Blog
Ministry



The Little Free Pantry in front of the Denver Loretto Volunteer House is stocked with dry food products and personal hygiene products like deodorant, menstrual care items, toothpaste and wipes. Also inside is a pocket with lists of other resources in the area and a pocket with paper and pen for notes. (Ali Alderman)



by Ali Alderman

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Denver — November 18, 2020

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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. We are beginning our 12th round of bloggers: Ali Alderman is a Loretto Volunteer in Denver; Maddie Thompson is a Good Shepherd Volunteer in Wickatunk, New Jersey; and Celina Kim Chapman is a Good Shepherd Volunteer in New York City. This is Ali's first blog post. Read more about her.*

It begins with a box.

During our first few days together as a house, my fellow Denver Loretto Volunteers and I put on our best gardening gear and embarked on a yard cleanup day. It was midmorning in late August, and the sun greeted us kindly and graciously. So did our coffee.

With knees and fingers in the ground, I thought about the beauty of clearing and turning the soil of our garden just as each of us were beginning the labor of rooting into Denver. It wasn't entirely romantic, though: Goathead poked my skin, my muscles tired quickly from all the pulling, and I still wasn't quite sure how to make conversation with my new housemates.



The Little Free Pantry in front of the Denver Loretto Volunteer House (Ali Alderman)

When I made my way to a back-and-away corner of the yard, I found the dilapidated skeleton of what used to be a Little Free Library. Unfinished, filled with leaves and with a dysfunctional latch, my next project rested atop its rickety post and tiredly leaned against the fence.

Between the next several weekends that I spent fixing up this new addition to our home, I began my work with my service-year placement, the Urban Peak Drop-In Center. I work as an outreach case manager serving youth experiencing homelessness in the Denver area, and the work is invigorating. Read also: exhausting, frustrating, life-giving, joy-bearing, challenging beyond belief sometimes.

I have spent much of my brainpower in the last few months considering the role of small works — like much of what I do at the drop-in center — in the face of big issues. We focus on meeting our clients' basic needs, like access to personal hygiene items, showers, meals, a place to nap. With our noses up against the canvas, as I often feel during my workdays, it is so easy for the edges of the big picture to feel impossibly distant.

Even though I've only been there a short while, I've found myself slipping into bouts of deep disillusionment with helping. Why bother with these itty-bitty Band-Aids when the wounds are so deep and so wide?

