

# After 15 years, Notre Dame-AmeriCorps still going strong

Jessica Tural was intent on going to law school when she decided to give a year of service through Notre Dame Mission Volunteer – a federally funded AmeriCorps program based in Baltimore. Tural volunteered to help prisoners reclaim their lives – an experience that so moved her that she completely shifted her career goals. The Baltimore native decided to become a psychologist and started “Hand in Hand,” a nonprofit focused on reducing juvenile recidivism in the city.

“It really felt like a spiritual awakening,” said Tural, a 24-year-old graduate of The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. “I want to dedicate my life to healing hurting people.”

Tural’s story isn’t that uncommon. Many of the young adults who serve through Notre Dame-AmeriCorps go on to give their lives to service. It’s one of the greatest successes of the program, according to Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Katherine Corr, Notre Dame-AmeriCorps executive director.

“I was with the Freedom Riders in the 1960s,” Sister Katherine said. “These are the Freedom Riders of the future. They see service as a solution and they are choosing to help make a difference.”

Founded 15 years ago by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Notre Dame-AmeriCorps has grown from just six volunteers to 375. They give a year of service and receive a modest stipend of \$11,800. After completing their service, they are awarded a \$5,350 grant to pay for student loans or for educational expenses. Some go on to serve a second year in the program.

Notre Dame-AmeriCorps volunteers serve in 18 states across the country, including 10 locations in Baltimore such as Ss. James and John School, the Julie Community Center and the Caroline Center. There are 17 members currently serving in Baltimore, four of whom are in their second year.

Believing that education is the key to eradicating poverty, the organization focuses

on providing academic assistance in and outside the classroom, mentoring, job readiness training, conflict resolution and similar efforts. Since its launch, Notre Dame-AmeriCorps volunteers have tutored 72,251 children and 23,056 adults.

Sister Katherine, who has headed the program throughout its existence, noted that there are far more applicants than available positions. Last year, Notre Dame-AmeriCorps received more than 5,000 applications to fill 375 full-time positions.

Catherine Stephens, a 22-year-old parishioner of St. John in Columbia, said her eyes were opened by volunteering in the program this year. As a teen, she had often visited Baltimore to go to Orioles games and the Inner Harbor.

"I didn't know about where tourists didn't go," said Stephens, who helped people earn their GEDs and prepared them for the workforce at the Julie Community Center. Stephens signed up for another year with Notre Dame-AmeriCorps, and will soon be helping those in prison and mentoring children of parents who are incarcerated.

"I'm more motivated to get at the root of the problem," Stephens said.

Jeremy Mitchell, a 25-year-old Notre Dame-AmeriCorps alumnus who volunteered two years in California, said the experience taught him the intrinsic value of seeing the world from another person's perspective.

"For me, it's a deeply authentic experience," he said. "It teaches you the true meaning of compassion."

Mitchell said some of his friends work simply to earn a good paycheck and have fun on the weekend.

"That's unacceptable to me now," he said.

Since AmeriCorps was established by President Bill Clinton as a kind of "domestic Peace Corps," it has faced threats of defunding in the Congress. That's no different this year. Sister Katherine is confident that lawmakers will again recognize the importance of the program. She is optimistic that funding will be approved for her program in the next few weeks. Sister Katherine is also working with Georgia

Congressman John Lewis on legislation to eliminate federal taxation on the education grants received by volunteers through the program.

“Some on the Hill think it’s time to eliminate us,” Sister Katherine said. “I can’t fathom that would happen. There’s just too much tremendous work being done by our volunteers.”