Blog



One of my favorite ways to spend my time in 2020 was hiking. This local trail is part of the amazing Monmouth County Park system. (Maddie Thompson)



by Maddie Thompson

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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.*

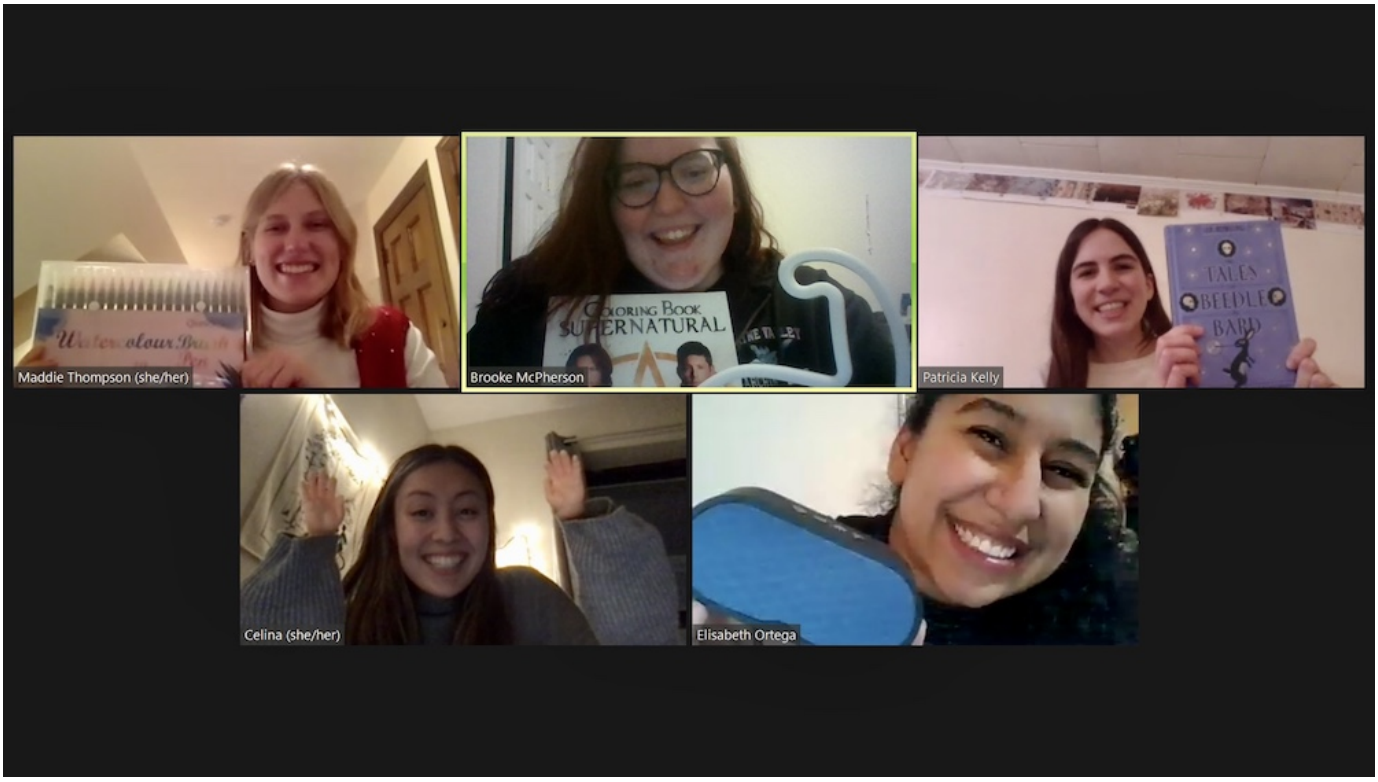
Sighs of relief, heartfelt reflections and buckets of hope ushered in the first few hours of 2021. On social media, I glimpsed what many missed out on in 2020 through pictures of pre-pandemic times and captions that discussed the unraveling of plans. Travel, graduations, family get-togethers, weddings and more were put on pause. Yet, I was amazed by the way many people found unexpected joy, new interests and creative connectedness during a year of great pain and loss.

