Blog
Spirituality



A film photo of my community and me (left) in the beginning of our service year in August 2020 (Provided photo)



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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.*

I cannot comprehend how in one year I graduated university and received my bachelor's degree, lived in three different homes (one in Queens, New York, one in Connecticut, and now one here in Washington Heights, New York) and started an adventure of a lifetime with Good Shepherd Volunteers. I also cannot fathom how that all happened during a global pandemic. This year seemed to simultaneously fly by, but also last a lifetime.



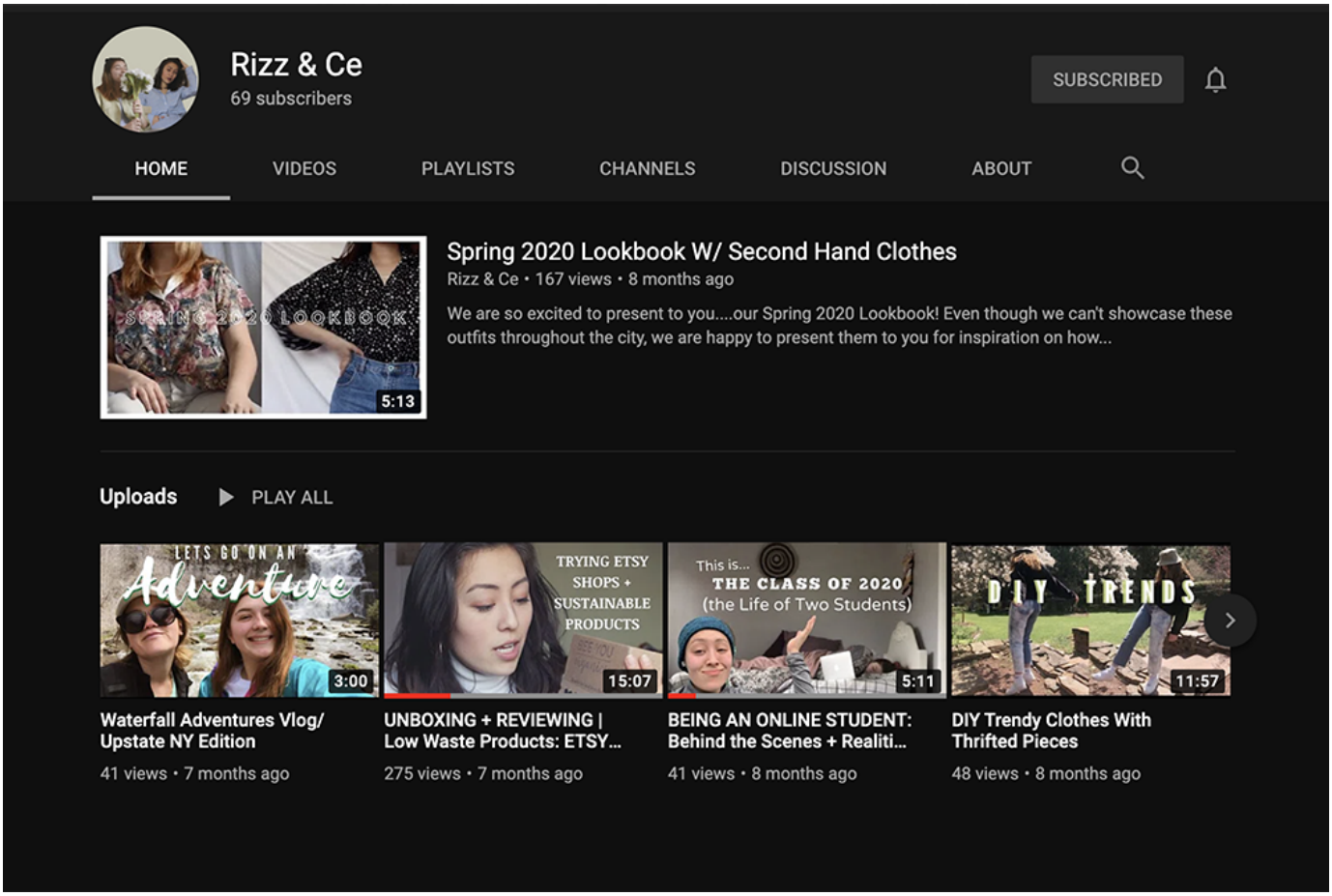
Celebrating New Year's Eve in 2019 with my partner (Provided photo)

It feels like I graduated university years ago, but it also feels like I'm still in school. It feels like all year I've been stuck at home, but technically I've been traveling and moving from place to place. I want to take a minute to recognize the complete change of life that has happened to me from January 2020 to now. I didn't even think that I was going to do a service year, but I am four months in and quickly chugging along into the upcoming new year.

On Dec. 31, 2019, I was on Long Island with my partner, celebrating a new decade with over 30 people. Everyone kept making the joke, "I'm ready to have 2020 vision," but I guess we didn't realize that receiving clarity in our lives wasn't going to be a linear path. I thought this was going to be *my* year. I was entering my final semester at St. John's University, and even though I didn't know what I wanted to do as a career, I knew that I had good people by my side to help me through.

