FROM JFK TO POPE FRANCIS: HOW A CALL TO SERVE ON THE MARGINS IN THE 1960s ENDURES TODAY

Extension Lay Volunteers gathered for 55th reunion of program instrumental to the lay volunteer movement in America

CHICAGO (July 16, 2015) – In his January 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy sparked the imagination of a generation with his famous call to action: “Ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.” Countless young people responded by dedicating their lives to public service, whether abroad in the newly formed Peace Corps, or by joining the U.S. Armed Forces. Throughout the next decade more than 2,000 young people chose a different path, joining the ranks of the Extension Lay Volunteer (ELV) program created the year prior by Catholic Extension, a national fundraising organization whose mission is to make visible the power of faith in America’s most marginalized communities. The ELVs sought to become a force for good in their own country by dedicating at least one year to this groundbreaking program working in home missions – mission dioceses whose community members were rich in faith but facing poverty and other challenges putting them at a disadvantage within society. The ELVs set out to make a difference and the experience proved life changing, instilling within them a lifelong desire to give back. Now, 55 years later, more than 100 ELVs recently gathered in a Chicago suburb to share stories and reconnect while inspiring the next generation of lay volunteers who now heed Pope Francis’s call to serve the poor and marginalized.

“The story of Catholic Extension is the beautiful love story of God’s love for us and of our care for others, especially the poor,” said Fr. Jack Wall, President, Catholic Extension. “We are grateful for the legacy of the ELVs’ service, which laid the foundation for Catholic Extension’s enduring legacy of supporting lay leadership at all levels. The Church is stronger and better today because of the ELVs’ spirit, involvement and gifts.”

Elizabeth A. Duclos-Orsello, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and Coordinator of American Studies at Salem State University in Salem, Mass. She also is the daughter of ELV Elaine Duclos and contributed a chapter dedicated to the experience of the ELVs in the book, “Empowering the People of God”. Duclos-Orsello was the reunion’s keynote speaker and shared her insights on what brought about the movement.

“Looking back on the ELVs’ inception, it really was the perfect storm in the United States in terms of secular, Catholic, and societal changes. Young adults from all walks of life were seeking a more authentic life in a way that could make a real difference,” said Duclos-Orsello. “At the same time the Catholic Church was calling out the public to engage, with Bishops encouraging young people to ‘be the change that they wanted to see.’” She added that Catholic Extension’s ELV program offered a grand opportunity for an adventure or transformative experience that ultimately profoundly impacted not only the people they served, but also the volunteers themselves.

As witnessed at the reunion, many ELVs went on to enjoy prominent careers. Some became internationally known for their work helping others – like Joanne Zimmerman, who created Amanda the Panda, comforting thousands of children struggling with cancer and grief. Others are living out the commitment and passion that began with their service as ELVs as renowned authors, Eucharistic ministers, church leaders and academics.

-- more --
Sister Hilda Mateo, Director of Ongoing Formation at the Missionary Guadalupanas of the Holy Spirit in Los Angeles and a member of the Catholic Extension Mission Committee, received a standing ovation for her remarks at the closing dinner about the impact and legacy of the ELVs.

“You all did many different activities, but what you most profoundly did was to be present to others – others that were forgotten because of their economic status, because of their skin color, because of their gender or because of their age,” said Mateo. “You accompanied others in their struggles, in their pain and in their poverty, creating real transformation.”

While some who signed up as an ELV felt God’s call to serve, others heeded the call from JFK seeking social justice amidst the challenges of the 1960’s. So impactful was their work that ELVs received draft pardons in response to letters written by Bishops on their behalf. One group of volunteers walked hand in hand with their brothers and sisters in Christ during the height of turmoil in Selma, Ala. Others taught English to migrant families or taught poor schoolchildren in rural Louisiana who might otherwise have been bused to an all-white school on the other side of the railroad tracks that served as the community's racial dividing line. The ELVs traded training, transportation, room and board and a $50 monthly stipend for an experience that would shape their lives and in turn shape the lives of others for years to come.

At this 55th reunion the group’s energy was palpable, as was hope for the future. While the ELV program ended in 1971, its legacy continues in Catholic Extension programs that now follow Pope Francis’s call to serve, including the Hispanic Lay Leadership Initiative and the Young Adult Leadership Initiative, both of which are helping form future lay leaders. For its part, the ELVs will continue connecting and sharing their stories via Catholic Extension’s website and on their Facebook page, and look forward to planning their next milestone anniversary, the 60th reunion, in 2020.

For more information on Catholic Extension, please visit the official website at www.catholicextension.org.

###

About Catholic Extension: Catholic Extension is a papal society that makes visible the power of faith in America’s most marginalized communities by strategically investing in people, infrastructure and ministries. Since its founding in 1905, Catholic Extension has distributed more than $1.2 billion in today’s dollars to provide funding and resources to dioceses and parishes that cannot support themselves. For more information visit www.catholicextension.org; follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/catholicextension or twitter at @CathExtension.