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**Upcoming Orientations:**

• **Summer Unit #325**

July 19-August 7, 2020  
Camp Harmony—Hooversville, PA

• **BRF Unit #326**

August 16-August 24, 2020  
Camp Swatara—Bethel, PA

• **Fall Unit #327**

September 20-October 9, 2020  
Camp Brethren Heights—Rodney, MI

**By the Numbers:**

• **Active volunteers – 39**

31 in United States  
2 in Europe  
1 in Latin America  
4 in Japan  
1 in Africa

• **Active Projects – 63**

44 in the United States  
7 in Europe  
4 in Latin America  
1 in South America  
2 in Japan  
4 in Africa  
1 in China

# The Volunteer

Sharing God's love through acts of service

**RUINED FOR LIFE**

**Brethren Service in Europe**

*By Kristin Flory*



Kristin Flory, Unit 134

I never tire of explaining that this is not only the BVS office, but that Brethren Service in Europe has a longer history. Despite our 18th century German origins and a few mission efforts, Brethren first returned to work in Europe during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Offices were located in many countries and the central administration for Brethren Service in Europe was established in 1947 in Geneva, Switzerland, with the World Council of Churches. BVS, born in 1948 in the USA, was invited to provide young volunteers for the programs in Europe.

We will be closing the Geneva office when I retire at the end of 2019. Sadly, there has been a steady decline in volunteers serving in Europe in recent years. The good news is that BVS volunteers will continue to serve in Northern Ireland and Ireland.

What an amazing job, ministry, and privilege this has been. Never could I have imagined in 1987 that I would stay for so many years. There were 16 volunteers on project when I arrived, from Belfast to Alkmaar to Skierniewice. I set off to visit everyone and expand my knowledge beyond the European peace work already familiar to me, having served six years with German and Austrian peace groups. It was amusing to learn about apples and our Brethren-Polish agricultural exchange; it was sobering to see The Troubles still happening in Northern Ireland.

Numbers of volunteers increased, sometimes up to 35 were on project. Not to compare it with the "glory days" of post WWII Brethren work in Europe: I count 58 participants in a 1960 retreat photo. But it wasn't about numbers. It was celebrating Thanksgiving in 1989 with our Polish friends in Skierniewice who witnessed the changes in Poland; *(Story continued on pg 2)*



Europe retreat in Germany, 1988

The following contributions come from BVS alumni celebrating Brethren Service Europe, as the Geneva-based office closed in December of 2019. Hear stories of laughter, connection, appreciation, and blessing as former volunteers have been 'Ruined for Life' by their service through BVS in Europe.

**Brethren Service in Europe, cont'd**



Europe Retreat in Geneva, 2018

*(Continued from pg 1)* it was seeing the Berlin Wall breached that year and placing a BVSer in East Berlin; it was sharing BVSErs with groups in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Sadly, too, it was watching the wars in Yugoslavia. And then being part of peace and women's groups in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo, sending BVSErs to the newly formed Balkan Peace Team and to youth organizations in Mostar. It was

also supporting peace groups and communities in the heart of the continent, from Geneva to Brussels to Rome, France, Germany, the Netherlands as well as England.

When I think about the first BVSer in Belfast in 1972 at the height of The Troubles I wonder about the audacity of sending volunteers then. I will always remember the phone call from Quaker Service director Vincent Bent in Belfast on August 31, 1994: "Kristin, we have a cease fire!" From initial BVS involvement with peace and church groups, most Northern Irish and Irish projects are now with children and people with disabilities.

In 2002 Rev. Harold Good, the pastor who first invited us to Belfast, spoke during the 30th anniversary event of our presence in Northern Ireland: "When the full story of all these years [...] is written, you Brethren probably won't be recorded; sorry about that. But in many ways that can never be measured, you've made a huge contribution to the lives of so many people here and to our overall situation. By coming here you've encouraged us, by helping us to realize we are a part of a great world family who are concerned about justice, peace, and people. Thank you."

I hope that I, too, have tried to make a contribution towards a more peaceful and just planet, and I am thankful for the privilege of having accompanied the volunteers, witnessing history, and serving God and the world. 🌿



Europe Retreat in Germany, 1993



40th BVS Anniversary in Northern Ireland, 2012

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VISIT [BRETHRENVOLUNTEERSERVICE.ORG](http://BRETHRENVOLUNTEERSERVICE.ORG) OR EMAIL [BVS@BRETHREN.ORG](mailto:BVS@BRETHREN.ORG)



## Finding Home Amidst Strangeness

By Kelly Johnson

In the summer of 1989, I became a stranger. The Polish language, with seven cases for nouns, was a glass wall between me and most other people for nearly six months. Hard and soft currency were terms, not realities I knew how to navigate. My instincts about social cues couldn't be trusted: that man who didn't smile at me, is he being polite or rude? But people welcomed me to their homes to share food and watch TV, even when I could not carry on a conversation. They taught me how to make coffee without filters, where to buy better bread, how to break opłatki on Christmas Eve.

