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A Vincentian Education by Midnight

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On any typical Monday through Thursday evening at 7pm at St. John's University, the O'Connor Hall Residence Hall 2nd Floor Lounge is home to the University's Campus Ministry Midnight Run collaboration. This truly engaging and transformative Vincentian service effort has become "a household" name, and synonymous with a "must do," for any St. John's University student. Since 2003, the University has partnered with the Midnight Run organization to provide college students with a unique and distinct connection of service and reflection of those most in need. This experience highlights the University's Catholic, Vincentian mission – offering its students real and tangible ways to encounter the poor and vulnerable of the city, and to reflect on systematic structures and circumstances, while connecting it to their faith life. This encourages students to consider creative, systematic, concrete ways to address these issues and be catalysts of change.

As a Catholic, Vincentian institution, St. John's University is committed to academic excellence and the pursuit of wisdom, which recognizes free inquiry, religious values, and the human experience. Founded in 1870 in response to an invitation of the first Bishop of Brooklyn, to provide the youth of the city with an intellectual and moral education, the University embraces the Judeo-Christian ideals of respect for the rights and dignity of every person and each individual's responsibility for the world in which we live. As a University, St. John's has been inspired by St. Vincent de Paul's compassion and zeal for service and strives to provide an excellent education for all people, especially those lacking economic, physical, or social advantages. The institution benefits from New York City's cultural diversity, its intellectual and artistic resources, and its unique professional educational opportunities. As a global university, and one of the nation's most diverse institutions of higher education, the University continues to foster qualities in students that assist them to become effective leaders and responsible citizens in a vibrant city and dynamic world (St. John's University, 2017).

The core values that characterize the distinctive nature of a Vincentian education, in the life of its students include, education that is: holistic, responding to the intellectual, spiritual, moral and affective needs of students - to educate the hearts and mind of students; integrated, where humanistic and professional are blended with the abstract and the practical; creative, in seeking ways to care for the needs of others, while maintaining a clear "sense of possible"; flexible and willing to make an effort to adapt to the needs of non-traditional students; quality of excellence, in teaching, instruction, and methodology; person-focused, to recognize all members of the university as valued and respected; and collaborative, in seeking to work together with all necessary constituents; and focused on the mission and care of service to the poor (Sullivan, 1995).

Tavanti (2006) asserts that St. Vincent dePaul drew upon leadership practices that use communication, collaboration, shared values, mission and a team-centered approach. Tavanti explains that leadership engaged in Vincentian values utilizes: a "big picture" approach that is concerned with innovative ideas and long term plans; a priority placed on people, relationships, processes; the highest level of building community; and an engagement in direct and indirect service to the poor. Leaders use lived competencies that include vision, innovation, commitment, pragmatics, risk-taking, inclusiveness, collaboration, communication, and are service-oriented.

By connecting both the core values of a Vincentian education and the values of Vincentian leadership, the Midnight Run provides St. John's students a unique and significant way to live the University mission and draw upon their own development and education for their future endeavors and careers. This service experience creates an innovative way to encounter the poor, and to recognize how to engage and be transformed by these experiences – therefore living a St. John's education.

Background

In 1984, as the epidemic of homelessness was on the rise, members of a local church in Dobbs Ferry coordinated with the homeless men and women they were serving at a local soup kitchen. They aimed to continue these encounters by visiting with them at Grand Central Station, and distributing much needed food, supplies, and clothing, as well as companionship to those living on the streets (MidnightRun.org, 2017). As the effort grew, volunteers from other churches and synagogues in Westchester County joined this effort, and by 1989, a dozen groups were participating.

Then in 1989, Midnight Run became incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, where a generous contribution by a Westchester corporation enabled the organization to rent its first headquarters at 97 Main Street in Dobbs Ferry. Today this location serves as the central location where clothes are stored and sorted, food is prepared, and donations are coordinated by thousands of volunteers that make Midnight Run a reality (MidnightRun.org, 2017). The program has grown from the original small group, to a collaboration of more than 150 community organizations.

Midnight Run's mission is dedicated to bridging the gap between the housed and the homeless. Partners with Midnight Run, like St. John's University, serve by distributing bagged meals, soup, coffee, toiletries, and clothing to the homeless living in the borough of Manhattan. Locations (or a stop list) for distribution of these goods are created by the Midnight Run organization. St. John's University's partnership begins in the residence halls, where student volunteers gather to make the 60-75 bagged meals, and sort and organize the goods ready for distribution. Students can sign-up prior to their volunteer date to secure their participation.

Since its inception at St. John's University, its popularity and participation has grown significantly—from a few days in the month of November in 2003, to a weekly opportunity to participate every Wednesday or Thursday (as well as, Mondays and Tuesdays in the months of September, October and April) in the present day. The effort at the University offers ten student volunteers the opportunity to participate in each run, with a waiting list of over 100 students wanting to get involved.

With a strong, collaborative partnership with Midnight Run, Campus Ministry at St. John's University has been able to provide students this unique and creative way to serve. Implementing

this experience in the Vincentian spirit of reflection and prayer, challenges students to consider their life choices, their academic endeavors and how he or she can continue to form and inform a Vincentian identity.

The Outcomes of Participation

The growth of the program at St. John's University was the direct result of students' desire to become more involved, because of transformational nature of the experience. After most Midnight Run experiences, students ask how they can sign up to go again. The draw to the experience is created often by the "word of mouth" of students who had participated, sharing their experiences and encounters with the poor. Whether it was in a classroom, in the cafeteria or in the residence hall, when surveying students as to why they attended, "Someone told me about how great it was," was a clear theme. As the demand grew, resources had to be allocated to meet this need. Resources not only included the goods distributed, but the need to address transportation issues, the development of a student leadership team, and administrative supervision that maintained the highest quality of service offered for our students and to those served.

