Blog
Social Justice



The sun setting on the Collier High School campus one evening. The beauty of the Collier campus continues to refresh staff and students even amid a difficult year. (Maddie Thompson)



by Maddie Thompson

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

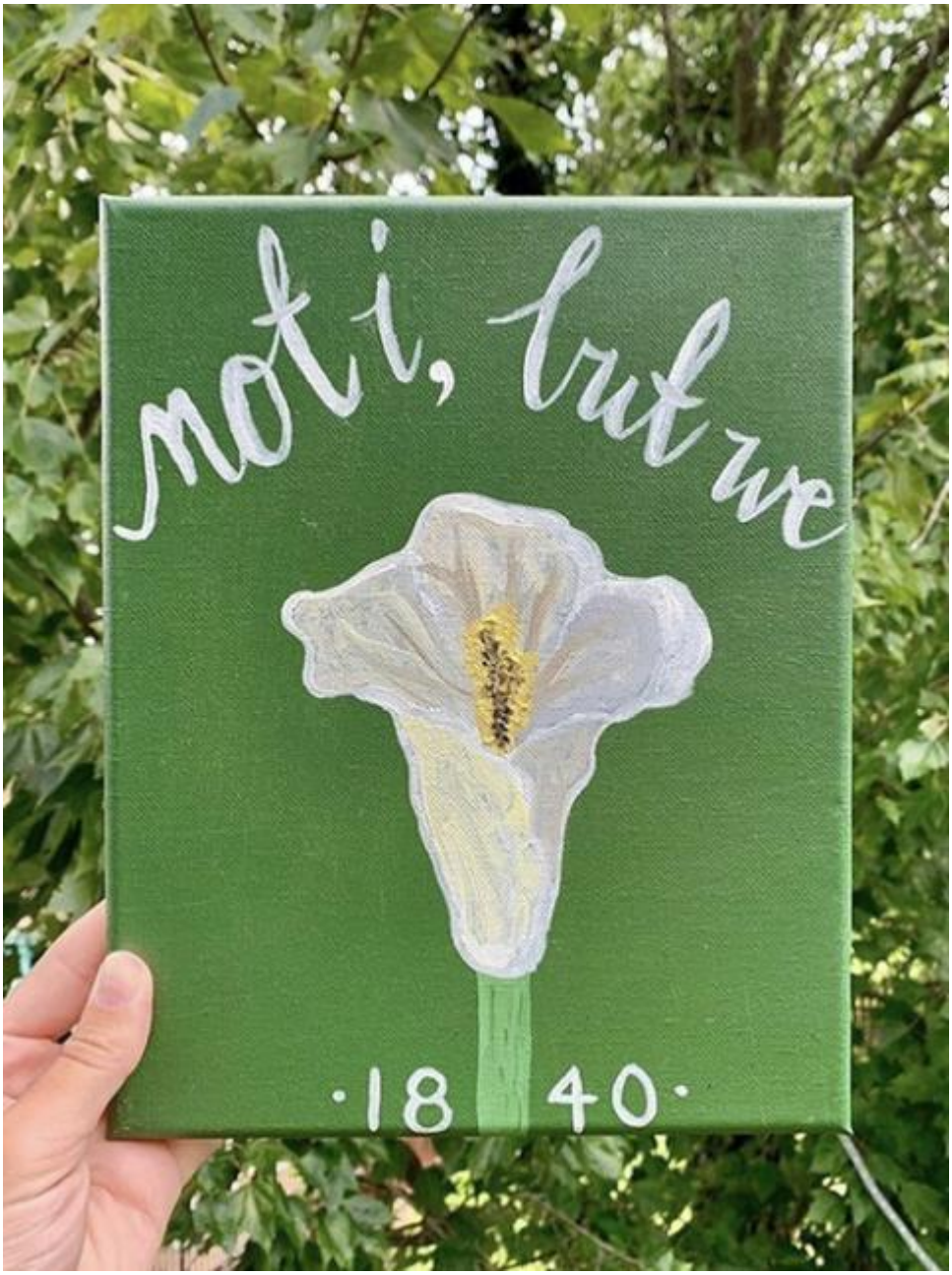
Wickatunk, New Jersey — January 27, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

During my first week of orientation as a Good Shepherd Volunteer, I signed into my Collier email account to be greeted by messages of welcome from soon-to-be colleagues.

One heartfelt email was filled with sincere thanks for accepting the invitation to serve at such a special place this year. The author introduced himself and explained his many roles at Collier High School, including co-adviser of Model United Nations. In that introductory email, he extended an invitation to me to get involved with Model U.N. despite not knowing what these conferences might look like in this year like no other.

