

VOICES OF COMPASSION



Advocating for detained migrants

Heidi Cerneka has launched her border ministry in the midst of unprecedented challenges

3 God is here
PRAYER ~ Mungu Yupo!
 Learning from the wisdom of Africa

4 A trip that changed me
FRIENDS ACROSS BORDERS ~ Immersion trip to Cambodia moves participant to deepen her faith

Heidi Cerneka at the Paso del Norte border bridge in Juárez. Recent changes in immigration policies have pushed thousands of migrants into the streets of Juárez.



6 Advocating for detained migrants
COVER STORY ~ Working as an immigration attorney at the U.S.-Mexico border, Heidi Cerneka helps asylum seekers on the road to a new life. The current political storms make that difficult, but she is making lives better, one legal case at a time.

10 New award honors returned missionaries
BISHOP MCCARTHY AWARD ~ Cathy Breen and Wynnie-Fred Victor are recognized for their 'spirit of mission'

12 Brazil region energized by synod
NEWS ~ Synod for the Amazon, welcoming new missionaries, contemplative retreat and more

14 Volleyball values
PROFILE ~ Juan Gomez helps his indigenous students build their future, on and off the volleyball court

COVER PHOTO BY SERGIO FLORES

Keep connected with our e-newsletter. Sign up at the bottom of mklm.org.



Go forth fearlessly

"EACH OF US IS A MISSION," Pope Francis keeps reminding us. The Spirit stirs within us a desire to embrace our brothers and sisters "not only with our gaze but also with our entire life," he preached in his homily for this year's World Mission Sunday.



Jesus invites us to open eyes that do not see, ears that are numb to the cries of the world and hearts that are overwhelmed with fatigue. Jesus sends us to embrace our brothers and sisters whose lives are intertwined with ours, woven together in love and communion.

"Go is in fact the imperative of Jesus in the Gospel," Pope Francis tells us. It is our mission "to go up the mountain to pray for everyone and to come down from the mountain to be a gift to all. Going up and coming down: the Christian, therefore, is always on the move, outward-bound."

Go! Let go of the clutches of the familiar. Go, to the cities, suburbs, farms and forests. Go, to our sisters and brothers—the migrants, the sick, the neglected, the women and children, the ones without food and shelter, the naked, the indigenous and first-nation peoples, the oppressed. Go, and be transformed by grace and courage for all that lies ahead.

The women, men and families who serve as Maryknoll lay missionaries are inspired by God's work of compassion. They go beyond their comfort levels and cross boundaries with a desire to embody a transforming love. They—like all of us, in our own boundary-crossing—discover God's invitation to join in the joy, hope, resilience and profound love of the communities who receive us.

Please know of our deep gratitude and appreciation for the many ways you support Maryknoll Lay Missioners and invite us into deeper discernment of God's call in our lives. In turn, we encourage you to read this issue of *Voices of Compassion* with an open heart and mind, considering what God is asking you to be or do as a mission on this earth.

To borrow the words of Pope Francis once more, "Go and show love to everyone, because your life is a precious mission: It is not a burden to be borne, but a gift to offer. Have courage, and let us fearlessly go forth to all!"

Yours in mission,

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
 Maryknoll Lay Missioners

Read tinyurl.com/PopeFrancisHomily



GOD IS HERE

BY JUDY WALTER

MUNGU YUPO, a Swahili phrase I hear often in Tanzania, means "God is here." The people of Tanzania are teaching me that the experience of God is here, now, God in the flesh, present in whatever is happening—Mungu Yupo!

A friend recently asked me, "How do you experience God in Africa?" Let me count the ways:

GOD IS HERE in the small acts of kindnesses received each day:

- the beautiful morning greeting in Swahili, "How did you wake up this morning?"
- making room for one more on an already overcrowded bus
- a young child quietly slipping her hand in mine as we walk the road together

GOD IS HERE in the five-times-a-day call to prayer from our neighborhood mosque.

GOD IS HERE in the laughing, shouting, playful energy of the children who live all around us.

