

# “Ruined for Life”

## LIVING THE JESUIT VOLUNTEER CORPS ETHIC

**Ed Fowler and Br. Chris Derby, SJ, have been ruined for life. Susan Foster and Skye Schell are still young, in their early twenties, but are perilously close to a similar fate. “I’m working on it,” says Schell. There are no laments, however.**

“*Ruined for Life*” is the informal credo of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), which began in 1956. Volunteers work with the poor for one or two years and live in community, frequently soon after college graduation, either in the United States or in Jesuit missions abroad. A few become Jesuits; most, however, return to their home communities, more aware of what they have seen and heard about JVC’s four main components: community, spirituality, simple living and social justice.



Ed Fowler

“It really opened my eyes to poverty,” says Ed Fowler, who became a Jesuit volunteer in 1992 soon after graduating from St. Louis University. He landed at “Neighbors Together,” a social service agency founded by Dominican Sisters in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, NY. In many ways, he never left. “I couldn’t just turn my back,” he says. He is now

executive director of the agency and regularly recruits Jesuit Volunteers who are devoted to helping the poor navigate the social service bureaucracy and locate decent and affordable housing.

Not all former Jesuit Volunteers end up as social workers. Yet, whether they become homemakers, lawyers, doctors or business people, the evidence is that they are indeed “ruined for life,” if that means that they look at the world differently than their peers.

A recent Fairfield University study of JVC grads backs up the assertion. Half work in social service fields. Almost all donate to charity, \$500 more per year than their peers without JVC experience. More than 80 percent volunteer in their churches and communities. They are socially and politically engaged: 92 percent voted in the last presidential election. One,



Chris Derby, SJ

Robert Casey Jr., was recently elected to the U.S. Senate from Pennsylvania.

Some find JVC an entrée into the world of Jesuit spirituality. Br. Chris Derby, SJ,

director of vocations for the Maryland and New York provinces of the Jesuits, came to JVC work at Nativity Mission Center on Manhattan’s Lower East Side soon after graduating from Kenyon College in Ohio.

The experience, says Chris, “is why I became a Jesuit.” There, while teaching middle school boys at Nativity School, he got to know Jesuits who inspired him with their commitment to social action, education and spirituality.



That commitment is carried on today at the “Neighbors Together” social service agency by Jesuit volunteer Skye Schell, a recent graduate in philosophy from Rice University in Houston.

It is late afternoon. Schell is on the phone, where he spends much of his work time. “Let me check on Medicaid,” he says, talking to a client as the sound of hip-hop emanates from the nearby kitchen, where a crew is cleaning up after the daily soup kitchen lunch at the center.

To another caller, he gives directions to a city agency in downtown Brooklyn. “If they send you away, come back here and we’ll see what’s going on,” he offers in an assuring tone.

Schell, relatively speaking, is a JVC veteran. Last year he worked in refugee resettlement in his home diocese of Arlington, VA, not far from Fairfax, where he grew up. While it is only a few hundred miles distant, Fairfax is a long way from the streets of Brownsville. Every night, Schell goes home to a JVC community

in nearby Bedford-Stuyvesant, where he lives with other young volunteers. “My job is to be the advocate for the people,” he says, noting he gets a view of the social service bureaucracy from the side of its clients. He hears lots of hard-luck stories and is convinced that many of the applicants who come to the modest storefront office have a right to services that are frequently denied by a bureaucracy under pressure to keep its rolls down in this era of government cost-cutting



*Skye Schell*

Schell credits his social consciousness to his parents and a semester he spent in Chile studying economic development. He found that much of what passes for social development continues the tired mantra of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. He is determined, in his own way, to do something about that.

Susan Foster grew up outside Portland, OR. From the Western mountains it is a long way to Harlem’s St. Aloysius School, where Foster works as a volunteer teacher’s aide and lives in a nearby apartment community with other Jesuit Volunteers.

Foster is a graduate of Oregon State, where she majored in theater. One appeal of New York, of course, is the Great White Way and all of its star-struck opportunities.



But for now, her work consists of helping third-graders with their lessons and at an after-school program. Her ultimate goal to use her theater gifts to help children express themselves.

Community life with other Jesuit Volunteers is a major focus of the JVC program. Foster lives with three other volunteers, all of whom go out daily for work in a housing agency, parish religious



*Susan Foster*

education and at Cristo Rey High School in East Harlem.

“It’s intentional community. We make time for each other,” says Foster, noting that shared meals and prayer, religious retreats and other activities make it a community that exists on a deeper plane than the usual twenty-somethings

sharing apartment space in Manhattan. Like the other JVC communities, Foster’s group has regular contact with a Jesuit liaison, in this case Peter Folan, S.J., a scholastic studying at Fordham University.

Foster has become imbued with the Jesuit spirit. She is particularly attracted to the concept of contemplation in action that Jesuits are known for.

“It’s a way to have a deep and personal spirituality and still be out in the

world doing the dirty work,” she says.

Folan, 28, plays a role of big brother to the young college grads he works with in the Harlem community, located in an apartment on 153<sup>rd</sup> Street. He is struck by the material sacrifices the volunteers make.



*Peter Folan, SJ*

Most come from middle-class homes, and have freely chosen poverty – they exist on a small stipend that they share with their community to pay for rent, food and other necessities.

While their good works are valuable, volunteers often bring up the learning through community as the most beneficial part of the JVC experience. This is how they learn the lessons in simple living and reliance on others, forged in the day-to-day reality of cooking, cleaning, praying and living together.

“Community is not just about having roommates. It’s about being deliberate and making people a part of your life. It’s challenging, especially if you end up with



*Ed Fowler with the kitchen crew at Neighbors Together*

people you might not normally be friends with,” says Folan.

He finds himself amazed at the transformation he sees in the young people who go through the JVC experience.

“They are in the crucible for a year,” he says. As a result, “it challenges them and it changes them.” He could even say, as so many Jesuit Volunteer Corps alumni have in the past, that they have been ruined for life. In a good way, of course.

*Community,  
Spirituality ...*



*... Simple Living,  
Social Justice*

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