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My housemates surprised me with birthday decorations. (Celine Reinoso)



by Celine Reinoso

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Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015. This is our 11th round of bloggers: Celine Reinoso is a Loretto Volunteer in El Paso, Texas, and Maria Longo is a Notre Dame AmeriCorps volunteer in the Bronx, New York.*

As I like to define it, I just completed another rotation around the sun. I celebrated my birthday April 20, and like many other birthdays for my introverted self, I spent it relaxing at home. I often prefer chill nights in with my family and friends over extravagant parties and dancing all night, but this year, I didn't even get to choose.

My housemates and friends (at a safe social distance) still made the day feel special despite the limitations on our celebration. I received phone calls from family members and wishes for happiness and health from friends who are away from me at the moment. I had much more alone time, so my birthday felt different this year, but it was a celebration of life nonetheless.

During those moments of quiet, I let myself reflect on my life so far and yet to come. Really, I have been doing that quite often during quarantine. During this transition, I have been struggling with the concept of my purpose, especially since the reason I am in El Paso is to serve, but that is exactly what I cannot do right now. After falling into a period of hopelessness and depression, I have emerged with a realization that I can still serve, but it might look different for the meantime.

To celebrate users' birthdays, Facebook allows people to post online fundraisers for their chosen nonprofit. Given the current state of the world, it was clear to me that I would invite my social media network to donate to COVID-19 efforts.

I brainstormed different needs organizations are addressing: drives for personal protective equipment; handmade masks; food boxes; people infected in prisons and detention centers; domestic violence victims stuck at home; and free virtual counseling and psych consultations. I found hundreds of fundraisers online, from small efforts by local El Pasoans to global fundraisers led by the United Nations. Each one I found recalled my vision of a world that runs on support, love and community. Any of those fundraisers would have been great for my birthday post, but something in me wanted to make it more personal.

During this global pandemic, I have been paying attention to what is going on in the Philippines. Rather unintentionally, I have been keeping updated through my family group chats and messages with my Filipino friends. Soon, I understood how the Philippine government was failing its constituents and leaving them to fend for themselves.

When I shared the news with my housemates, they were shocked at the lack of media coverage about the Philippines. I then realized I had a special role to bring awareness of that crisis to my network, composed mostly of people living in the U.S. Despite being stuck at home, I am still able to inform the public of what is going on in my other home thousands of miles across the Pacific.

Hoping to shed light on my personal experience and difficulties during self-isolation, I decided to support a group of mental health advocates for health professionals working against COVID-19 in the Philippines. While searching through all the amazing groups that are taking action and sourcing aid for the workers and affected communities, I noticed that many of them were addressing the same needs: food, disinfecting supplies, equipment and masks. It's no surprise that even the basic needs of Filipinos are left unmet by the government and that individuals had to step in.

I found the Help for Health Movement, a group of self-organized advocates trying to meet not only the basic needs of communities, but to offer mental health support in this trying time. The funds raised are going to "Hugot Packs" filled with personal protective equipment, disinfection products, food, energy drinks, vitamins, and notes of support and appreciation for Filipino medical professionals working on the front line. The word "hugot," as I understand it, is a Filipino term to describe the letting-go of suppressed, negative emotions. In the description of the fundraiser, organizers wrote: "Para may mapaghugutan sila ng lakas sa gitna ng laban sa COVID-19," which roughly translates to: "So that they can release what they are holding in the middle of the fight against COVID-19."

On Facebook for my birthday, I decided to share with my friends what the movement's work means to me, as someone struggling with her mental health. I can't begin to imagine how difficult it might be for health care workers with mental health diagnoses who are working against a virus that seems like it has no end. I invited people to celebrate my life by showing support for those who exemplify the meaning and importance of their patients' lives each day.

I realized this small gesture I made came from the same place as my service work with the women at the shelter. I felt the same empathy and compassion I feel for my clients, for my fellow Filipinos working and resisting every day. Just like during my meetings with the residents, I am advocating for health care workers' mental health, rights and dignity. Self-isolation hasn't stopped my activism and service in the fight for social justice, but it has challenged me to advocate in new ways. Service for me looks very different now, but it is not any less important or worthy of my energy.

[Celine Reinoso is a Loretto Volunteer in El Paso, Texas, working at Villa Maria, a transitional homeless shelter for women.]

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