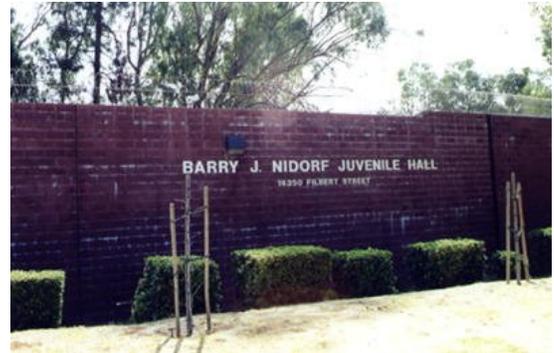


De Ernestine

“Home for Christmas” a dream not possible

For several weeks before Christmas one hears the old favorite nostalgic Christmas song, “I’ll be home for Christmas,” bringing memories of celebrations filled with human warmth and security. This is not the case for the hundred plus youth incarcerated at the Sylmar Juvenile facility north of Los Angeles. Their Christmas is spent behind bars and, even if not so, their home conditions are often high risk environments that do not provide the desired love, joy, peace and security.

On December 17 a group of Company of Mary sisters and other volunteers crossed the threshold to an unfamiliar and ominous reality, the Sylmar jail for over 1000 youth. There were many steps of preparation, an Advent of sorts, before the awaited event took place: a Christmas party and special dinner for young people spending the Christmas season confined to this facility.



The question haunting our efforts was, how can one bring joy and a sense of love and care to a place that is the consequence of violent and unlawful actions? But we discovered that love and the spirit of solidarity transcend the space that divides the so-called free and the unfree.

The journey to this day began mid-September when the sisters from the Saint Anne community received an invitation to organize and prepare a Christmas celebration for the young inmates at Sylmar. The invitation came from some young people who do ministry at the facility on a weekly basis. The sisters could not help but take very seriously such an invitation proposed by young people. The preparations began:

First of all a small fund-raising festival had to be organized in order to raise the funds needed to provide a special dinner for that evening. The festival took place in the driveway of the sisters’ home with an unprecedented response. There was food, music, dancing, a neighborhood festival with the presence of friends from near and far. Countless people donated the food that was sold, musicians volunteered their time, and the idea of reaching out to youth in these circumstances touched people in a way that we never anticipated. The evening concluded with people speaking about the preparation for the following year!



The next mile-stone was an evening Mass and orientation presided by Fr. Mike Kennedy, S.J., chaplain of the facility and director of the Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative. Fr. Mike's 20 year experience with incarcerated youth has shaped him into a man who knows that it is only through the profound encounter with the person of Jesus who gives meaning to one's life and the strength for transformation that countless of young people can break through personal circumstances that incarcerate them way before they have to serve jail sentences.



Then the long awaited day arrived, December 17, Christmas Party and special dinner for groups of 40 or so youth. This part can best be shared by the telling of personal experiences from the volunteers:

"When I was asked if I wanted to visit the kids at the Juvenile hall I didn't know what to expect... At the orientation and preparation day Father Mike mentioned something I had not given much thought to: Jesus was once a prisoner, too. From that moment on I just felt I had to visit these kids because God had something special waiting for us. Sure enough visiting these kids really impacted my life.

As I walked into the room where the girls were waiting for us I felt like I was walking into a school with ordinary teenagers. We were able to share a special and memorable moment when the volunteers and girls played games, sang Christmas carols and got to know one another. At one moment one of the girls asked puzzled, "Why are you all here?" One of the sisters said, "We just want to be here with all of you." I realized how powerful it is to be present with someone. When our time of sharing was up the girls did not want us to leave, making me aware of how much they had appreciated our visit. I am thankful to God that I got to share time with kids who are the forgotten and are nobody in the eyes of society. If people would take time to really get to know them, they would realize how amazing each person is."
(Taide Cueva)

"To be honest, I struggled in accepting this opportunity. Of course I love the Advent and Christmas season and love to share the joy with others, but I didn't know if I had it in me to share this at juvenile hall. With the support of fellow friends that were going they assured me that I would be able to do this. The day finally arrived and off we went towards Sylmar. After all the waiting just to enter the facility, we were escorted to the block which we would be hosting. I walked into a hall filled with teen boys, some of whom seemed too young to be capable of doing anything to be incarcerated..

What affected me most was the fact that many of them said that all they wanted for Christmas was to be home with their family. It reminded me to cherish all the blessings that I have, especially that of family. And even though we were there to host a special night for them, they still felt as though they had to host us and show us a good time. They appreciated everything that we did and they did not overlook any small detail. What I hope for those boys is that they don't let a mistake ruin their entire lives. They have so much hope, drive and intelligence and you pray for the best for them. Had it not been for the uniforms and the facility, you would not believe that some of these boys were incarcerated youth."
(Marissa Cornejo)

"Although my friends and I had some fears from not knowing what to expect, we were surprised that in spite of the restrictions, these young people needed to be shown a good time. I was struck with the realization of how much an environment affects and shapes your life. It was a sad reality to come to grips with that these young people were here because they came from environments that did not provide

them with the guidance they needed to make good decisions in their lives. I felt a profound wish to be able to do more for them. I also became aware that our realities and circumstances shape our experience of God. One young man asked me, "Why are you doing this." I told him that I felt that God's love is universal and that I wanted to share God's love.

The personal impact of this experience was a heightened appreciation for the people around me, my family, my friends, people I sometimes take for granted." (Lincoln Nguyen)

So much more could be shared, but the answer to the question of whether our young volunteers were ready to go back next year with an immediate and determined **YES**, says it all!

TO BE CONTINUED....

We intend to continue the process this experience has initiated in each of us through the Lenten Season. We will pray and reflect together on the ways in which each and all must learn to live freely in the Lord, to consider our own imprisonments, and continue to grow in humbly reaching out to others with God's love and mercy.