Around that time, my close friend Marissa (also known as Rizz) and I decided to start a YouTube channel and actually begin pursuing our dream of buying and refurbishing a van, and driving across the country. Writing this feels a bit odd — that fantasy of living in a moving home and seeing the United States seems like a figment of my imagination now. We made real, concrete plans at the beginning of January to make this happen after we graduated in May.

Rizz and I began posting on YouTube once a week and then tried bumping it up to two. We wanted to gain more views on our videos before we started our van journey, so we could possibly make a profit off our videos. Around February, we began looking at vans in person. We went on Facebook Marketplace and met up with various people around the New York City metro area to review different vehicles that could potentially be our new home. Everything was coming to fruition, and I was finally getting a grip on life — that is, until March hit.



My close friend Rizz and I started this YouTube channel. We gained 69 subscribers and over 200 views on some videos. (Provided photo)

For St. John's University, spring break is typically earlier than other universities because we also get an Easter break (since we are a Catholic school). Rizz, my roommate Emily and I decided to venture to Boston the last week of February — first week of March for our spring break. News of a fast-spreading virus was in the air, but we thought nothing of it. Rizz and I even made fun of Emily for wearing a mask on the bus. We kept saying, "Stop doing that — you look so weird!" Little did we know that we should've been following her lead.

To say this year was nothing I could have ever pictured is an understatement, and I think many people could say the same. Back at the end of January and beginning of February, I applied for Good Shepherd Volunteers, but I was completely unsure if I wanted to do a service year. I only applied for it as a backup plan in case the van didn't work out, and it was the only organization I applied to because of the placement sites and location. I've done direct service my whole life (like teaching in classrooms, working in food pantries, and cleaning up gardens), and I wanted to

experience the support side of it all.



Graduating from my hometown and trying to make the best of it by taking a fun photoshoot in May 2020 (Provided photo)

After March, my entire worldview shifted. COVID-19 cases began rising quickly, universities slowly canceled in-person classes for the rest of the semester, and many began canceling graduations. One by one, I saw all my plans crumble. Rizz moved back to her home in upstate New York, and we tried making YouTube videos separately. I also left my home in Queens, and moved back into my parents' home in

Connecticut for the first time in four years. I don't think I was depressed, but continually confused and paralyzed by the constant blows to my what was supposed to be my "perfect" year.

In every moment of disappointment, I kept trying to find a silver lining. Since I was able-bodied and my family was OK with it, I worked at a grocery store during the peak of the pandemic (from March to June) to make some extra money to finish paying my rent in Queens. I completed my final semester of university through a screen, and attended a virtual graduation in my own living room. Good Shepherd Volunteers decided to continue their program and they accepted me for the anti-racism and equity position for the 2020-2021 year.

In comparison to everyone else, my life was going a lot better than the usual. I had an income, I had a support system, and I had plans after university that would help propel me into my future. I am so grateful for the blessings in my life, but that isn't to say that missing so much of these huge moments in my life was a walk in the park. Reflecting back on it, I kept moving forward because I felt like if I took a pause to see what was happening to me, I would be disappointed.



A selfie of me, about to go into work at the grocery store in June 2020 (Provided photo)

Taking a holiday break during a service year

Writing all that brings me to an essential part of a service year: reflection. Within this program, we are allotted 10 vacation days and in my placement site, we only get Christmas Eve and Christmas Day off as well as New Year's Day (like any typical office). I took half days on the Dec. 23 and Dec. 29 and New Year's Eve. As much as I

took these days off to rest and enjoy the ending of a hectic year, I also wanted a moment to reflect upon my life without distractions. So far, during the Christmas holidays, I have been able to find these pauses to think about the upcoming New Year. I've asked myself: How do I make next year better? How can I accept what has happened and continue moving forward?

In my view, humans tend to like concrete endings and beginnings. We like natural pauses and restarts. Maybe it's the way school has trained us to think that these breaks are necessary throughout the school year, but does it actually just train us to exhaust ourselves until the next break, where we can then rest before jumping back in again? Maybe this mindset is dangerous. After a break, we may come back rejuvenated, but does this pause in our workload only give us an excuse to drain our batteries again until we have to recharge at the next break? The weekend is a prime example of this cycle. We strive to overachieve in our jobs all week, only to crawl to the weekend on a sliver of hope that we'll get enough rest to make it through another tough week.

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Well, I am done "making it through." I've had enough of surviving and doing what I need to until the weekend. As much as I've avoided thinking about this year, sitting and truly looking back at my decisions has made me realize that I need to give myself more breaks, not just ones for the holidays. If I've learned anything from the past four months of my service year (and from the entire year), it's that self-care is not a luxury — it's a necessity. When I realized I had no official weeklong school break, I was completely devasted. This is my first year out of school, so I'm not used to this type of schedule.

Also, I practically needed a month off to recuperate from this crazy year, but my service year and the values of Good Shepherd Volunteers have helped me understand how the best way to help people is to sometimes help yourself. If we take care of ourselves all year, maybe a holiday break won't seem as necessary because we've already been giving ourselves the necessary breaks to live a fulfilling and plentiful life.

My path this year completely fell to my faith, and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. If it is necessary to trust in God's plan to truly find peace, then this year

really proved to me how the unseen can be the greatest gifts and the already seen can be lessons learned and loved. There is nothing to leave behind in 2020 because everything I have experienced will make 2021 an incredible journey.

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