The opportunity to work alongside students through Model U.N. and to dive into the Collier community excited me, especially as many clubs and activities were put on hold because of the pandemic. As I accepted the invitation, I thought about the bravery it would take for students to engage in these groups when the politics of the world around them were so divided. Stories of climate damage, racial injustice, the spreading pandemic and more gripped headlines each day. To engage in politics as a high school student today is a beautiful and courageous sign of resilience.



My high school, St. Joseph's Academy in St. Louis, Missouri, instilled their motto of "Not I, But We" into me when I was a student there. St. Joseph's Academy was where the seed of civic engagement was planted in me as I participated in Model U.N. conferences and co-founded an Active Citizenship group alongside friends. I painted the school motto and flower as a gift for my sister when she graduated from high school. (Maddie Thompson)

I thought back to my own experiences as a high school student in St. Louis, Missouri. I had been involved in local Model U.N. conferences through an organization called Civitas-STL and even co-founded an Active Citizenship club at school alongside two

friends. Conversations about politics, discussions about injustices, and exposure to global policies often sailed right over my head, but I nonetheless felt a desire to be in these spaces, to learn from my peers, and to begin the work of educating myself on the issues plaguing our planet.

At the time, I did not know where I stood on many major issues; however, I loved every opportunity to hear from local leaders and explore my home city of St. Louis. I enjoyed spending a week each summer at Civitas-STL's Urban Go-Team program, learning more about racial injustice, policing, polling and voting in my broader St. Louis community.

As the years passed, I have been incredibly grateful for the opportunities to engage in local politics and activism as well as to learn about the larger policies and conflicts affecting our country and world. Supporting Collier students in their own civic engagement was truly a gift.

To prepare for the Greater Philadelphia YMCA's virtual Model U.N. conference during the first week of January, the group's co-advisers committed to meeting with students weekly after school for an hour over Zoom throughout the fall. Our students researched their country assignments, gradually gathering information about their geographic location, economic status, allies, past or present conflicts, major issues and more. Students who were Model U.N. veterans offered advice to newcomers while we all approached the unknown of what a virtual conference might hold.

I was inspired by the students' willingness and commitment to show up each week to learn, converse with one another, and prepare for a conference like no other. They modeled real civic engagement in choosing to dive into difficult conversations and hours of research despite the chaos of this year. COVID-19 has given people around the world a valid excuse to take a break from their regular day-to-day routines; however, these students chose instead to engage and take part in the world happening around them, despite its messiness.



The art I own tells the stories of people and places that have shaped me. These cork boards fill my apartment with reminders of why I serve and engage in the world. The art pieces, prayers and places that hang on my wall inspire me to engage in the world around me and work for peace and justice despite division. (Maddie Thompson)

As the virtual conference began at the start of 2021, I stood in awe as students debated and proposed resolutions for important topics, such as responding to natural disasters, using energy responsibly, caring for the underprivileged and transforming conflicts. Nearly 1,000 students engaged in this virtual conference from high schools near and far. I truly believe these students were not simply modeling what might take place at the United Nations, but planting the seeds for a future harvest.

While Collier students made up only a small percentage of the overall Model U.N. delegation, they brought with them the energy and encouragement from staff, administration, peers and family. Staff members reached out to send best wishes to

our students before the conference commenced. The students, filled with a mix of excitement and nerves, joined the virtual conference with the knowledge that they were not representing only a single country, but rather, taking the mission and community of Collier with them as they engaged with their peers on a global platform. Throughout the week of the Model U.N. virtual conference, staff members continued to check in to see how our students were doing and root for them from afar. Our students felt successful passing resolutions, proposing amendments, remembering how to properly introduce themselves, sharing comments, listening to peers, voting and more.

During times like today, filled with division, suffering and loss, I am comforted knowing that passionate students with the hearts and minds to change the world exist all around me, especially here at Collier.

Advertisement

Looking back at my time in high school, so much of who I thought I was has changed. As I have grown into the person I am today, I know this is due to the people, places and experiences that have gifted me their stories and lessons. I am incredibly grateful for those who made room for me to ask questions and make a fool of myself, from those beginning moments in high school up until this present day.

We all need places to ask questions, make mistakes and learn to celebrate differences in order to truly thrive and engage meaningfully in our world. I am thankful for the Collier staff who give so freely of their time to carve out these spaces for our students to grow and be challenged.

Collier is a fertile planting ground. This place and these people continue to embrace resilience despite a world that invites them to choose division and throw in the towel. I continue to learn from the staff and students in more ways than I could have ever expected.

[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.