GOD IS HERE in the woman with a broken spirit, as we sit in silence together, holding her pain.

GOD IS HERE in the courage of the young man who refuses to be defined by his disease.

GOD IS HERE when compassion wells up in me for the suffering of another.

And YOU? How do you experience God wherever you are in this world?

May we learn together from the wisdom of Africa: **MUNGU YUPO!** God is here, no matter what is happening.

Judy Walter is a Maryknoll lay missionary who serves at the Lake House of Prayer, a joint ministry of the Archdiocese of Mwanza, Tanzania, and Maryknoll. She and Maryknoll Father Jim Eble give hospitality and provide for the spiritual needs of those who come there seeking rest and spiritual renewal. They offer retreats with spiritual direction and a daily rhythm of prayer and Eucharist to individuals and small groups.

For more on Judy's ministry, watch the video: mklm.org/lake-house-of-prayer.

PHOTO: JERRY FLEURY



Sunrise at Angkor Wat. From left: Joseph and Michael Lynch, Lindsay Doucette, Elizabeth and Machele Lynch, James Havey, Jennifer DeVault and Mary Voight

The willingness of Maryknoll missionaries to share in people's lives and to 'sacrifice' has brought many blessings.

care, guests who are willing to share our resources and to partner with people if needed.

We were not remote tourists or clinical observers. We didn't judge or pity our fellow human beings. I also wasn't in museums just skimming the highlights of the country but was able to be—and really enjoyed being—with Cambodian people and learning about their lives and their hopes.

Seeing Cambodia with our guides **Lindsay Doucette** (a returned Maryknoll lay missionary) and **James Havey** (a current lay missionary) and meeting Maryknoll Sisters Regina Pellicore and Helene O'Sullivan, Mercy Sister Denise Coghlan as well as Maryknoll lay missionary **Maria Montello**, gave me a window into the day-to-day life and unique human ex-

periences in Cambodia.

Both at LaValla School, where lay missionary **Kylene Fremling** provides physical therapy to students with physical disabilities, and at the Deaf Development Programme, where **Russ Brine** and **Father Charlie Dittmeier** serve, students were all working and engaged. I saw no self pity; clearly, each student had been treated with dignity and love.

The humble work of the Catholic sisters and priests in Cambodia since 1975 really touched my heart, especially their powerful example of genuinely being with people rather than doing things for them.

Often the word *sacrifice* has negative connotations. However, the willingness of Maryknoll missionaries to share in people's lives and to "sacrifice" is not negative

at all. It has instead brought many blessings and goodwill for each of us.

The Catholic faith of the Maryknoll community gives us a shared mission. They don't preach or demand dogmatic obedience. Instead, Maryknoll sisters, priests and lay missionaries live shoulder to shoulder with the Cambodian people, sharing their reality.

I am different now

because of the witness of Maryknoll, which has made me demand more from myself and work to deepen my Catholic faith and my actions.

Mary C. Voight is a retired Mandarin Chinese teacher, who lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Photos by James Havey and Lindsay Doucette



A trip that changed me

The witness of Maryknoll in Cambodia encourages me to deepen my faith and solidarity

BY MARY C. VOIGHT



Above The Friends Across Borders participants wandering the vast terraces of Angkor Wat outside of Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Left The choir at Child Jesus Catholic Church in Phnom Penh.

Right Lay missionary **Maria Montello** with Machele and Elizabeth Lynch and two of Maria's university students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, discussing the best route to take for the tuk-tuk (auto rickshaw) scavenger hunt Maria developed.

In August, I took a trip with Friends Across Borders to Cambodia. This is the type of trip I would definitely recommend to others because we lived in Cambodia as guests who



Above Lay missionary **Kylene Fremling** discussing her work as a physical therapist assistant at LaValla School for children with disabilities.

Left With **Mercy Sister Denise Coghlan** (center left). Sister Denise runs the Jesuit Refugee Service's Metta Karuna Retreat Centre in Siem Reap. Here she is explaining the level of statelessness throughout Southeast Asia, and what collaborative advocacy can do to alleviate this injustice.



