

Perspectives of a Companion in Mission

One Saturday night in July, I went to a Western Dance party organized by the members of the Lordstown SCOPE. I didn't recognize many of the songs the band played, but since I enjoyed going to dances in college, I couldn't resist getting myself out on the dance floor and having a good time. Among the other dancers was a white-haired woman named Dorothy who came dressed for the event, complete with Western boots and a fringed shirt. I noticed she was looking for a dance partner, so I offered to join her, and I was quickly able to learn her step. A good-humored man named Frank tried to follow along with us, and he'd slump his shoulders in exaggerated defeat whenever he made a mistake. Whenever he'd start to get the hang of it, he'd smile to his spectators seated at the table to assure them he had figured it out, but at some point he would slip up again. When Dorothy and I finished dancing, she gave me a hug and said that we made a good pair. She asked me how old I was, and then when she told me her age, she added, "See, age doesn't matter!" Despite the years that separated us, we'd found our rhythm.

As I read the reflections of Martha Buser, OSU, on the life of St. Angela Merici, I felt a connection with St. Angela's ability to feel comfortable amongst diverse populations. As a Companion in Mission, I've had the opportunity to interact with many different groups of people. During the final week of my internship, I spent a day with Sister Diane during her shift at a nursing home, and I was especially excited whenever I encountered a resident who shared my passion for sewing. One woman proudly pulled out the drawstring pouches she sews for her friends and family using material from old scrubs. I met another woman who used to work as a seamstress, and she was delighted to hear about how my great grandmother was a seamstress, too. I told her it was a pleasure to meet her, and when I offered to shake her hand, she held onto my hand just a bit longer. It made me wonder what her hands must have been capable of

producing during her working years, and I wished I could share whatever part of me she was clinging to that day.

After lunch, Sister Diane introduced me to a man who likes to play the game Trouble. I remember playing the game with my sisters when we were growing up, so I was excited to see the familiar board when he pulled it off his shelf. Every once in a while, he would move in the wrong direction or send a piece from my safe zone back home, but he always knew at the instant I rolled if I was going to capture his piece, and those shared moments were the highlight of our game. While I was waiting for him to take a bathroom break, another man rolled over to me in his wheelchair, pointed to the bulge in my pocket, and jokingly asked, “Hey, what have you got in there? Cigarettes?” I reached into my pocket and pulled out my cell phone, and we both had a good laugh over that.

In addition to spending time with the members of SCOPE and the residents of the nursing home, I also continued to work with children. I couldn't believe our six-week youth program had gone by so quickly, and even though the other volunteers and I had become more efficient in running the program, we still had new challenges to take on. One boy in our program had begun calling the older kids names, and when I talked with Sister Martha about the situation, she guessed that the boy was expressing his desire to be included with the older kids. He wasn't developmentally at their level, but he was the same age as them, so he should have the opportunity to be with his peers as long as he makes the choice to be respectful. One morning when the younger kids were out on the playground, I had the older kids in the basement writing sentences. When the boy came in for a drink of water and asked what we were doing, I told him about the assignment and invited him to join us. I was surprised when he said yes, given the alternative of spending time on the playground. One of the other kids complained about him

being with us, but I assured them that he was here to do his work just like they were. Sure enough, he stayed on task, respected the other kids, and did a good job.

As my internship drew to a close, I thought back to the goals I'd set earlier that summer. I had given the older children in our youth program the challenge of completing each of their multiplication tables in under a minute. I allowed them to work collectively, but it took awhile for them to learn to work cooperatively. On the final day of our youth program, they only had the 4- and 5-times tables to complete, and they were very excited when they finally did. Another goal I'd set was to help a fifth-grader in our youth program improve her reading and writing skills. One afternoon, she started complaining that the book we were reading (about common myths and the science—or lack of science—behind them) was boring. Then, she had the idea to read it as a conversation: I'd read the question, and she'd read the answer and explanation. It brought the book to life, making it feel like a book of skits rather than a science book. During one exchange, I accidentally started reading her part, and she said, "Hey, don't read that! I like to read!" then added, "I never thought I'd say that!" Since we didn't have much time to work together this summer, I hope that I have at least helped her discover the joy in reading—a joy that will hopefully carry into the future.