Language immersion does work, eventually, and as I began to communicate better, I learned I wasn't the only one who lacked control. My students began telling me stories of resisting during martial law. They shared the supplies they'd stored up to deal with shortages, we watched the Berlin wall come down, and one night soon after that I listened to teenagers debating which country they prefer to be overrun by, next time it happened. I began to see that control is always a thin veneer, even for those who are at home.

BVS made me a stranger. I had to rely on others for help with every task and I've never quite gotten over it. These days, when I feel uncertain about the future, worried that my secure life isn't really very secure at all, I take an afternoon to coach a Congolese refugee family struggling to tell junk mail from utility bills. Then they feed me food that reminds them of home and we laugh over our attempts to speak each other's languages. We are all strangers here, and the love we share is all the home we have. 🌿



Unit 187, teaching English in Poland, 1989.



Christina Kaake, Unit 311

## Life as I know it

By Christina Kaake

After leaving my three-year BVS term at incredABLE in Northern Ireland, I emailed my former boss about a reference for a job in the States. He said to me that no other job would ever be good enough for me, that they had 'ruined me' for other work by giving me too much freedom and too good of an experience. At the time, I laughed at him. A few months later, though, I told him he was right.

But it wasn't totally incredABLE's fault. It's BVS' fault, too.

Volunteer life is freeing in a way that's difficult to convey and even more difficult to move past. I still had bills to pay during my placement — being in your mid-30s when you join up will do that — but spending that time focusing on only basic monetary needs frees a person to engage with other needs. As a BVS volunteer you get to focus on your social needs, the things that 'fill your basket' at work and learning to create and maintain the boundaries that feed your emotional health.

I had a fantastic plan for my own re-entry. I was

going to transition so easily and simply back into the career I had been working in for 15 years. But a full-time office job, particularly with U.S. expectations and job culture, is something that doesn't really appeal to me anymore. I know how much I'll miss those freedoms, from the materialistic mindset and the general belief that you are where you work.

BVS changes you. You'll learn to make genuine connections with strangers, to rely on community, to look at conflict differently, even to define home differently. It's the most rewarding set of changes I can think of, and they make returning to life as you knew it before....impossible! 🌿

## New Coordinator of BVS Europe

Sara Cook began on January 1, 2020, as the Coordinator of BVS Europe. Sara was part of Unit 246 in 2001, and served at three different projects in Northern Ireland from 2001-2003- Ballysally Youth and Community Centre (Coleraine), Kilcranny House (Coleraine) and the Peace and Reconciliation Group (Derry/Londonderry). Sara is currently living in Belfast, N. Ireland and brings experience as a teacher and trainer in facilitating and mediation in Northern Ireland and internationally. BVS is so grateful for Sara's willingness to share her wisdom, expertise, and caring nature while accompanying European volunteers and continuing the meaningful partnerships that already exist in Ireland and N. Ireland. Sara was part of a trip in December with Kristin Flory and Emily Tyler to visit and meet with current projects in Ireland and N. Ireland.

## Coffee, Gossip and Atrocities: Conversations for Life

By Katie Hampton and Tori Tevis



Katie and Tori, Unit 277

We first met in 2007 during a spartan orientation in the Missouri Ozarks and then embarked on a multi-year journey of service and self-exploration in Bosnia-Herzegovina through BVS Europe. With the retirement of our beloved Kristin Flory, it seemed only fitting to collaborate and write about our experience and how it has had a lasting influence on us. Convening at Tory's apartment after work, we were committed to our task. But first, it was critical to complete the ritual of prepping and sharing a meal as we caught up on the latest in each other's lives

As BVSers, when we would meet, either during regional retreats or occasional visits to another volunteer's site, these catch-up conversations often seemed to gravitate towards specific, favored topics, such as political turmoil around the world, or the heavy weight of Sarajevo and Mostar's history. The conversations

also turned toward lighter topics such as the Balkan jokes we'd recently heard or the latest in local happenings where we lived. We fondly referred to this discourse as Coffee, Gossip, and Atrocities, capturing both the levity and the gruesomeness that we regularly covered all within one session, sipping viscous Bosnian coffee all the while.

Maybe it was not so shocking then, that on that chilly November night ten years later, in a New York City apartment, we found ourselves returning to this familiar blueprint. Katie shared updates regarding her current work advocating for asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border. Tory reported on a Syrian-Kurdish friend who had emigrated to Canada from Turkey, seeking to rebuild. We wondered about the future amid repression in China and Hong Kong. To keep it from all becoming too grim, we asked about each other's families and discussed visits we hoped to plan with old BVS friends, as well as our hopes and dreams of integrating our spiritual values, ethical commitments, and intellectual interests even more deeply in our careers.

We somehow failed to actually do any writing that evening — there was just too much that felt essential to cover while together. These topics, while so natural to us, wouldn't have felt so necessary to discuss with a non-BVS friend. As we said our good-byes later than anticipated for the night, we agreed that maybe BVS and our enduring love for Coffee, Gossip and Atrocities had ruined "normal" conversation for us for life. 🌿



Tori, Katie and Mostar friends visiting the partisan memorial in Mostar, 2008.



Kristin Flory, Sara Cook, and Emily Tyler visiting projects in Northern Ireland, 2019.

