

## Hope for a Weary World: Faith in Service

Record low temperatures, record amounts of snowfall, and record unemployment- **is there any good news out there?** YES, right here in our parish. I was happy to learn that 3 members of our parish are serving in a program entitled Teach For America (TFA). TFA is a program that aims to end educational inequity by recruiting recent college graduates who commit two years to **teach** and to **effect change** in under-resourced urban and rural public schools, in our nation's highest-poverty communities. TFA cites this fact: "Of the 13 million children growing up in poverty, about half will graduate from high school. Those who do graduate will perform on average at an 8<sup>th</sup> grade level of education." To help combat this problem, three in our parish family have accepted the challenge.

**Katie Feldt:** The 7:00 am mass crowd will recognize Katie Feldt since she volunteered her talents playing the organ at that mass while she was in high school- right up until she left for the University of Michigan. Katie was on track to graduate with a degree in Chemical Engineering and enjoyed the technical challenges. But her background of Catholic education at St. Mary's School and Muskegon Catholic H.S. had given her a heart for service, so in her junior year of college she led an Alternative Spring Break trip to Guatemala with her student parish in Ann Arbor. Katie was shocked that the children she was teaching had no books, paper, or food and often no homes, yet they were eager to come to school, to feel safe, to have Katie read and play with them. Katie decided that after graduation she would delay her Chemical Engineering career and spend time in service. She searched for a program that impacted education and found the TFA, learning that educational injustice is not limited to third-world countries but that it was prevalent here in big and small cities across America.

Katie trained for two months this past summer and in August began teaching ninth grade math at Abraham Lincoln High School in Denver, Colorado. Katie said, "I was prepared to help my students master the ninth grade standards and succeed, but what I didn't know was that I would need to teach some of them how to add, most of them how to work with negative numbers, and all of them the ever-elusive concept of the 'fraction'. How to take notes, what a complete sentence was, and what I meant when I said 'study' were soon added to the must-teach list. Add 150 sets of homework and quizzes to grade every week and endless mounds of school paperwork to fill out, and my life as a first year teacher was, needless to say, quite overwhelming." Despite the challenges, Katie has not regretted her decision and credits her students as the reason- all 158 of them. While juggling after-school jobs, younger siblings to take care of, and, in many cases rough family lives, Katie's students were even more determined to meet their class goal of 80% mastery of the Colorado State Math Standards. Katie feels privileged to see that despite assumptions of failure, her students **do** have what it takes, they **can** succeed on an absolute scale, and that as their teacher, she **is** making a difference in their lives. She admits that this experience has undoubtedly been the most challenging and most rewarding of her young life- one that will stay with her forever. Concluding her thoughts on her experience, Katie said "My faith is no longer only Sunday Mass or considering myself a Catholic. My faith is now **action**...my faith is service."

**Dan Holt:** Dan Holt graduated from Hope College in May with a Bachelors of Science in Chemistry. As a Varsity athlete at both Spring Lake H.S. and college, Dan learned a lot from his coaches and hoped to direct his love for basketball into coaching someday. He learned about the TFA Program and thought it would be a great way to experience different cultures outside of West Michigan while giving him an opportunity to help coach. Dan witnessed his parents serving the parish as Religious Education catechists, as chefs for parish dinners, and as ushers, so the call to serve was not foreign to him. He did two months of rigorous training in Los Angeles and began teaching Chemistry in the fall at John C. Fremont High School in South Los Angeles.

Fremont High is a 3-track high school (year round) with only 2-tracks of students in school at any given time due to the school's enrollment of 5000+ students (making it slightly larger than Spring Lake High School). Fremont is located in a neighborhood notorious for its gang violence and low-income households. Despite witnessing violence in his school and even on his basketball team, Dan found that students there not only have the potential to succeed, but they do so on a daily basis. Dan points to a young African-American student of his last semester, who came up to him a month before final exams (while carrying a 30% in his class) and asked, "Mr. Holt do you know that only 50% of African American males will graduate from Fremont?" Dan replied yes, upon which the student added, "I'm going to be one of them." That student then went on to pass Chemistry after receiving an 80% on the final exam. "It's experiences like these", Dan said, "that help me to believe that even though our nation still struggles to fix its educational inequities, it is a fight worth fighting."

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**Mollie Smith:** As an interpersonal communication major at Alma College, Mollie was required to take an internship before graduating. In the winter of 2006 she fulfilled that requirement, working as a Child Advocate Social Worker for Philadelphia's Public Defender's office. It was there that she met some amazing children who had lived through some very horrific experiences. Finding it difficult to leave them when her internship ended, Mollie wanted to continue in public life as an activist and a citizen. She had learned that these children and the educational systems could be helped through active involvement, if she was willing to make change happen. She wanted to service underprivileged children in more than a legal capacity- to help them to help themselves. She believed that the systems *can* be changed by observing them and then working *within* them to change the foundations, so she joined TFA. She is currently in her second year at Maritime Academy Charter High School in northeast Philadelphia. She is teaching ninth grade environmental science and twelfth grade watersheds and loves it, commenting: "My students are wonderful to work with and they make every day fun".

Now in her second year of teaching, Mollie has many stories of students triumphing over adversity but the one that changed her most was her work with a student named Charnae. When Charnae was 13, her mother abandoned her, packing up her things one morning and taking her to live with her grandmother. Charnae's mother wanted freedom that having a child didn't allow. The effect on Charnae was immediate-she was loud and obnoxious in class; it was her way of getting attention. She was constantly in trouble and had problems dealing with female authority figures. So when Charnae entered Mollie's classroom, Mollie admitted that she was nervous. She had heard that Charnae was rowdy, didn't do any of her work, and had been known to cause a scene. Mollie's worst fears were never realized because from the moment Charnae met Mollie last year, Mollie reached out to her and the two became instantly attached. Charnae was so close that she would call Mollie "momma," phoned her on a regular basis, and Mollie even started to take her (with permission from her grandmother) out to dinner and on extracurricular trips. Mollie was even invited by Charnae to her family Christmas party and her grandmother's wedding! Charnae is now a wonderful student whom Mollie believes just needed someone to challenge her and make her feel worthwhile. Mollie explained "Charnae taught me to value the relationships that I have with others, because they can be gone in an instant. This year she goes to a school that is closer to her house so she is no longer one of my students. She and I still have a close relationship, we keep in contact on a regular basis, and she is currently maintaining her 4.0 average. Students like Charnae keep me motivated- she is just one of the 120 students that have impacted my life."

These stories are uplifting, offering hope and encouraging young people to join in service programs- there are many available. Since 1956, **faith-centered programs** such as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) have grown. Volunteers make a year commitment to serve where the need is greatest, to work with people who are marginalized by society and to live in community with other JVs in the U.S. and in 7 other countries, living out a commitment to faith and justice. Chris Cassleman Jr. served one year at JVC East as an advocate for teen runaways through the Covenant House in New Jersey. He confirmed that service experiences are both illuminating and life changing. Another program is the Peace Corps, tracing its roots to 1960, when then Senator John F. Kennedy challenged students at the University of Michigan to serve their country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. **\*\*If you have examples of faith in service, please contact Mary at the parish office.\*\***



Katie Feldt with students



Mollie Smith with students