Above: Heidi Cerneka on the El Paso side of the Paso del Norte bridge, which is one of the busiest ports of entry from Mexico to the United States.

Heidi Cerneka helps asylum seekers on the road to a new life

Advocating for DETAINED MIGRANTS at the border

| STORY AND PHOTOS BY MEINRAD SCHERER-EMUNDS |

At

the start of this year, Maryknoll lay missionary **Heidi Cerneka** moved to **El Paso, Texas**, to begin a new ministry at the U.S.-Mexico border.

One of the people she met was Zam Babirye, a woman from Uganda whose work advocating for youth had landed her in trouble with the Ugandan government. “I was beaten, I was imprisoned, I was raped,” says Zam. The persecution also resulted in the death of two family members—her sister and her brother-in-law. The two were killed, Zam says, while using her car to drive to a funeral. The hit had been meant for her.

It was at that point that Zam decided to flee for her life. She left her children in her mother’s care and eventually made her way

to the U.S., seeking asylum, and planning to bring her children once she had it.

Like other asylum seekers, Zam came to the U.S. to exercise her right to seek protection under UN and U.S. refugee and asylum laws. The U.S. signed and ratified the U.N. Convention on Refugees as well as a U.S. law that declare that people fleeing persecution have the right to seek refuge in this country. But once they arrive in the U.S., our law requires asylum seekers to prove in immigration court that they meet the narrow requirements that allow them to remain in the country.

That is where Heidi comes in. Heidi works as a **pro bono immigration attorney at Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center**, an El Paso-based nonprofit organization that provides free and low-cost legal services to immigrants and refugees. Heidi took on Zam’s

case as her attorney, representing her in her claim for asylum in court.

Eventually, through the representation of Heidi and the Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, Zam won her case and was granted asylum in the U.S. She was released, and Heidi helped arrange for her stay at Villa Maria, a temporary home for women in El Paso.

“Winning asylum is a road to a new life,” Heidi says. Zam will not only be able to stay in the U.S., but now that she has been granted asylum herself, she will be able to

apply to bring her children to join her in safety. When Zam was ready to move on from El Paso, Heidi helped her to relocate to the Los Angeles area by putting her in touch with the Maryknoll Sisters in Monrovia, who welcomed her there in August.

Winning cases like Zam’s is not easy. While nationwide about a third of asylum cases are granted, the El Paso immigration courts are granting only 3 to 7 percent of asylum seekers permission to stay in the U.S.

More recently, things have become even more difficult



Above: In late March migrants are gathered inside the fence of a makeshift detention center in El Paso, Texas. (Photo by Sergio Flores)

Left: Heidi and a fellow attorney from the Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center are leading a group of legal aid volunteers across the border for intake interviews at shelters in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico



because of the endless stream of new policies and regulations that the U.S. government has issued this year. In fact, since she arrived in El Paso, Heidi says that **the one constant of U.S. policy on immigration has been that it is constantly changing.**

Two new U.S. policies—the Migrant Protection Protocols, better known as the “remain-in-Mexico” policy, and the “metering” program—have now forced many migrants and asylum seekers who arrived at the El Paso border into the streets of Ciudad Juárez on the Mexican side.

The remain-in-Mexico policy sends asylum seekers who speak Spanish back over the border, requiring them to remain in Mexico for the duration of their legal proceedings. And the metering program, in direct contradiction of UN protocols, denies asylum seekers the ability to even reach U.S. soil to apply for asylum. They are forced to return to Mexico and directed to place their name on a waitlist and wait for their number to be called.

As a result of these two policies, Heidi is now working on both sides of the border.

By early August, these policies had forced some 19,000 asylum seekers at the El Paso entry points back across the border into Ciudad Juárez. There, many are stuck living in the streets, where they are at the mercy of gangs and others who have found easy prey among the vulnerable foreigners. Mexican churches and community organizations are doing what they can to help the sudden influx of migrants, but shelters are overcrowded and resources are limited.

