

# Armchair College Fair

## Teacher learned about life as college volunteer

### Inspired by people

By Mary Elizabeth McNeil  
Guest contributor

As I took his plate, a man of about 60 eloquently said, "I'll have a cup of coffee and a fresh hot danish, please."

I smiled back at him and said, "Oh, I'm sorry sir, the danishes are still in the oven. How about something else?"

He responded by saying, "Well, then, I'll just have the usual."

This conversation could have occurred in a restaurant, bakery, or diner anywhere in the world, but it didn't. It happened at Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, 402 South Ave. There were no danishes in the oven and the homeless man knew it. He knew he would get eggs, sausage, home fries, and, most likely, a stale donut.

As I brought his meal, he touched my hand and said "thank you." As he said this, he looked so deeply into my eyes I believed he saw my spirit. He seemed to be asking, "What brought you here?"

For me, the road to St. Joseph's House was filled with many twists, turns and stops. The first stop brought me to Rochester's School No. 4, where I worked with kindergarten-age children. I entered the classroom, a 17-year-old college freshman, ready to save the world. The experience made me realize this goal would be a little bit harder to attain than I first thought.

I interacted with children who, on the outside, exuded a

spirit of life and innocence, but who were coming to school with empty stomachs, sleeping in empty houses, and hiding at any quick movement. They had already seen more violence in their young lives than I think I will ever witness in mine.

From this experience I learned there is something inside all of us that we can pass on to others who are facing challenges. This something is a human touch, compassion. It is giving of your inner spirit. I smiled, laughed, and hugged these children. I taught them what I knew about living and surviving in my world, hoping it would help them in theirs. Most importantly, I listened to their wisdom and inner thoughts.

I will never forget the child who drew a picture of himself and me, looking up to the sky for his father who had been killed. I am thankful for every second I spent with these children.

The next stop on my journey was one that I believe changed my life the most. During one of my spring breaks, I joined a group of Nazareth College students and staff for a trip to Nazareth Farm in Charleston, W. Va. The farm is a small Christian community staffed and run by volunteers who spend a week working alongside the Appalachian residents, repairing or building houses, painting, visiting the sick or homebound, or tutoring children.

The first day there I met Mary Knudsen. We were helping to build a foundation for a home for her and her family. Working conditions were somewhat primitive. There was no electricity or plumbing. Halfway through the day, Mary took me down the mountain to



Mary Elizabeth McNeil

her present home to get water.

As I walked into a clearing and saw an old broken-down bus, my breath was taken away as I realized this was where she lived. Tears sprang up in my eyes when I saw their bathtub sitting in the middle of the field

with logs underneath to heat the water. I continued on, afraid that Mary would see my shock. She looked at me and smiled a comforting smile.

During this visit to West Virginia and the two that followed, I visited shut-ins, planted trees to stop erosion, dug outhouses, put on siding and insulation, cleaned and painted a 90-year-old woman's house, and prepared a building intended to be a used-clothing store.

Much to my parents' distress, my 10-hour days included learning how to use a jigsaw, table-saw, and other power tools. At night I was so tired and sore I didn't know how I would continue, but each morning I woke up rejuvenated.

I worked alongside people who did not take food, shelter, warmth, or plumbing for granted. They had a strong sense of community and they showed me that happiness can be found

in a simple sunset, a mountain, a laugh, a conversation with friends, or a prayer.

It is these people — the woman who lived in a bus, the children who smiled in the face of adversity, and the man who asked for a danish — who taught me about life and living. It is their spirit that will encourage me to continue serving those in my community and beyond.

I am sharing my experiences with you, not that you will recognize my efforts, but that my story will inspire you to practice "random acts of kindness" and senseless acts of beauty," and to give the man his danish.

McNeil graduated from Nazareth College of Rochester — no relation to Nazareth Farm — in May. She volunteered at the farm on spring breaks from 1992-94. McNeil is now working as a special education teacher with the Pittsford School District, where she began teaching fifth grade this fall.

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