

An Interview with the Director of Nazareth Farm, Site Partner in the Appalachia Seminar through the Center for Social Concerns

Written by Emily Okawara

As one of the most popular and competitive sites for the Appalachia Seminar, Nazareth Farm has partnered with Notre Dame and the Center for Social Concerns since the seminar was founded. The site is available in the fall and spring, and also holds the opportunity of 8 weeks of immersion through the Summer Service Learning Project program with the Center. Brian is a Class of 2005 graduate of Notre Dame and lived in Carroll Hall as an undergraduate, and served as an Assistant Rector in O'Neill Hall while completing his Masters of Divinity at the university. He was involved in the CSC in his time here, and remembers an immersion trip to Arizona being particularly impactful.

I called Brian to chat about the partnership that the Farm has with Notre Dame through the Appalachia seminar, and he was enthusiastic about the connection. We talked about the impacts that the immersion has on the Farm community and the greater community of the surrounding area in West Virginia. He emphasized that the best thing about the Notre Dame Seminar students is that they are always very well prepared—they are a “rising tide to all other groups” and help to create fertile ground that flows over to the other volunteers not from ND as well. The understanding of the region and the issues of the region that the students have from 5 sessions of class pre-immersion really help them to understand what it’s all about in interactions with the homeowners and with the group of volunteers, doing anything from home repair to daily farm chores. “These are students that typically come with some sort of experience with service, and that’s really helpful,” Suehs-Vassel says. Notre Dame students are regarded by the organization with a reputation of people who are really passionate about social justice and the dynamics of charity and justice. They are known for being welcoming and accepting, and the Farm community looks forward to their arrival. He says that the Notre Dame students are typically among the volunteers that are most open to prayer and the faith cornerstone. This creates positive peer relationship and an environment that allows the entire group there that week to get the most out of the service they are doing and learning through. He describes ND volunteers as “open and respectful” and as a “huge asset.”

When asked what could be done to strengthen the partnership, Suehs-Vassel responded that he wished there were more opportunities for students to return to the Farm after their immersion experience!

Brian and the staff at Nazareth Farm, as well as across the other sites, are why the Appalachia Seminar and immersions are so successful—without partners to welcome students into their homes and their work, Notre Dame students would not have the incredible opportunities they have through the program now. Thanks Brian!

“Brian Suehs-Vassel joined Nazareth Farm in January of 2014. Brian’s deepest passion for ministry involves helping young adults discover their vocation – how their unique God-given talents can meet the needs of God’s people. He is excited about how this passion can be lived out as a member of the Nazareth Farm community and is very humbled to get the opportunity to join in the great work that has been happening at Nazareth Farm for over 3 decades.”

~Quoted from the Nazareth Farm Website