On a recent day of intake interviews at two shelters in Ciudad Juárez, Heidi listened to asylum seekers from Guatemala, Cuba and

El Salvador. The stories she heard were heartbreaking—threats from gangs, brutal domestic violence, robberies, kidnapping, extortion, rapes and being a witness to a double murder. But at the end of the day, given the current restrictions on asylum, despite clear cases of persecution in their home countries, none of the people were likely to be successful with their applications.

On her way back from Juárez to El Paso, Heidi points out the two guards stationed on the Paso del Norte Bridge, whose job it is to enforce the “metering” program by preventing potential asylum seekers from entering the U.S.

“Those who put their names on the waitlist have to wait at least six months in Mexico to even voice their asylum claim,” Heidi says, “and then begin the immigration court process, which will likely take another four months or more.” During all that time, they may be on the streets or in a shelter, with no resources and no work opportunities. And when their number is finally called, they will most likely have to be their own “attorney,” which is practically a guarantee that their claim will be rejected.

Meanwhile, during her visits to immigrant detention centers on the U.S. side, in and near El Paso, Heidi has witnessed how migrants are separated from their family members and their children. “Their only ‘crime’ is having the courage to flee violence in their home countries and exercise their right to ask for asylum,” she explains. “They are kept weeks without a shower and packed into overcrowded detention facilities with no access to immigration attorneys or legal assistance.”

The part U.S. policy plays in the humanitarian crisis at

the border is especially difficult for Heidi. She sees policies like the metering system as an “erosion of our nation’s values,” and she believes that “the damage to human beings and to the integrity of the U.S. is irreversible.”

It is also discouraging that with such large numbers of asylum seekers, Heidi and the others involved in this work cannot help everyone. “Every day, we hear all these stories from so many people whom we can’t help,” Heidi reports. “Many times we feel so powerless to do anything about that. **There’s this messy mix of anger and sadness and powerlessness. That is very challenging.**”

Fortunately, there are successes along the way that help her keep going. In addition to the case with Zam, Heidi recently won two “withholding of removal” cases—one for a Cuban political asylum seeker and one for a lesbian woman from Guatemala. For both, although they are not officially being granted asylum, the judge has recognized that their lives will be at risk if they are sent home and has ruled they can remain legally in the U.S.

These successes demon-

strate the importance of having missionaries like Heidi working at the border.

In addition to her legal work, Heidi has also been helping with the advocacy role Las Americas plays both in the El Paso community and on the national scene. For example, she has served as a liaison for lawmakers to better inform them about the situation on the border. And she has given educational talks about the border reality in Chicago, Boston, New York and Washington.

Linda Corchado, the director of legal services, to whom Heidi reports at Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, says that Heidi’s “work has just been indispensable. She’s just so passionate. Going to the detention facilities and to Ciudad Juárez, she is experiencing how asylum seekers, who are some of the most vulnerable people on earth, are being rejected by our country, how they’re being treated badly in detention facilities.”

Marj Humphrey, Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ director of mission, who recently visited Heidi’s ministry at the border, concurs that “Heidi’s work is nothing short of remarkable. In the



In downtown El Paso, Heidi accompanies Zam Babirye, an immigrant from Uganda whose asylum case Heidi won, on her way to buying a bus ticket to Los Angeles.

midst of incredible suffering, and overwhelming needs, I encountered a human response—one person at a time—that offers palpable hope to so many migrants.”

Marj also points out that in addition to working long hours as an immigration lawyer, Heidi lives at and participates in the Encuentro Project in El Paso. This collaborative project coordinated by several religious congregations combines border immersion and service experiences with education and reflection on the daily reality and the seemingly endless obstacles that migrants face in their

desperate hope for asylum. “I was inspired,” Marj says, “by the large numbers of young people who take time out to come to the border, eager to learn about the situation and what they could do in the face of this crisis of mass migration.”

She adds, **“Being able to put human faces to the news reports made it all the more imperative to me that each of us must act,** must do what we can, no matter how near or far from the situation.”

