

Jesuit Volunteer Corps - 50 years of nitty-gritty service

By [Ed Langlois](#)

The Jesuits had served the Alaska missions since 1886.

Bishop Francis Gleeson - a bald, hard-charging, cigar-smoking Jesuit - was spiritual leader of Alaska's northern frontier during the 1950s. He saw the need for a good boarding school closer to villagers. That gave rise to Copper Valley School, 170 miles east of Anchorage on 462 acres of federal land.

Alaska Airlines helped airlift children to the location, which was still a work in progress. News of the school spread across the country and volunteers with building skills began trekking north to help - and have some adventure.

Meanwhile, St. Ann Sister George Edmond went to the East Coast to Catholic women's schools that required community service. Using a slide show, she persuaded five students to cross the continent to teach at Copper Valley.

Around the same time, Bishop Gleeson had formed a team of lay volunteers, mostly engineering students from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.

Those groups, fueled by the church's sense of lay mission, were the seed of the volunteer corps, which would become a model for scores of other programs over the years.

But it took a cold winter in 1956-57 to bring it all together.

'The big thing was to build the school,' says Jesuit Father Tom Gallagher, a Tacoma, Wash. priest who was a seminarian assigned to Copper Valley at the start. 'The people were there, but the place wasn't ready.'

Father Gallagher became head of Copper Valley in the mid-1960s. All told, he served in Alaska for 50 years.

With surplus construction material from the Korean War, an all-out effort to finish building swept up the volunteer tradesmen, the new volunteer teachers, the Jesuits and the students.

There was no running water yet. The women had to cross a stream to get to an outhouse. A friendly lodge owner let them take a weekly shower.

As winter set in, temperatures dipped to 70 below. Coal was trucked in from 180 miles away to heat the buildings. Sometimes furnaces went on the fritz.

'Everybody had to roll up their sleeves to do this,' Father Gallagher recalls. 'There was not that much difference between students and teachers. They all had to get their overalls on and load coal. The

students didn't even look at the girls as teachers but as big sisters. It was a matter of being pioneers.'

Father Gallagher keeps an aging essay written by an eighth-grade student from one of the villages. The boy describes his old life at home with a chronically drunk father. Coming to school and meeting the young volunteers, the lad wrote, brought him 'into a whole new world.'

Female volunteers and the Sisters who came to work at the school lived in one wing. The men lived in another dorm of the huge complex.

The volunteers transformed Father Gallagher's own sense of love and service. He marveled at their bravery and their gift of self.

In 1967, a young woman from Tigard arrived at Copper Valley to teach. A flood had just hit. Before Marylee Lowry was even unpacked, she was in her classroom mopping up.

'She had a rich poverty,' Father Gallagher recalls. 'I think she was a mystic. She shows the dimension and depth of the people who showed up here.'

Lowry stayed in Alaska for some years, then came to teach at St. Mary's Academy in Portland before becoming a lawyer. She died of leukemia in 2002.

Father Gallagher remembers the curious alcoholic welder from the eastern United States who mostly kept to himself. But the man, says Father Gallagher, was a 'Beethoven in steel.' He welded a metal dome

150 feet across to provide a covered walkway and parking space at the school. Then there was the 28-year-old Baptist bricklayer who rode his motorcycle all the way from Tennessee.

Another young Jesuit, Father Jack Morris, taught at Copper Valley in the late 1950s as a seminarian. By the early 1960s, he was farther north, teaching at the Jesuits' high school in Fairbanks. He had heard about the progress at Copper Valley and saw the potential of the volunteers.

Bishop Gleeson had come to consider the young people an 'absolute necessity.' When his first choice to organize the movement died suddenly in 1964, Father Morris got the job.

The energetic priest from Montana would be the one to coin the name Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

'I just saw we had work to do,' says Father Morris, now 78-year-old pastor of St. Mary by the Sea Parish in Rockaway. 'I was running this thing out of my back pocket.'

His recruitment brochure called for those 'young and old - with adult joy and adult stability. Men and women who dig in, work hard, laugh loud and often. Flexible enough to adjust to diverse companions, tasks and environments.'

