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Loyola alumnae serves abroad through collaboration

WASHINGTON, D.C. (April 14, 2015) –

With her bare toes digging into the mud and water, Annemarie Barrett ('12), alongside her co-workers, breaks up the ground around them in preparation for Barrett’s third planting season in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In the Santa Vera Cruz Parish garden, laboring together with shovels and hoes, they express gratitude for the recent rainfall.

This is a good day for her and her Bolivian co-workers. Often times, water is difficult to come by in the poorer regions of the city where they work. In a country where almost half of the population lives below the poverty line, many of the parishioners also basic access to water and sanitation services.

Barrett is a lay missioner with Franciscan Mission Service, a Catholic nonprofit that prepares and supports lay people in order to humbly share work with marginalized communities abroad. Thanks to the many opportunities provided by Loyola University Chicago and the city itself, Barrett's heart and soul was shaped to live in solidarity.

Early on at Loyola, she connected with the local Catholic Worker movement, which is committed to living communally in voluntary poverty and dedicated to radical action for social justice. “I learned a great deal by their example and their friendship,” Barrett said.

In her junior year at Loyola, she lived in San Salvador, El Salvador for four months through the Casa de la Solidaridad, a program that focuses on learning about the local culture and current social context through relationships of accompaniment.

The Gannon Scholar learned, as she says, “how to be together, how to live focused on being present to one another” during that time abroad. “I wanted to keep challenging my worldview, my privileges, my lifestyle after my experiences in El Salvador,” she said. “I wanted to keep growing in solidarity with those who are marginalized and I found that FMS offered that possibility through living as a Franciscan lay missioner, focused on a humble ministry of presence.”

Since arriving in Bolivia with FMS in 2013, Barrett, 25, has worked with the Pastoral de la Madre Tierra (Ministry of Mother Earth) in the parish of Santa Vera Cruz. The ministry collaborates with the parish communities, primarily comprised of migrants from the rural regions of Bolivia, to establish healthy and sustainable vegetable gardens in the patios of their homes. Their work is rooted in the Andean value of “ayni” or “reciprocity,” honoring the wisdom and potential of the migrant farmers to produce their own food in an urban context.

“I’m really learning what it means to share work, not to see my work so much as a service, but as a relationship and commitment to the community,” Barrett said.

As Barrett is learning how to farm from the community she lives and works with, she also has experiences to share. Putting her degree in Communication Studies from Loyola to good use, she uses what she learned from her interpersonal and organizational communication courses on a daily basis.

Early on in her work with the Pastoral de la Madre Tierra, the skills she developed from her degree helped her assimilate in a new culture and a new language. She regularly was asked to coordinate communication with the families of the parish communities, make visits to their homes and advocate for their needs in the coordination of the parish work. She also found that her communication skills were an asset to their team meetings and organization throughout a number of work transitions.
Before she decided to dedicate herself full time to the Pastoral de la Madre Tierra, she conducted a series of workshops in nonviolent communication in three different communities in Cochabamba as well, directly drawn from her Praxis course in the School of Communication in her final year at Loyola.

Serving alongside marginalized populations, there are valuable lessons in accompaniment and appreciation to be learned, according to Barrett, a St. Paul, Minn., native. “I am invited daily here to be myself with much less pretense than back home,” she said. “Back in the US when we relate to one another through material possessions and success, we tend to create a lot of noise and miss the opportunity to be present to one another. Unfortunately, we focus on scarcity, on not having enough to be content, on always needing more.”

“But when we choose to live simply in community,” she said, “we realize that we are surrounded by abundance. I am grateful to live amidst that abundance daily here in these marginalized and resilient communities.”

This interest in social injustice and embracing a personal connection to underserved communities led her to Franciscan Mission Service. Presence, solidarity, and collaboration are the hallmarks of this 25-year-old organization. Through its many programs, Franciscan Mission Service works with people like Barrett who are inspired to live and serve in solidarity with economically poor communities across the globe.

Barrett’s initial commitment was to serve in Bolivia until the end of 2014, but she decided to renew her contract with FMS for at least another year. “My life here is not without its challenges and struggles, but as I was formed in Ignatian spirituality at Loyola, I trust in the deep consolation that I experience in the midst of those struggles here and the ways that I continue to feel called to grow.”

To read her blog posts about her experience on mission, or to make a donation in support of her, please visit www.franciscanmissionservice.org/annemarie_barrett.

About the organization: Franciscan Mission Service prepares and supports lay Catholics for two-year international, one-year domestic and one- to two-week short-term mission service opportunities in solidarity with impoverished and marginalized communities across the globe. Since 1990, the independent 501(c)(3) has built partnerships with women and men who are inspired to live and serve in solidarity with economically poor communities across the globe – and to bring the transformative experience of mission to North American societies and churches as advocates for peace, justice, reconciliation and care of creation.