Heidi agrees, saying, “As people of faith, we have an absolute responsibility to look at our neighbor and ask ourselves, ‘What does that person need to live a safe, healthy and just life? And what do I—and we as a community—need to do to make that happen?’” She adds, “There’s a million ways to do that. Prayer is essential, but **we have to do a lot more than prayer. Absolutely, God gives us these hands for a reason.**”

Meinrad Scherer-Emunds is Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ director of communications.

For more on Heidi’s ministry, watch the video mklm.org/immigration-lawyer-at-the-border and visit mklm.org/tag/heidi-cerneka

One way you can help

Maryknoll Lay Missioners is planning to expand its ministry on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Veteran missionary **Coralis Salvador** will be joining Heidi at the beginning of 2020, and the hope is that others will follow as well.

Please support Heidi’s work and help us to make additional border ministries possible by donating at mklm.org/border.

Thank you for your generous support!

PHOTO Jaime Rodriguez Sr./CBP via Flickr



New award honors returned missionaries

Wynn timer-Fred Victor Hinds and Cathy Breen are first recipients of Bishop McCarthy Award



| BY DEBBIE NORTHERN |

On Aug. 3, 2019, Maryknoll Lay Missioners proudly conferred its first annual Bishop McCarthy Spirit of Mission Awards for lay missionaries who continue to demonstrate outstanding dedication to the spirit of mission after their return to the United States.

The first recipients of the award are **Cathy Breen** (Class of 1989) and **Wynn timer-Fred Victor Hinds** (Class of 1994).

In 1996, Cathy Breen returned from seven years as a Maryknoll lay missionary in Bolivia to become a live-in volunteer at a Catholic Worker house of hospitality in New York City. However, her mission journey did not end there.

In 2002, Cathy traveled to Iraq as part of a peace team sponsored by Voices in the Wilderness. This became the first of many visits to Iraq, through which she formed ongoing relationships with those whose lives have been uprooted by conflict.

A prolific writer, she has shared her experiences and observations through countless articles. She currently volunteers for Voices for Creative Nonviolence, through which she continues to advocate for peace and to tell the stories of those

affected by war and violence.

Wynn timer-Fred Victor Hinds spent six years in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, with Maryknoll Lay Missioners. Since returning to Newark, New Jersey, in 2000, she has been a tireless advocate for environmental justice.

She has been active in several Newark and New Jersey-based environmental groups and currently serves as co-chair of the board of the Newark Environmental Commission. In addition, Wynn timer-Fred is the founder and executive director of Stepping Stones Resources, a nonprofit focused on seeking long-term solutions to issues that affect the environment, health and quality of life.

Reflecting on her time as a lay missionary, Wynn timer-Fred says, “I learned how unlimited the heart’s capacity to absorb and entrust love is. The way that the heart just gathers the love that people give you and the love you give—and how it heals itself during moments of anguish only to expand and persist—is what gives me the confidence and strength to continue working and fighting for a just and conscientious world.”

The Bishop McCarthy Spirit of Mission Award is named after the late **Bishop John E. McCarthy** of Austin, Texas, who died in 2018.

Throughout his life, Bishop McCarthy was a champion of social justice. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, supported the rights of migrant farmworkers and was one of the founders of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. As bishop of Austin, he established a project that provided free legal services to those in need and was one of the first bishops to call on Catholics to practice compassion for all living with HIV/AIDS.

A devoted supporter of mission in general and of Maryknoll in particular, McCarthy was also an avid promoter of laity in the church. As a result, Maryknoll Lay Missioners became one of his favorite causes. Through the years, he maintained close friendships with several lay missionaries, including **Marj Humphrey**, who remembers him as “a charismatic person of great joy, with a sharp wit, a delightful sense of humor, and a passionate commitment to poor, marginalized and stigmatized people.” For Marj, “he was the embodiment of what mission is all about.”

Maryknoll Lay Missioners hopes to continue to honor his extraordinary life and his commitment to mission by offering this award annually at the jubilee (reunion) weekend.

