

Talk for JVC:NW Annual Dinner
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Painted on the wall of the Jesuit Volunteer house in Spokane are the words of Oscar Romero: “It helps now and then to take the long view,” he writes. “We plant seeds that will one day grow. We water seeds that have already been planted knowing that they hold future promises. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete but it is a beginning, a step along the way or an opportunity for God’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see end results but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.”

Throughout my year this passage has provided a lens through which to view my JVC experience; particularly one recent part of it. For the eight weeks leading up to the Spokane Bloomsday Run on May 6th, ten of the families at St. Margaret’s Shelter participated in the first annual Wellness Program. Each week they attended classes on various aspects of wellness from healthy eating and exercise to self defense and tobacco cessation. The shelter provided a membership to the YMCA and weekly healthy cooking instruction and blood pressure screenings. The families received points toward prizes for the healthy choices they made. In the end, six women and three children walked all 7.46 miles of Bloomsday.

From the beginning, this project—indeed my whole year at St. Margaret’s—has stretched my capacity for perspective and persistence. With this group of former drug addicts, current smokers and very overweight women, the successes of the program were never going to come in leaps and bounds. I learned to take joy in the little things; like the woman who proudly announced that she had taken the plunge and switched from Pepsi to Diet Pepsi or the mom who was able to go from five smoke breaks during our weekly training walks down to two.

I have also found that small persistent acts of love and support, especially in the face of the residents' sometimes disappointing choices and defeatism, serve as a powerful reminder to them of their potential. Their response to this display of faith can be amazing. There was one woman who moved into the shelter in the middle of the program. Her behavior was a challenge from the start and was quickly on her way to being asked to leave for her disregard for the rules and her hostility toward the staff, myself included. Nevertheless, every Saturday morning I knocked on her door and asked her to come on the walk. She always protested and made excuses but with a little convincing she came every week. Though it took some coaxing even to get her to the start of the race, she ended up being the most surprising and proudest finisher of Bloomsday. The confidence she gained from this accomplishment seems to have generated some changes in other aspects of her life. Since the race she has begun to take more responsibility for her actions and has abandoned some of her self-sabotaging behaviors.

I will never see end results with the women I have worked with this year. Though there have been some heartening indications that some of them may continue with the changes they've made, many of women are not yet at a place where they can make these changes lasting. Ultimately, they are the only ones who can determine that. At times this year, that realization has been heart breaking. But to dwell on the fact that some of the residents will become homeless again or resume their drug use or lose their children would paralyze my current efforts and exhaust my energies. Accepting my limitations has given me the freedom to put all of my passion, faith and love into *this* particular step on their way and to keep the measured hope that something I've said or done might one day take root. Romero says: "We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that." While I hope to leave JVC feeling that I have done something and done it well, I am also firm in the knowledge that there is still much work to be done.