winter day and ten students participated. Our assigned project was to help distribute fresh produce to the residents of an assigned housing unit. Many residents of NYCHA lack access to affordable fresh produce and groceries. By offering this service to the residents, we promoted and assisted them with better nutritional options as well as encouraging healthy diets. The primary reason why I chose this service opportunity was because of my love for food and nutrition, as well as the potential direct effect of nutrition on overall health.

One of the lessons we learned from this service was that some of the residents that we served didn't know how to prepare the fresh produce that were distributed. Two items distributed were acorn squash and beets. Some residents didn't know what these were. Therefore, one of our responsibilities was to educate the residents about the nutritional values and benefits of this produce as well as how to cook them. As an individual whose hobby is cooking, I was well-equipped to share information in this area. Sharing cooking tips with these residents was so satisfying because I was able to share my passion along with helping others.

New York Cares Day

Just one out of every three New York City fourth grade public school students today is proficient in both math and reading. More than 23,000 students drop out of city high schools every year. Less than a third of those who do graduate are deemed college-ready. In response to these jarring statistics, New York Cares is asking you to take part in Cares Day for Schools, a campaign where all

funds raised are dedicated to expanding educational programming in public schools that connects volunteers directly with struggling students, helping them develop skills, networks, and self-esteem critical for long-term achievement.

What's more, the campaign culminates not in a walk or a plunge, but in a day of painting, cleaning, and organizing in schools, ensuring NYC students have bright and safe learning spaces in which to build futures of greater possibility. (New York Cares, 2018)

I wanted to offer students an opportunity where they can both have fun and make an impact on the community. Over the years, I have identified my strengths, weaknesses and skills. I have become very comfortable using my skills to help those who are in need of such help. The first New York Cares Day event that I led was in the Fall of 2013. The assigned NYC public school was P.S. 282 in Far Rockaway, NY. Our team goal was to recruit 30 students, but there was more interest than I thought, and our team ended up with 53 volunteers. I've never felt so satisfied to be able to provide my services to an institution that I can drive by and see all the work that was done. I could actually see the murals on the outside walls that we painted. The effects of our time and efforts would be shared with all the students, faculty, parents, and visitors for many years to come – a truly meaningful experience.

Since Fall of 2013, our team continues to participate in New York Cares Day for Schools (Fall) as well as New York Cares Day for Parks (Spring), which benefits the New York City public parks:

The NYC Department of Parks and Recreation oversees the largest urban park system in the world, but funding for parks makes up less than 1% of the city's budget. Volunteers provided an important supplement to the city's resources by participating in projects that restored local ecosystems, repaired damaged coastlines, cleaned community parks, and made

New York City a more beautiful and sustainable place to live and work. (New York Cares, n.d., p. 14)

Overall, we participated in five New York Cares Day events for schools since Fall 2013 and four New York Care Day for parks. We plan to continue participating during these annual events as long as there are students who want to be involved.

I have had countless opportunities to participate in service events as a member of the St. John's community. The University is effective in promoting opportunities and encouraging all members of the community including students, faculty, and administrators to be active participants in Vincentian social action. Our hope is to instill this sense of volunteerism and service in those who have the means to do so, in benefiting those who need it most. I do hope that this article will encourage more to sign up and participate in our local communities. Your individual strengths can be used for planning service, and the difference we can make when we come together is truly immeasurable.

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