A part of me avoided trying to look back on the year to summarize its highs and lows. If I am honest, I would rather keep my head down and simply continue taking things one day at a time while coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. I tried to scroll past New Year's Eve resolutions and reflections, desiring to treat the first day of 2021 like any other day this past year. I moved away from planning for perfection. Instead, I tried to commit once again to the imperfect practice of simply showing up and making room for the unexpected.

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When I expected to find myself in the West or Midwest, I applied to Good Shepherd Volunteers based in the Northeast. When I expected to serve in a city, I ended up serving at a more rural site. When I expected to live in a community with other volunteers, I found myself living independently next to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

Plans, goals and commitments can be wonderful and beautiful things; however, 2020 reminds me again and again that beauty and grace can also be encountered in the unexpected when I am willing to make room.



My fellow Good Shepherd Volunteers and I open each other's Secret Santa gifts over Zoom. (Brooke McPherson screenshot)



A view of the sun after days of heavy snow, taken from the train tracks nearest to Collier High School in Wickatunk, New Jersey (Maddie Thompson)

My service year so far at Collier High School has been filled with nothing but the unexpected. I have built and sustained community with other Good Shepherd Volunteers over the phone, via group texts, and through monthly virtual gatherings. I have embraced the beauty of the rural land and forest that Collier sits on by hiking, biking and exploring its trails. I have laughed, shared meals, and supported my alma mater by watching Notre Dame football games with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. I have aided with a career assessment course when I myself am still

exploring careers. I have leaned into temporary remote learning when needed and adapted to social distancing and safety precautions when on campus. I have joined a local pottery class and picked up crocheting in my free time. I have continued to look for small glimpses of beauty in the unexpected and gradually carve out space for the unexpected to share its many gifts.

As the fall semester came to a close, staff and students prepared to wrap up assignments, engage in holiday traditions, wear festive sweaters, open surprise gifts, devour winter treats and dishes, and say meaningful goodbyes before winter break. However, the last full week of school ended with a snow day trifecta: a half-day on Wednesday before the roads got icy, a full snow day on Thursday, and a delayed start and virtual learning day Friday. That same weekend, we found out the school would be switching to remote learning the final half-week of the semester because of COVID-19 concerns. A semester like no other ended in the only way we could expect: unexpectedly.

As students and staff reunited on campus last week, I could not be with them in person, as I was quarantining after traveling home to be with my family over the holiday break. The familiar hellos and after-break questions greeted students as they walked into each class. As I joined classes virtually, I witnessed the fresh start a new year brings. Studio arts with Ms. Raybon, in particular, embraced this feeling of hope ushered in by the new year.



A glimpse inside the Thompson Park Creative Arts Center, where I take weekly pottery classes. I love getting off-campus and engaging in the creative and challenging task of working with clay. (Maddie Thompson)

