The greatest gift

by Stephanie Breen

Gift giving is an exchange that requires both a giver and a receiver.

When I signed up for BVS, I knew that I would be giving the gift of my time and volunteer hours to my project. I live on sight at the Hogar de Ninos Emanuel in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. It is true. I am a giver of long hours, of English lessons, of early childhood development activities, I give my time chaperoning, I give advice and I give the gift of fun activities for the kids. I also have the opportunity to go on TOMS shoe distributions. We have given thousands of pairs of shoes to children in need across Honduras. I know that I have given a lot here. What I didn’t expect at the outset of my volunteer experience was that I wouldn’t just be a giver.

I am the receiver of bountiful gifts: the gift of family, the gift of friendship, and most importantly, the gift of unconditional love. I did not anticipate just how much love I would receive from the children of the Hogar, the love I receive from the children of Honduras receiving their shoes, or the friendships I would make with mission groups and TOMS giving teams. I am surrounded by the unconditional love of Christ and I have been moved and changed by this gift. My heart is full.

Now, of all of my various tasks I perform here, I know that my most important tasks of all is to simply be, to form relationships, and to love and be loved by the children. It is the most important gift any of us can give and the most blessed to receive.
Unexpected gifts
by Chris Kaake

The idea of gifts is one I’ve always been uncomfortable with. At different times I’ve felt I don’t have any gifts, or disagreed with people/tests about what gifts I have, even watched hurt and confused as people used their ‘lack’ of a certain gift as a crutch or excuse. But I live and work in the church, so I pinpointed my ‘gifts’ somewhere along the way and discovered a new ramification of ‘gifts’—the risk of putting yourself in a box.

My box was working with youth, so I worried about being a volunteer here at Enable, a charity that works with people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. How could it be right for me? Had I become too focused on living overseas (a life-long dream) and ignored my own limitations? Someone, I knew, needed to dedicate their time and talents to this organization. But should it be me? Give me a group of teenagers trying to puzzle out sexuality within their spiritual beliefs or a college student who isn’t sure what to do with her life—I have those gifts. I wasn’t sure I had the gifts needed for this work. I had never connected deeply with someone with a learning disability, and my world revolved around connections and creating community. I was afraid I couldn’t do within a different context and with a different group of people. I must have repeated it a thousand times: I’m just worried I won’t be able to connect.

Luckily, gifts are not so confined as we sometimes think. They are infinitely adaptable, growing and transforming as our lives do the same.
Reflections on my gifts

by Abel Tewelde

Coming from the south of Germany, a place where I feel crime and homelessness is low, I entered this new and unknown city, Baltimore. Baltimore is a city with different faces. It is a city where homelessness, social inequality, and crime play a huge role. However, it is also a city facing a lot of progress. Project PLASE is a good example of this.

PLASE is a non-profit agency offering homeless people transitional housing while helping to find employment and more permanent housing for them. During my time here, I have reflected on my personal skills, talents, and gifts. I’ve also reflected on how they have helped me and others, and how they have affected my life as a volunteer.

The work as a Case Manager can be challenging. My main goal is to assist residents whenever they need help and with that comes many responsibilities. One of my responsibilities is to inspect every room of the residents for food, drinks, weapons, etc. If I find any of these contraband items, I must report it. I remember one incident shortly after I arrived. While carrying out my daily inspections, I found food in an older resident’s room. After throwing the food away like I’m supposed to, the resident was upset and tried to intimidate me. I was shocked by his reaction. I didn’t feel I did anything wrong and decided to talk to my colleagues. They advised me not to fear him, saying he was simply testing how far he could push the new intern. The next day I talked to him. I looked him in the eyes and told him that I respected him and his service for the country, but I wouldn’t tolerate his behavior. I could see he was surprised and didn’t expect that from a young volunteer. After the incident, we developed a good relationship.

Looking back, I feel good about how I handled the incident and I’ve realized how my interpersonal skills helped me through this incident. I’ve also realized my ability to communicate with colleagues, asking for help, and staying calm in difficult situations are wonderful gifts.
Ron and I arrived in San Diego in January 2015, eager to learn about our project at the San Diego Church of the Brethren and the Peace Resource Center of San Diego. The first of many gifts was a warm welcome at the church shortly after our arrival. In addition to the pot of daffodils at our door, other gifts include invitations to hike and sightsee and the collegiality with our two bosses, Pastor Sara Haldeman-Scarr and Mariah Geyler. Sixteen months later, I realize how many gifts we have received and how our leaders have recognized our own gifts, encouraging us to use them.

Ron’s artistic and technical skills and expertise with computers have been used in many capacities; from consulting with the church secretaries about layouts and workarounds to working on various projects for the PRC. He has also taken on designing and building a labyrinth next to the sanctuary. It’s wonderful to know that his work will be a lasting legacy to the Peace Campus long after we’re gone.

My biggest gift has been the chance to use some of my church hours to work with children and teachers learning to do Restorative Circles at a nearby, high-poverty elementary school. The children take to the circles so readily, and the circles build their classroom community. I have also thoroughly enjoyed putting together a booklet on working with children nonviolently, using my skills in child development, conflict resolution, and restorative practices.

We are both very grateful to BVS for giving us this chance to start our retirement in a new place, with new people, and the opportunity to serve in different ways.