On recruitment trips to Catholic colleges all over the nation, Father Morris would tell people that the Jesuit Volunteer Corps was twice as old as the Peace Corps, twice as tough and 10 times more rewarding.

The youths got by on \$10 per month, at a time when Peace Corps volunteers got \$75.

By 1968, volunteers in Alaska outnumbered priests.

'It began to grow,' Father Morris says. 'It was because people said, 'We've been in the belly of the beast and it's not a beast. It's the Church and it's wonderful.'"

Volunteers served in remote areas such as Nulato - 40 log cabins nestled against hills. There were only seven Anglos in the town.

The Jesuits appreciated the new presence.

'The volunteers bring a fresh spirit of optimism and joy to the mission,' said Father Bernard McMeel, superior at a mission near the Yukon River.

Soon, Father Morris decided that the volunteers could serve places other than Alaska. By the late 1960s, volunteers were in northern Washington at St. Mary's Indian School on the Colville Reservation.

By 1970, Alaska had become a state, and a new bishop took charge in the area. The need and enthusiasm for Copper Valley School waned, and it shut down in 1971. In 1976, a fire razed the place.

But the Jesuit Volunteer Corps would survive and thrive. It would expand to the Midwest in 1974, the East Coast in 1975, the Southwest

in 1977 and the South in 1980. It went international in 1984, with programs in Belize, Tanzania, Micronesia, Peru and Nepal.

Now, almost 400 volunteers - mostly fresh from college - serve around the world each year and more than 200 other programs are modeled on the Corps.

Meghan Buckner, a 24-year-old current volunteer, grew up in New Jersey. After starting her service working with homeless children in Birmingham, Ala., she re-upped. She just completed a year teaching at St. Andrew Nativity School in Northeast Portland, and next year she'll work with homeless people in downtown Portland.

'It is an amazing experience to volunteer and work with such diverse populations who are so different from me but so similar to me in many ways,' says Buckner, who herself grew up in a low-income household.

Her rule of thumb when working with people who are poor - don't judge them and don't hassle them. Their lives are hard enough.

After graduating from Miami University of Ohio, Buckner knew she wanted to do something good with her life. She and a friend applied to the Corps together.

Like all current volunteers, Buckner lives in a small co-ed house. The community has evenings dedicated to spirituality and communal life.

Although many houses naturally experience conflict and then try to grow by addressing it, Buckner says she has somehow avoided the

hard lessons. She and her three housemates - two women and one man - go to plays and lectures together, anything that is free or low-cost.

Most of all, when not working or praying, they talk.

'You get into some of the most random conversations that really open your eyes,' Buckner explains. 'One of my favorite parts of this is being surrounded by people who are really intentional about being authentic with those they encounter and striving toward honest communication.'

The work, Buckner explains, has taught her that spirituality and action cannot be separate.

The importance of Jesuit Volunteers does not end with their year or two of service. In the Northwest, scores of former volunteers create a subculture of faith and service in the church. Worldwide, there are 12,000 former volunteers.

In Portland, former volunteers lead agencies and sit on parish councils. They are lawyers, teachers and writers and most sustain a mission to serve those who are poor.

'Like so many other Jesuit volunteers, I was evangelized by the poor I encountered,' Mary Medved said in 1987. After serving as a volunteer in Bellingham in 1978, the Georgetown University graduate became director of the Corps in the Northwest and eventually a Holy Names Sister. Now, she directs Jesuit Volunteers International.

For much of the past decade, the Corps, along with most other volunteer programs, had a drop in recruits. Houses closed in Woodburn, Bend and Portland. But applications to the Northwest region are up 40 percent over last year. Communities will be re-opening in Sitka, Alaska and Billings, Mont.

Jeanne Haster, director of the Northwest region of the Corps, says the church and the world benefit from the program's core values - spirituality, community, social justice and simple living. The Corps in the Northwest continues a focus on connections between social and ecological concerns and working toward bringing justice and compassion to those who suffer the most.

Says Haster, 'Young people are still attracted to the possibilities of making a difference in the world.'