

Appalachian Immersion Internship

A reflection by Sophie Mather

Overall, my experience as an Appalachian Immersion intern was eye-opening, educational, healing, and transformative. But was my AI internship what I had hoped for? I don't know. In many ways, yes. Did it fit my expectations? As much as it could, but I don't think there was any way that I really could have expected what happened.

My goals for my Year of Service and Love were to learn how to love and serve others, especially those from different backgrounds from my own. I also hoped to gain skills and understanding that would help me to be a better teacher in the future and to grow deeper in my relationship with God. My AI internship was planned as part of this Year of Service and Love.

I hoped to learn about who God is, as well as understand God's desire for me, during my time with Good Works. Through the morning devotionals in the Hannah House, I began to understand aspects of God's character and parts of the Bible that I had never understood before. When I participated in a Spiritual Formation Retreat, I began to understand how the terms "justice" and "righteousness" relate to my faith. Both were concepts that I had not understood before, but which turned out to be my goals for myself.

My faith, while still a mystery, began to become more understandable. Living out my faith, while still challenging, began to become more doable. I was doing it every day through my job. We were talking about it every day in staff meetings and devotionals and over lunch and during AI time. The AI education time was especially meaningful to me, and the two books that we read – *Befriending the Stranger* and *Soil and Sacrament*— reinforced the lesson that I was learning in every other part of my internship: living out my faith means loving my neighbor, caring for Creation, and enjoying the gifts that I am given every day.

I expected and hoped to grow in my faith during my internship, but I ended up getting so much more than I had hoped for. I began to feel deeply connected and rooted in a faith from which I had been feeling increasingly disconnected.

In spite of everything I was learning and all of the time that I was able to spend in worship, I felt like I did not have enough time to spend alone in quiet time with God and time to reflect on what I was learning and how that would apply to the way I lived my own life. I would have been able to take that time for myself; I just had a hard time making the decision to do that because I was enjoying spending time in community. I could have benefited from others checking up on me to make sure I was taking that time for myself.

I was also hoping, through my internship, to connect with people who were experiencing poverty. Good Works created many contexts for me to connect with people who were experiencing poverty: the Transformation Station, Friday Night Life, the Timothy House, and Neighbors Helping Neighbors. I felt safe connecting with people in each of these contexts, and I felt encouraged to connect with people in each of these contexts.

There were two goals that I had within my goal to connect with people experiencing poverty: to learn from them and to love and serve them. And that's where my experience became very different from the experience that I was expecting. I do believe that I met my goals. I was able to love and serve people. But I learned that loving people who are suffering usually means suffering with them, rather than saving them from their suffering, because I am not able to do that. And sometimes, because I am also broken and suffering, I found that I was not even able to suffer with those who were suffering.

I also found that not only was I loving and serving others, but they were also serving me. I had gone into the internship expecting to give everything to the people I was serving. I expected to feel good about myself. I didn't realize that *I* needed things and that others would serve *me*.

And so I did meet my goal of learning through my relationships with people experiencing poverty, but the lessons that I was learning were hard lessons. I was really being challenged.

Although I did not anticipate that kind of challenge, I found that I was very much supported in facing that challenge. When I started to realize that loving people was going to be hard, *Befriending the Stranger* helped to put into words what I was feeling. I was feeling my brokenness, and our discussions of *Befriending the Stranger* during AI time led me to the understanding that brokenness is normal, and even necessary. The authenticity of many people in the Good Works community also helped me through the challenges. I saw many people willing to expose their brokenness, and I realized that they were still beautiful and lovable people, even in their brokenness. I began to realize that I was lovable, even in my brokenness.

Not only the authenticity, but also the care, of the other Good Works staff helped me to be honest about what I was struggling with. It was still hard for me to admit to being broken, but I was able to express some of that during AI time. My scheduled weekly reflections that I wrote to Andrea during the first few weeks of my internship gave me another good source of support during the time that was most challenging for me. I also felt comfortable sharing some of my brokenness with Fran when she would hang out with me as my mentor. My Hannah House family was also very supportive, and it was easy for me to be honest with them. These communities that I was placed in during my internship were a wonderful support for me, as I am assuming they were intended to be.

As I was learning how to love others, the communities within the Good Works community were also guides for me. In every context; such as the Timothy House, Friday Night Life, and Neighbors Helping Neighbors; the Good Works staff demonstrated love for the people in their context, and I saw relationships that had been lovingly built. When Transformation Station volunteers, Friday Night Life participants, Timothy House residents, Neighbors, and staff experienced suffering, I witnessed others stepping in to be with those who were suffering. That didn't make it easy for me to love people who were suffering, but it did show me how to suffer with them.

Looking back, the most valuable parts of my AI internship, were probably living in the Hannah House community, AI education time, and becoming part of the Timothy House

community. My time with Good Works Gardens was also extremely valuable for me because it revealed a love for Creation that I hadn't realized was inside of me. Although I wouldn't say it was one of the most valuable parts of my internship, raising support turned out to be much more meaningful than I expected. I found joy in getting to share my experiences with people who are important to me, and I found gratitude for the amazing support I received from my friends. Another of the most valuable parts of my internship is the friendships that began during my internship, which I have been able to sustain past the end of my internship.

The other things that I have been able to take with me past the end of my internship are the lessons that I learned. These include lessons in justice, in caring, in integrity; lessons on what poverty is and how it affects us; lessons on how to love; lessons in mutuality; lessons on our relationship with Creation. I know that seems like a long list of lessons, but everything that I listed there is a lesson that still has an impact on me, two months after the end of my internship. I still think about these lessons and how they apply to my work at camp and my relationship with my family and my plans for college.

The internship was challenging for me. It was really hard. But I needed that. I learned a lot. I think I grew a lot. I would absolutely do it over again. And I am absolutely grateful for the Good Works community who challenged me deeply and supported me greatly.

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