Over left: Wynn timer-Fred Victor Hinds receiving the Bishop McCarthy Spirit of Mission Award.

Above right: Cathy Breen serving as a Maryknoll lay missionary in Bolivia.

Debbie Northern is the Missioner Engagement and Programs Manager for Maryknoll Lay Missioners.

Make an impact with your year-end giving.



EDUCATION & LEADERSHIP



HEALTHCARE



FAITH FORMATION



JUSTICE & PEACE



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



Maryknoll Lay Missioners are agents of hope serving with those at the margins in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Your support makes it possible to send and sustain our lay missionaries in the far corners of the globe to spread hope and share God’s love.

Please consider a gift of:

- ❖ Cash, Check, Credit Card
- ❖ Securities Transfer
- ❖ IRA Rollover
- ❖ Donor Advised Funds

For more information, please visit mklm.org/donate or contact Leslie Lopez, Director of Mission Advancement at llopez@mklm.org or **(800) 867-2980**.

 **maryknoll lay missionaries**

PO Box 307
Maryknoll, NY 10545
(914) 762-6364

Maryknoll Lay Missioners is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization. EIN# 13-386453

NEWS

MKLM.ORG

Our **new website** went live Aug. 30. It offers a fresh new look, mobile responsiveness, social media integration and more compelling visual storytelling. **Check it out!**

SOLIDARITY ON TAP

Maryknoll Lay Missioners has become an official sponsor of **Solidarity on Tap**—informal gatherings around “socializing and social justice” that take place across the United States.

SYNOD REPORTER

Returned lay missionary **Barbara Fraser** had a front-row seat to the Synod for the Amazon, as she joined Catholic News Service’s team reporting on the synod from Rome.

OUT OF AFRICA



After almost 20 years of dedicated ministry in Kenya, Maryknoll lay missionary **Coralis Salvador** was poised to retire. However, inspired by the new ministry at the U.S.-Mexico border, she has decided to join **Heidi Cerneka** at the border in early 2020.



TWO DAYS OF FUN

ENTRE RÍOS, BOLIVIA

On Oct. 15-16, Maryknoll Lay Missioners’ **Social Inclusion Project** co-sponsored two days of events in Entre Ríos. More than 200 people with disabilities and their families participated in a one-kilometer race/walk, basketball, small car races, art contests, and dance demonstrations. Project coordinator **Filo Siles** was assisted by **Cortney Freshwater** and **Verónica Arriagada**. Despite heat and high humidity, the smiles, cheers, and newfound pride were more than worth the effort.



ACOMUJERZA ANNIVERSARY

ZARAGOZA, EL SALVADOR

On Sept. 24, ACOMUJERZA in Zaragoza celebrated 10 years as a legal cooperative. The **cooperative** gives women, mostly single mothers, an opportunity to earn a living by producing and selling clothing and crafts. Lay missionary **Melissa Altman** helps with communications, marketing, product development and administration. The photo shows members voting on actions and leadership positions during their annual assembly. Melissa was elected to the finance committee.



CONTEMPLATIVES IN ACTION

MWANZA, TANZANIA

In July, the Lake House of Prayer in Mwanza hosted a **Global Maryknoll Contemplative Retreat**. The 10 Maryknoll participants included priests, sisters, affiliates and lay missionaries **Judy Walter** and **Dee Dungy**. “The retreat,” Judy said, was designed to “empower Maryknoll missionaries to be contemplatives in action in our broken world” and highlight the urgent “need for a contemplative response to the overwhelming challenges in our globalized world today.”



NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER

SUBUKIA, KENYA

On Oct. 5, **Kathy Flatoff** and **Rich Tarro**, lay missionaries in Mombasa, took a 17-hour, crammed bus ride to join thousands of Kenyan Catholics for their country’s National Day of Prayer at Mary Mother of God Shrine in Subukia. The theme for the outdoor Mass was “Baptized and Sent,” Pope Francis’ theme for the Extraordinary Month of Mission in October. The Mass concluded with pleas to end corruption, one of the greatest challenges in Kenya.



