

Jesuit Volunteers follow pioneering tradition in Idaho

By Michael Brown
Editor

BOISE — In 1842, Jesuit Father Pierre DeSmet built Sacred Heart Mission in northern Idaho and helped chart the course of Catholicism in the state.

In August 2008, five college graduates from the Jesuit Volunteer Corps came to Boise, and only time will tell of their lasting impact. Their immediate effect has been incalculable on the lives of those most in need in the metro area and on the environment.

To those who helped to bring the JVs here and the children who enjoy their tutelage in one parish's religious education class, the effect is clear.

"It's awe inspiring," said Margaret McClean, a member of Risen Christ Parish.

One of the volunteers, Jennifer Popp, 22, teaches religious education at Risen Christ, and has made an impact on her students, prompting McClean to say, "It's inspiring the young people as well."

For Popp and her colleagues — Matthew Dickey, 23; Margaret Stewart, 23; Sara Wells, 23; and Theresa Bichsel, 22 — their year of service will be done in August. They, too, will feel the impact of their service, however, for a long, long time.

"You know what the motto of the Jesuit Volunteers is?" asked Jack McMahan, another member of Risen Christ.



IN THE TRADITION OF FATHER DESMET — Matthew Dickey, a Jesuit Volunteer serving in Boise and Nampa this year, is involved with English conversation classes with African refugees. (ICR photo)

"Ruined for life," he said with a smile.

Wells agreed. A resident of Columbus, Ohio, and graduate from that city's Capital University, she is working at Corpus Christi House, a day shelter where many of the clients are homeless. Her title is "Services Coordinator," said the English Literature graduate, but her ministry is listening.

"Listening is really important," she said, adding that the shelter allows her to provide "a ministry of

presence."

Besides that, Wells collects the mail and types a list of recipients alphabetically, a task that is especially important when a client's medication is delivered by mail. In the past, with no one specifically assigned to post a list, sometimes mail would get misplaced or undelivered.

Wells also hands out donated items such as passes to use the facilities at the downtown YMCA and bus passes. She was able to get

family passes to the Discovery Center, a children's museum downtown. It's sad, Wells noted, but there are a number of families who come to Corpus Christi because they have no other place to go.

"Seeing the kids is the worst part," she admitted.

Although her English degree may not play much of a role in her responsibilities at Corpus Christi, Wells said that she likes to write and use her creative skills as a way to separate her ministry from her home life. "That's the only way I survive some of these days," she added. "I hear a lot of sad stories."

Wells writes to her family and tells them what she does during the day — working with people with drug or alcohol problems, talking to others with mental illness or playing cards and listening to clients who might otherwise have no one to talk to.

"No one (at home) can really understand what it's like," she said, although after working in the environment the last seven months, to her, "it's just normal stuff."

"You don't need a social work degree to help people," she said. However, Wells added, the time here has given

her a clearer perspective that this is what she wants to do with her life.

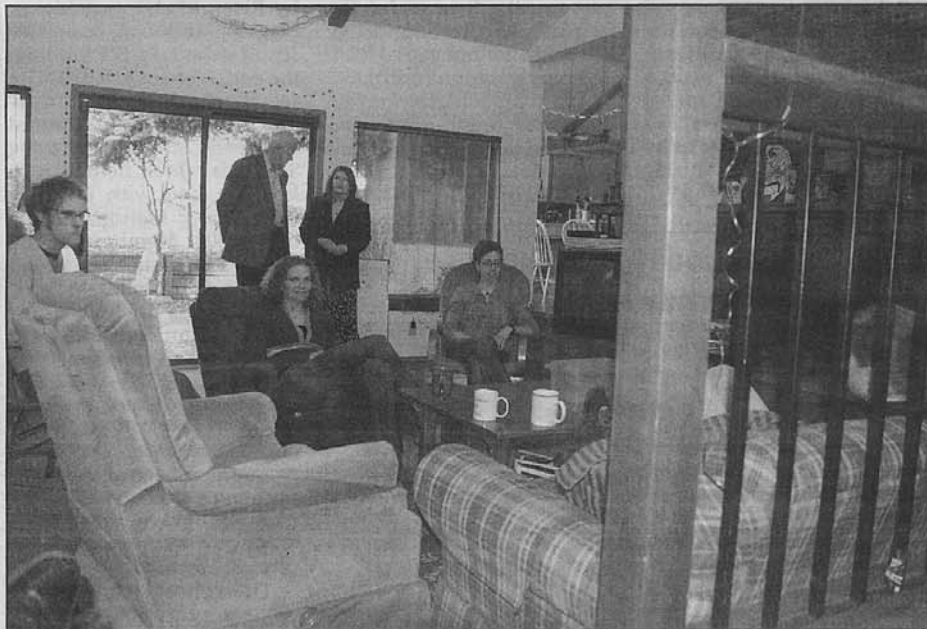
Wells said she's not sure what she'll do after her term expires in August, but it will likely involve service and a placement in another section of the country. "I really like Boise, but I want to explore a different place."

She knows that while she's done some good, Corpus Christi House will not collapse after she leaves. "They can survive without me."

Bichsel is a California native, graduating in 2007 with a degree in environmental science from Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, Cal. Her experience is quite different from her peers: While they are involved in direct services, Bichsel works at the Idaho Conservation League, which studies important environmental and health issues in the state.