I also established some summer goals with one of the Green Clean employees I tutored in writing. Before my first lesson with her, Carl, the program director at Potter's Wheel, informed me that she hadn't been able to commit herself to her education in the past, so he was impressed when she showed up for two consecutive lessons with me. Her biggest obstacle was her lack of confidence, so I made sure to set clear expectations and acknowledge her small victories along the way. At our first lesson, I said that I would help her write a complete essay by the end of the summer, but due to miscommunication and schedule conflicts, we missed several lessons. The

next time I met with her, we worked on writing body paragraphs. She developed her main points into three paragraphs, and when she finished writing them, she couldn't believe that she'd written a full page. She told me that one of her biggest concerns is spelling, but when I assured her that GED graders aren't going to judge spelling, she looked up at me and said, "Really? Then I'm not afraid anymore!"

I enjoyed watching her develop her skills and confidence and work towards our goal of the finished essay, but on the day of our final lesson, I learned that she was sick and wouldn't be able to meet up. I faced a similar outcome with the other group of women I tutored. I'd taught them the individual components of an essay, but when it came time to put all the skills together, our group began to dwindle and we didn't achieve the sense of closure I'd hoped for. It was difficult for me to accept. I'd seen the potential in these women, but since they were all single mothers, I also got a glimpse of the challenges they faced and the demands on their time. I felt like we'd lost to the obstacles set against them, but when I read the reflections on St. Angela, I took comfort in Martha Buser's discussion of openness, like a piazza: "A piazza is open and it knows people are going to come in and people are going to go out, but it is always going to stay open. ...The other may come in, may reside there, and may share what he or she has with me; then the other may go back out." I liked the impression of ease and confidence in that image. For as much as I wanted to share my knowledge and experience with these women, I couldn't do everything. I needed to accept the forces beyond my control and trust that I have inspired them to grow as the world opens up before them, even if that goes beyond the time I have with them.

One afternoon, Sister Betty invited me to join her for a walk at the Mill Creek Park. I listened as she told me how she came to be a part of the community, and as she talked about the unexpected turns along the way, she kept emphasizing, "God has a crazy sense of humor."

Because she began as a companion in mission, we were able to compare our experiences, and as I tried to make sense of all that I'd encountered during my time as a companion, it helped to have her perspective. Mary-Cabrini Durkin, author of *Angela's Story*, discusses the meaning of a companion as it relates to being a member of Angela's company, but the definition seems to fit my role as well: "The graces of a holy journey in companionship are more than just a multiplication of journeying alone. Companionship itself is like a basket, receiving and carrying bread that sustains and nourishes us on the way. We are real 'com-pan-ions,' real 'sharers-of-bread,' of life, on our journey." My experience as a companion of the Ursuline community and mission was greater than a sum-of-parts. It was something unquantifiable, but just as you can feel the satisfying nourishment of bread, I'd felt the invigorating power of companionship and the delight of sharing something greater than yourself with someone else.

Towards the end of July, I had the opportunity to walk the labyrinth with a group of sisters, associates, volunteers, and other guests. While I waited my turn, I enjoyed watching everyone else before me make their way along the path. Even though they were walking in different directions, they were all going to the same place. The weather was perfect for the occasion: sunshine with a slight breeze. Sister Dorothy learned from the Native Americans that when the light wind blows at the end of the day, it is a sign that the Spirit is present. It makes you feel small in comparison to the awe and beauty in the world, but it is also comforting to feel the divine presence all around you and know that it will fill any void. I felt the same sense of awe one evening when I was on the porch with Sister Norma, Sister Dorothy, Sister Diane, and Sister Marlene. We had just finished our Handel's treats, and Sister Norma asked if I could explain the phases of the moon to her. Sister Diane also brought out her collection of astronomy

DVDs, which sparked a discussion of the solar system and the universe. We talked about how the universe is always in motion, even though it is something we never stop to think about.

Just as St. Angela grew up during a time when new expeditions expanded their knowledge of the world, we also live in a time where we are flooded with new information and discoveries. This holds especially true for immigrants as they navigate a new culture. When I sat in on Rogalia's English as a Second Language class at Potter's Wheel, she and her students spent quite a bit of class time joking around in Spanish, but Rogalia explained that it's not a waste of time since it fosters the relationship between them. Their families (hers included) are abroad, so all they have are each other; they make their own family. I felt the same sense of inclusiveness at the Jubilee celebration as I sat amongst people who had different connections to the community but who shared the pride in its continuing mission. Everyone sang with such meaning in their voices, making the room vibrate with joy. Since the altar ran down the middle of the church, I enjoyed looking over at all the familiar faces as we worshipped and celebrated together, and I felt so grateful to be included in this moment with them. When it came time to say my goodbyes, Sister Darla said she hoped I didn't pick up any "bad habits" during my time with them. But I think I can safely say that they didn't teach me anything I'm not proud to take with me out into the world—nor did they send me with any faulty religious garments.