PHOTO: Neil Palmer/CIAT (via Flickr)

Brazil region energized by Synod for the Amazon

The Oct. 6-27 Synod of Bishops for the Amazon in Rome was followed with keen interest by **Maryknoll lay missionaries in Brazil**. All of the missionaries took part in a pastoral theological reflection on ecology and water led by **Flávio Rocha**. **Margarita Duran** joined women from the Amazon and other rural women on a protest march in Brasilia for democracy, equality and nonviolence. **Kathy**

Bond traveled to and reported on an international meeting in Peru of women healers with a focus on indigenous spirituality. **Joanne Blaney** participated in parish and pastoral events and workshops on the synod. **Claire Stewart**, Flávio and Kathy also wrote articles for Maryknoll Lay Missioners (mklm.org/tag/amazon-synod) and the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (maryknollogc.org).

Meet the Class of 2019

Five new lay missionary candidates and one Maryknoll sister candidate are participating in this year’s 52nd orientation class, Sept. 22 to Dec. 14 on the Maryknoll campus in Ossining, New York. They are (standing from left) **Jillian Foster** from Loveland, Ohio (assigned to Haiti); **Greg Garrity**, Middlebury, Connecticut (Kenya); **Julie Lawler**, Austin, Texas (Cambodia); **Brenda Seymour**, Hudson, Massachusetts (Kenya); and (seated from left) **Sister Rolande Pendeza Kahindo**, Democratic Republic of Congo; and **Jaclyn Geyer**, Tacoma, Washington (Haiti).



Right: The girls' volleyball team of San Juan Bosco School warms up just prior to winning the Tacopaya championship.

Below: Lunchtime at San Juan Bosco School

Opposite page right: Juan Gomez teaching a computer class



PHOTO Nile Sprague



Volleyball values— one assist at a time

In a remote Andean town, Juan Gomez helps his indigenous students build their future

| BY GIOVANA SORIA AND MEINRAD SCHERER-EMUNDS |

Last February, when teachers at **Colegio San Juan Bosco** divided coaching responsibilities for the different sports teams, no one wanted to take the girls' volleyball team. "They always lose, and they're not very happy," said one of the teachers at the Catholic boarding school in the rural town of **Tacopaya** in the Bolivian Andes.

Juan Gomez, a Maryknoll lay missionary who had started working at the school the previous October, was finding it harder "to break the ice here than in El Salvador," where he had served the previous three and a half years. To him, the girls' team seemed like both a challenge

and an opportunity, so he volunteered to coach them.

He had been advised that the genders are very separated in Bolivia. "As a man, you are going to work with boys," he was told. So he wasn't entirely surprised when "at first the girls would not look me in the eye, talk to me, or even reply when I asked them a question."

He enlisted the help of a female teacher, and "little by little, as we practiced together and they saw they were playing better, things began to change."

The big breakthrough happened at the municipal tournament, where all the teams from the Tacopaya area compete.

"The last game was really hard," Juan remembers. "After we lost the first set, one of the girls was crying. It was very intense. We had to get them pumped up again."

The team rallied and won the game and the championship. "Everyone was jumping up from the benches. They were hugging, and the girls came up to me and hugged me too. I could see the pride in their faces."

Now the girls, who had never won anything before, were going to represent Tacopaya at the county tournament in Coca Pata. That meant a 12-hour bus ride and a week at the tournament for girls from poor families who had never traveled before.

"The travel alone was already eye-opening for many," Juan says. Coming from a dry mountainous area, the girls were amazed at the humid weather and the clouds that gathered every evening.

The team again did well, winning three of four games and losing only against the eventual county champion. They were a little intimidated by the city teams, who had fancy team sweat suits and shoes. The Tacopaya girls felt lucky to even have team T-shirts for their games.

For Juan, who had played competitive volleyball in high school, **volleyball became a tool for building trust as well as teaching values like perseverance, teamwork,**

self-esteem, empowerment and dignity.

