

Asheville Young Adult Volunteers meet challenges of a growing city

Young Adult Volunteers January 20, 2017

Volunteers build community as they work for change

by Gregg Brekke / Presbyterian News Service



YAVs (from left) Jeremy Glidden, Briana Joseph, Andy Thomas and Sammie Smith at their weekly meeting with Asheville YAV site coordinator Selena Hilemon. (Photo by Gregg Brekke)

LOUISVILLE – Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the picturesque city Asheville, North Carolina is a frequent tourist destination known for its hospitality, arts, great restaurants and breweries. Consistently ranked as one of America’s best places to live, the growth of the 86,000-person community has also been accompanied by the challenges that face many other expanding cities, and Presbyterian [Young Adult Volunteers](#) (YAVs) are there to learn and help meet these needs.

Currently in its second year as an official YAV site, the partnerships that enable volunteer opportunities started several years ago when YAV alumna, Sarah Robinson, established [Hands and Feet of Asheville](#) in an effort to match up volunteers with opportunities in the community. Connections between Hands and Feet and the YAV program were formalized in 2015 and the location plugged into the recruitment and administration resources of the [Presbyterian Mission Agency](#).

Four YAVs are in [Asheville](#) for the 2016-17 program year. [Jeremy Glidden](#) is working with Homeward Bound, an organization that assists people in moving from homelessness to more stable living situations; [Briana Joseph](#) is

working with the Hillcrest Community Center after school program, also supervising field placements of students from UNC Asheville at the site; [Sammie Smith](#) is the volunteer coordinator for Habitat for Humanity in Asheville; and [Andy Thomas](#) is working with the Asheville Poverty Initiative as the manager of 12 Baskets Café.



Sammie Smith helps direct a caller at Habitat for Humanity. (Photo by Gregg Brekke)

Smith, from Franklin, Indiana, made the transition to Asheville following graduation from Indiana University with a bachelor's degree in chemistry. A lifelong Presbyterian, she's made application to several seminaries as a next step beyond the YAC program. Smith says mentors at [Pyoca](#)—an acronym for **P**resbyterian **Y**outh **C**amp, located in Brownstown, Indiana—guided her to the YAV program. The experience of working with volunteers at Habitat for Humanity has been eye opening, helping to develop “people skills” she plans to use as she pursued further vocation in ministry.

“It's been fun to see a really thriving non-profit,” she says of the organization. “We just started our 300th house this month. I get out to the construction site at least once a week. It's cool to get out there and see the active construction site.”



Jeremy Glidden helps a Homeward Bound client move in. (Photo by Gregg Brekke)

Taking a brief break from his packed schedule of furniture delivery and moving, Glidden also says PC(USA) mentors influenced his decision to explore the YAV program following graduation from Presbyterian affiliated Grove City College. From the Finger Lake Region of Western New York, Glidden's experience has influenced him to pursue the business and entrepreneurial aspects of non-profit work.

In the first half of the program year Glidden had completed 65 move-ins, 87 donation pickups, nine moves of clients from one home to another and 37 furniture deliveries. But he loves the work, its challenges and the impact he's making on peoples' lives.

“Every day I constantly encounter different problems that I have no idea [and] no one else has anything, necessarily, to add on how to fix it,” he says of working with Homeward Bound. “Being in a situation where I have to figure it out on the spot—all that problem solving—is the best at preparing me to be adaptable by every day going into something that I'll probably not know any idea of how to do it. But we have to figure it out... we have to move these people in.”



Andy Thomas speaks with lunch guests at 12 Baskets Café. (Photo by Gregg Brekke)

Thomas is calmly instructing his volunteer servers at the 12 Baskets Café the crowd of customers begins to gather prior to lunch. The free-meal café serves between 40 and 60 customers each day, and sometimes as many as 80, relying on donations of surplus food from area restaurants to meet the needs of the mainly low-income and homeless clientele.

A partnership with Kairos West, a ministry of All Souls Episcopal Cathedral in Asheville, the ministry's goal is to "increase collaboration and decrease isolation." Explaining his belief in abundance, as is indicated in the café's name borrowed from the biblical parable—where loaves and fishes are multiplied and 12 baskets remain after everyone is fed—Thomas introduced the meal to guests, saying, "We live in a world that tells us there's not enough to go around, and at 12 Baskets we believe that's not true. We have an abundance of food... an abundance of people and an abundance of love."

This is Thomas' second year as a YAV, having spent the 2015-16 program year in Washington, D.C. He says there's a difference in how each city approaches its homeless population and sees Asheville's as a place where people "care more about trying to improve their community. There are more people willing to give of their time and their resources to help people who don't have enough."



Briana Joseph with her violin at the Hillcrest Community Center. (Photo by Gregg Brekke)

On the other side of town, Joseph, a graduate of UNC Asheville, leaves campus and arrives at the Hillcrest Community Center after school program. Situated in a subsidized housing development, the community center serves between 20 and 30 children each day. Joseph's work, in partnership with eight students from UNC Asheville, provides mentors for the kindergarten through seventh grade participants.

The only non-Presbyterian YAV in Asheville this year, Joseph saw the work at the Hillcrest Enrichment Program as a natural fit. "Anyone who knows me, knows that I really love kids," she says. "They're precious and innocent, and they absorb everything around them... That was the part of this particular site that was most intriguing to me. I look for opportunities to be part of a child's life and make a difference."

Today she's brought her violin and once students are done with their studies and some outside playtime, she brings it out and introduces them to the instrument and plays a few songs. Students line up to take turns plucking notes and running the bow across the strings. Joseph's patience and love for these eager learners comes through as they smile and laugh together.

Asheville's YAV site coordinator is Selena Hilemon. She has been the executive director Hands and Feet of Asheville since 2015 and ultimately helped shepherd the existing organization's volunteer opportunities into the YAV program.

"I still get to work with young adults and community partnerships, which is what I love to do," she says of the group's alignment with the YAV program. "We have a lot of benefits in being part of a larger organization... Hitching our cart to the national office with their national presence, and having that much larger recruitment pool, gives us better exposure and grounding. It's the difference between us existing and not existing."

As he prepares to drive to pick up more donated furniture, Glidden reflects on how important the YAV program has been for his professional development. Rather than jumping into a career track following college he feels aspects of being a volunteer—and working to help people—“allows me to do the best work I can, rather than trying to impress someone for a promotion or something like that. I get to do what I think is best to get the job done every single day, without worrying about being judged.”

Joseph agrees, noting the variety of opportunities each placement has for growth. “Through this program it is a safe space for me to branch out and try different things in the work world,” she says. “The YAV program has also challenged me to be comfortable with the unknown...”

“Not everything has to be planned out.”

*If you or someone you know is interested in a transformational year of service, [apply online](#) today! Follow [@yavprogram](#) as [current Young Adult Volunteers](#) are taking over the accounts to showcase behind-the-scene views into each of the [21 sites](#). **Applications for international placements are due February 1st**. The entire 2017-18 recruitment season is open until June 1st. For more info about YAV, or to make an [online gift](#), visit www.youngadultvolunteers.org.*

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