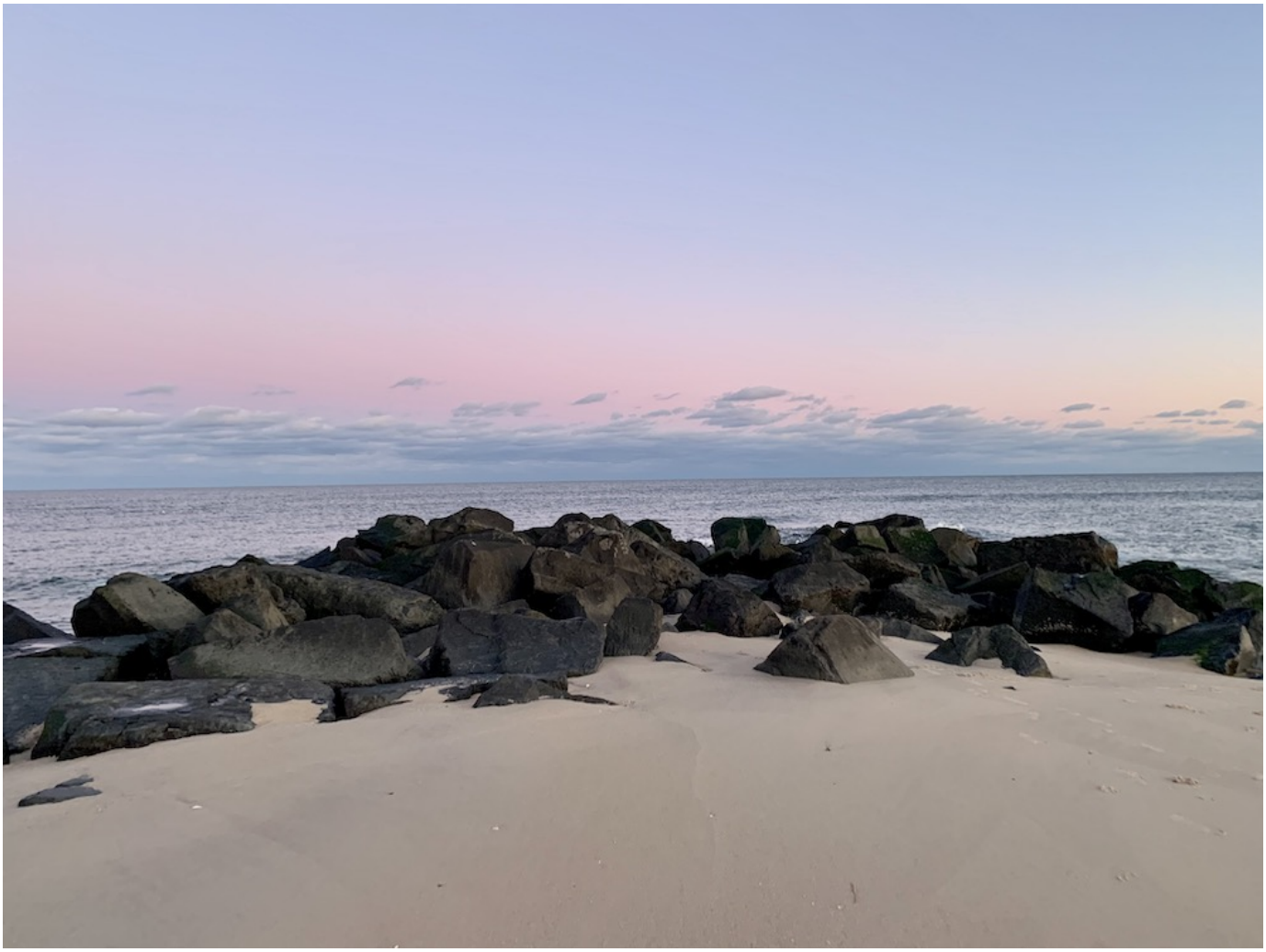
Ms. Raybon introduced a class activity from tThe New York Times article "Draw the Year Ahead." Students were asked to draw symbols representing what they wanted more of in 2021 on the left side of their page and what they wanted less of in 2021 on the right.

Quickly, ideas began to pop into my head as I participated alongside the students. I wanted more creativity, hiking, travel, health, pottery, learning, handwritten letters and sunshine.

When thinking of what I wanted less of in 2021, I immediately wanted to draw a symbol for the unexpected. But as I reflected on what the unexpected has gifted me

even amid loss, I began to move away from wanting less of it. I was reminded that in some strange way, the unexpected year of 2020, while burdened with pain, brought with it much to be thankful for: a year of service, hiking, open space, time, hobbies, creativity, quiet, new connections, and the gift of Collier.

I once again find myself grateful for the people and places that journeyed with me through the year of unexpected loss, unexpected change and unexpected gifts. May 2021 bring with it a little more of the unexpected, and may we be willing to show up and make space for it.



A winter trip to the New Jersey coastline brought unexpected beauty, even while bundled up in layers to keep warm. (Maddie Thompson)

[Maddie Thompson is a Good Shepherd Volunteer serving at Collier High School in New Jersey.]

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