Besides coaching, Juan tutors math and leads after-school activities. He also teaches sign language and provides transportation for Maryknoll Lay Missioners' Social Inclusion Project, which works to empower people with disabilities (see page 12).

Sometime after Juan arrived at San Juan Bosco School, he discovered that the Bolivian government had given the school a whole set of new computers that were sitting in a storage room. So he also volunteered to teach computer classes.

Many of the children had never used a computer. "They started from zero, but they learned fast," Juan says. "It was beautiful seeing their surprised faces when they learned new things on the computer. We started with Microsoft Paint, and there was a big 'wow,' as they figured out what they could do. **It was like opening up a whole new world.**" The computer classes have been another great way to connect with the students, especially for many

of the boys, who love learning computing.

About 90 percent of the school's students are indigenous, whose first language is Quechua. Most of their families are subsistence farmers. Some live in remote areas of the Andean mountains, from where walking to school can take up to five hours. So the boarding school allows children to get a quality education during the week and then go home for the weekend.

"Sharing life with the people here is such a privilege," Juan says. "Our very different life journeys meet in this place and time to enrich us all in a grace-filled way."

He believes that, coming from U.S. culture, "I bring a lot of baggage with me that I don't want to pass on to them. Our civilization has become dehumanized. We seem to have lost our sense of community."

By contrast, he admires the richness and humanity of the millennia-old indigenous culture he encounters in Tacopaya. "It goes all the way back to a time before the Incas—their traditions, the way they prepare and eat



PHOTO Nile Sprague

their food, make their own style of clothes, build their own musical instruments and have their music and dances."

He saw one example of indigenous values at work at last year's graduation. Whereas in the U.S. graduating students expect to receive gifts, the school's students—most from poor families—raised funds that allowed them to cook and serve a very special meal for their parents, siblings and friends.

One of Juan's main hopes is to help his students appreciate the richness of their own culture. While they do express pride in their heritage, they are also tempted by

the "garbage" they encounter on their cell phones and in TV shows, he says.

To Juan, **the indigenous culture is a precious gift**, a "world heritage" that he hopes his students will carry forward into future generations. "If I can help with that, I think it will be the most important thing I can do during my time here."

Giovana Soria is a staff writer for Maryknoll and Misioneros magazines.

To see more photos from San Juan Bosco School, visit mklm.org/volleyball-values.

Wondering if Maryknoll Lay Missioners is for you?



Join a **Discernment Retreat** to find out:

- **April 9-11** (Holy Week), Ossining, NY
- **July 24-26**, Chicago
- **October 9-11**, Los Altos, CA



Contact retreats@mklm.org or 914-467-8857 for more information and to register.

Visit mklm.org/discern



Maryknoll Lay Missioners
P.O. Box 307
Maryknoll, NY 10545-0307
mklm.org

Facebook
[MaryknollLayMissioners](https://www.facebook.com/MaryknollLayMissioners)

Instagram
[MaryknollLayMissioners](https://www.instagram.com/MaryknollLayMissioners)

Twitter
[MKLayMissioners](https://twitter.com/MKLayMissioners)

FRIENDS ACROSS BORDERS

Take a trip with us that will change your life!

Join us in a **MISSION IMMERSION TRIP** led by our missionaries.

Learn about our ministries and the communities where we live and work.

Come and see how together we are creating a more just and compassionate world.



TANZANIA



EL SALVADOR



BOLIVIA

Sign up for an immersion trip to ...

EL SALVADOR

January 31 - February 8, 2020
Deadline for signups: November 30, 2019

TANZANIA

March 11 - 22, 2020
Deadline for signups: January 11, 2020

BOLIVIA

August 2020 (Dates TBD)
Deadline for signups: June 2020 (Date TBD)

CONTACT US TODAY

Friends Across Borders
Maryknoll Lay Missioners
P.O. Box 307
Maryknoll, NY 10545-0307
Phone 914-236-3480
FAX 914-762-7362
friendsacrossborders@mklm.org
mklm.org/FAB