As one student shared, "The Run creates a unique and genuine human connection between complete strangers, and a way for us all to come to know our authentic self." These stories are what continue to resonate throughout campus, and continue to shape the students' Vincentian education and their future endeavors. In the following three stories, two students and one alumnus offered to share their transformative experiences.

As the first student offered his personal experience regarding a run he had attended, he recalled that as the night went on, they ran out of socks, underwear, and some of the clothing items. In the conversations among peers the following day he said, "They took it upon themselves to initiate a group of people to go to the Dollar Store and buy extra socks, and underwear and clothing, all with their own money and everything, so the next run had what it needed." He went on to share how moved he was by the students' desire to not let those they encountered on the streets go without these basic needs. Even after that semester, he recalls this experience and often thinks about those he met, hoping their needs continue to be met.

Another story about a different Midnight Run comes from a former student leader, who recalled an encounter of transformation and change of heart,

in just a few short hours of a run. She shared, “Leading the run was one of the most rewarding aspects of my time at St. John's. Many times, the van was filled with people who really wanted to do good in the world and grow in their understanding of the cycles of poverty. Other times, the nights were more difficult because the group was less concerned about the big picture of the Midnight Run, and mostly concerned with fulfilling a requirement. On one of the more difficult nights, I was leading a group of men who were very socially conservative and came into the run with a lot of preconceived notions of what it means to be homeless.”

As she led the group and briefed them on what to expect, and how to handle the distribution, she made sure to remind the group, “That it wasn't about the food or the clothes but about the conversations we have and always asked for people to approach those we were serving with open hearts and open minds.” She recalled on this particular night, one of the students had expressed his picture of homelessness based on what he had saw. After the second stop, that same young man approached the student leader and shared with tears in his eyes, “He had just had an extended conversation with a man they were serving. Initially it was about sports, but it quickly moved to talking about the man's life.” The student continued to share, “The student looking at me stunned said, ‘That could be anyone. He looked just like my best friend's dad. He was laid off in the financial crisis and then hit some bad luck and ended up on the street. That could be anyone and no one deserves this’.”

As she reflects years later, “That moment was very special to me, not just because I saw how a few short hours had completely changed his perspective, but because it changed mine too. I was quick to think this was going to be a tough night and to make my own assumptions about my peers in the van, but I was reminded that through an experience like the Midnight Run anyone can come to see Jesus.”

Another student shared an encounter she had with a man who she hadn't seen in a while, after participating in a run a few weeks in a row. She went onto share “There he was sitting in the atrium with the usual group waiting for us to come with coffee, sandwiches and the supplies we brought. This man refused everything except a cup of coffee.” After the student greeted him and encouraged him to please take whatever he needed, he refused and went on to share that he didn't need

anything. The student was told by the man “That he isn't living on the street anymore, that he got a job and now lives with his brother. He wanted to come back to thank his old community. He told me that he met the best people, during the worst time in his life. He went onto express his gratitude to God and to the community he had while living on the street.” The student was struck by his perseverance and faith, and left this encounter reflecting on how she too can live through the tough times in her life.

These stories begin to create a picture of the lessons offered to St. John's students, in the Vincentian spirit, and as they live out their Vincentian education. These encounters create defined moments of engagement and conversation, as a student continues their collegiate career.

For Future Use

The Midnight Run offers a unique and innovative way to live the distinct nature of a Vincentian education. As a holistic approach, the Midnight Run provides students the opportunity to be educated by the heart and mind – to be transformed by encounters with another person, namely the poor. As an integrated value of human potential and a professional experience, students are challenged to think about these encounters in both abstract and practical ways. The Midnight Run provides a creative approach that offers a distinct way to care for the needs of others. These encounters must be flexible, and make the effort to adapt to the needs of all the students served at St. John's.

In a lived Vincentian education, a quality of excellence must be maintained in teaching, in instruction, and in methodology, therefore, the resources, both financial and human, that are afforded to the Midnight Run must maintain the highest level of quality. As a person-focused effort, the Midnight Run recognizes the abilities of all members of the University and their ability to offer the best of themselves to the experiences and encounters with the poor.

For the Midnight Run to be effective, a collaborative approach challenges all participants to work together in creating a compassionate, caring encounter for both the student and those they serve. Lastly, a Midnight Run focuses on mission, as part of, and in conjunction with the care and service to the poor.

As students continue to develop, leadership opportunities, like the Midnight Run engages them in Vincentian values. This program utilizes a ‘big picture’ approach – as part of reflection, students are challenged to consider long term, systemic

structures of the poor. Students are asked to reflect on how their choices and experiences can be transformed by their Midnight Run encounter. As such, the Midnight Run recognizes the priority that must be placed on people, relationships, and processes. The focus of the Midnight Run experience includes encounter, engagement, and community. It creates a space for human encounter and engagement in direct service to the poor.

As a University, the stories of the Midnight Run have been embraced in many facets, and have begun to span various contingencies throughout campus. Professors request specific dates to use the project for Academic Service Learning in their courses, alumni donations have been earmarked to support the purchase of food and clothing items, and fiscal and goods donations have been made to the program by employees, who themselves have begun to participate and attend “Runs” as they commit to the mission of St. John’s University.

Since 2003, the University’s partnership with the Midnight Run offers its students the unique and distinct connection of service and reflection of those most in need. Students are afforded a real and tangible way to encounter the poor and vulnerable of the city, and to reflect on systematic structures and circumstances, while connecting it to their faith life. In turn, this encourages students to consider creative, systematic, concrete ways to address these issues and be true catalysts of change.

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