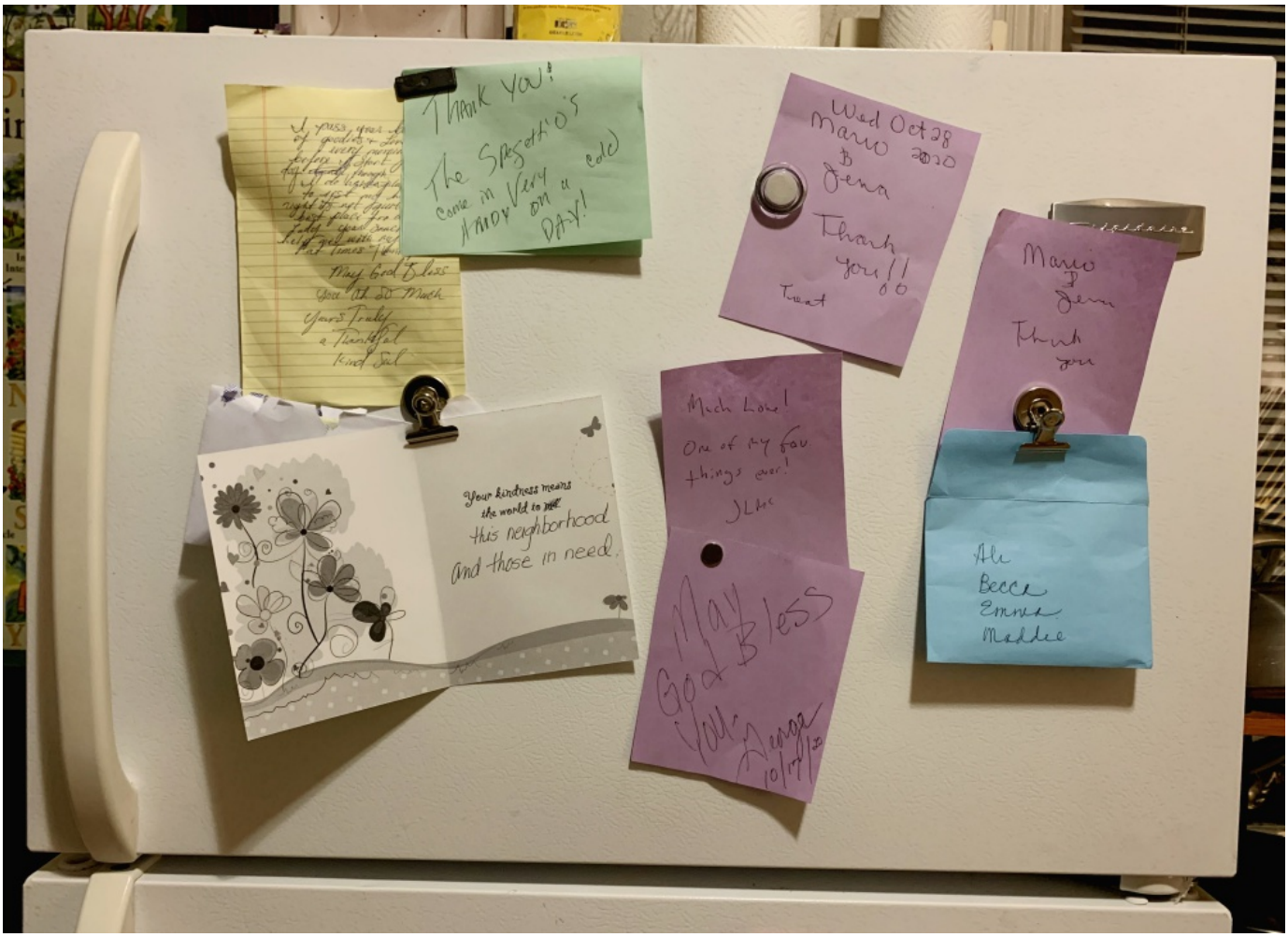
And then I think about my little box in front of our home, transformed with love and some elbow-grease into a Little Free Pantry. Rather than books, as it was originally designed to house, the box is stocked with canned goods, hygiene products, snacks and whatever others give us.

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Its face reads, "Take what you need, leave what you can," an invitation for all members of our community to participate, no barriers or requirements. Amazingly, with the support of the Loretto Community and our neighbors, we have not yet had to purchase anything ourselves to stock the food pantry.

This project certainly is not even a beginning to tackling the monsters of poverty, food insecurity, homelessness and other issues that would force a person to rely on our Little Free Pantry. We outfitted the inside with resource sheets that offer phone numbers and addresses for all kinds of service providers in the area, in the hopes that the needs we so clearly can't meet in our 2-foot-by-2-foot box can be met elsewhere. Even still, I feel our little box tugging our neighborhood closer together.

Every day after work, I check the pantry. I look for what is going quickly and needs restocking (usually soap and toothpaste) and what has been sitting for a while (macaroni and cheese, dried lentils, canned sweet potatoes). My favorite part of the pantry, though, is our little notes pocket, welcoming folks to leave us a message.



The Denver Loretto Volunteer House fridge is covered in notes from patrons and supporters of the Little Free Pantry. (Ali Alderman)

I had hoped people would tell us things they needed or wanted so we could better stock it, but instead, we've only received words of kindness and encouragement. Truly, my favorites are those that simply say that our little box is a great idea. I like to think those come from folks who don't really need what is inside the box, and instead, they walk away with some inspiration, or at least the intention to return with something they can afford to give. Every note makes it to our fridge door, and I find a lot of hope in those small purple pages.

In my debate about whether my work or this Little Free Pantry matters, I've come to believe that if taking care of the small things can help relieve that stress from even a handful of people so they can instead focus on anything else — perhaps something other than surviving — then it is worth it. (I'm sure Abraham Maslow would agree with me.) Sure, like my time spent in the garden where this all began, it's often not glamorous or comfortable. It is miles short of enough, but it is still good.

Just as I have begun rooting into this community, so has this little box, this little place of give-and-take that is proof to me that small drops in the bucket still matter. It is a gift to give. It is a gift to always be clean and full.

[Ali Alderman is a Loretto Volunteer working with youth experiencing homelessness as an outreach case manager with Urban Peak in Denver.]

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.