Founded in 1973, the ICL is Idaho's largest state-based conservation group. Some might question the role that an environmental group has in Catholic ministry, but the main components of JVC mission are simplicity, community, social justice and spirituality.

See "PIONEER," page 6



JESUIT VOLUNTEERS RELAX — Members of the initial group of the Jesuit Volunteer Corp unwind at their residence near Catholic Charities of Idaho's West Central office in Boise. From left are Matthew Dickey, Risen

Christ parishioner Jack McMahan, Theresa Bichsel, Risen Christ parishioner Margaret McClean and Sara Wells. With her back to the camera is Margaret Stewart and absent in this photo is Jennifer Popp. (ICR photo)

Pioneer

Continued from page 5

That means, said Bichsel, that whether its protecting endangered species or habitats, or working to protect drinking water supplies, her efforts are part of the group's mission.

"Our groundwater has the potential to be seriously compromised," she said.

The ICL has divided her time into three duties: public land protection, administrative work and community conservation. The first duty required that she travel to sites around the state to update and assess targeted sites. The next duty, which she is currently focused on, involves administrative responsibilities. The last duty will require educating the public and local leaders to try to stiffen the state's environmental protection laws.

Right now, for instance, she's sifting through data to get a better focus on whether water conditions throughout the state are meeting federal standards.

Bichsel said she was concerned that rising levels of mercury in area fish stocks pose a significant health hazard, particularly to young children and pregnant women, who are especially susceptible to mercury poisoning. State agencies and the legislature are reluctant to implement a cap, even a voluntary mark, on the amount of mercury re-

leased into the atmosphere.

"It's heartbreaking in a way," she said, although "I feel like there's change coming."

Bichsel said there were advantages and disadvantages to the work she's doing, compared to the other volunteers. "In general, I think the public is more sympathetic to what I'm doing," but acknowledged that she felt a little frustrated.

"I did want more direct services," Bichsel said, although she can still volunteer at direct service sites during her free time.

Bichsel is planning to pursue law studies, specializing in environmental law and urban planning, when her term expires.

Dickey earned a bachelor's in fine arts from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Ill., and if Bichsel has a specific focus, Dickey serves a plethora of needs. He's at Catholic Charities of Idaho's Emerald office and at the Salvation Army. He's involved in an English conversational class with refugees, most of whom are from Africa. He is also a case manager at Nampa's Salvation Army center, working with seven local clients.

Dickey landed in Boise by a different route than his peers. They were placed here by JVC Northwest — the autonomous regional branch of the national group. Dickey enrolled



LIVING QUARTERS — Jesuit Volunteers Jennifer Popp, Matthew Dickey and Sara Wells share a light moment at their residence. Popp and Wells share this room, and two other female volunteers share a bedroom on a lower level. Dickey has a smaller, single room. (ICR photo)

in the program through JVC East, but the placement there fell through. He later was contacted by JVC Northwest which gave him a choice of Boise or Bethel, Alaska.

"I chose Boise," he said.

Dickey's hoping to serve a second year in the JVC, although it's not likely to be in Boise.

Stewart, an Oregon native, graduated from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Wash., with majors in Spanish and Global Studies. She works with Dickey in the conversational English class and also looks for housing and employment for those seeking help from Catholic Charities in Boise. She works with counterparts in the state Dept. of Labor and has witnessed firsthand the frustration faced by many looking for jobs during the economic downturn.

After her tour is finished, Stewart said she is thinking about returning to school, but is unsure at this point.

Popp earned a degree from Marquette University, Milwaukee, studying accounting and marketing, and hails from Maple Grove, Minn. Her ministry has several main thrusts: she is a life skills trainer for men and women, a representative payee for low-income clients unable to manage money, and oversees two homes for women trying to recover from substance or alcohol abuse or transitioning from prison into society. It is under the auspices of the Supportive Housing and Innovative Partnerships program (SHIP).

As a representative payee, Popp has found such success at dealing with difficult clients that local courts have recommended her following

adjudications.

In the transitional housing program, she has been able to tap into clients' personal strengths and convert it into skills that will help them find jobs once they leave the program, she said. Despite her accounting background, "I knew I wanted to work in a non-profit," Popp said.

Popp is a house manager and her supervisors hope to entice her to stay on even after her JVC time is done.

McMahon said that bringing the JVs to Boise was the result of a vision provided by Risen Christ parishioner Meghan McDonagh, a former Jesuit volunteer. For funding, the parish spent \$15,000 of its regular allocation for community outreach and partnered with each of the sponsoring agencies which helped with funding, and with Catholic Charities of Idaho throwing in \$10,000. Members of the parish's women's group and Knights of Columbus worked on preparing the house.

McMahon said he had talked to the JVs during their orientation in Oregon and met them there to transport them to Boise last August. Their enthusiasm, interactions and energy have been a blessing to watch and a lesson about today's young people, he added. "This is what's meaningful to this generation."

Their efforts have exceeded expectations, McClean said. "It's been terrific, just to hear about the benefits. It's everything we dreamed of."

Editor's note: While Risen Christ is hoping to fund another team of volunteers, Catholic Charities of Idaho is struggling to come up with money for next year. To make a donation to CCI for a JVC team, call Christopher Smith at CCI at 345-6031, or send a check to CCI, 1501 South Federal Way, Ste. 450, Boise, Idaho, 83705.