

Volunteer keeps blog as resource for others

WASHINGTON - "You leave your family, you leave your friends, and you know that you're going to be gone for two years," said Patrick Furlong. "A lot changes. When I get back, I don't know what it's going to be like."

Leaving the United States for two years, living on \$60 a month and washing his laundry by hand wasn't where Furlong expected to find himself in five years when he graduated from high school and left his native Albuquerque, N.M., to attend Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

But Furlong's experiences in college led him down a path of service that continues to inspire and amaze not just him, but anyone who reads the Web log, or blog, he writes as a witness to his life.

Furlong has been serving with the Holy Cross Associates for the last 12 months. He keeps his blog - <https://pjfurlong.blogspot.com> - with the hope that college students considering volunteer work after graduation might catch a glimpse of what it is like in the trenches.

He described his doubts, his trials and the joy he has found as a volunteer with the Holy Cross Associates in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service this summer from Santiago, Chile. In August he headed to another volunteer position in Quito, Ecuador, to teach poor children and their parents 12 hours a day, five days a week.

Furlong said his decision to commit to a service program came from the experiences he had on alternative school-break trips in college. Serving in places such as Kentucky, Guatemala, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Mexico introduced Furlong to a poverty he couldn't ignore.

He recalled a woman he met after a hard day in Mexico whose comments crystallized his need to volunteer.

"She said, 'You have an obligation to do something about this. You've seen it. You can't turn your back on it,'" he said. "That's what it means to get ruined by poverty. After you've seen what you've seen, you can't forget it."

Furlong's blog isn't an advertisement. He said his life as a volunteer has been a joyful but difficult one. There are things he wished he had known before he got to

Chile, but they are things that can't be learned from brochures or recruiters.

He said he hopes his blog will provide answers to questions that potential volunteers don't even know they have, volunteers who might be - as he was - a little naive about life as a volunteer.

Furlong said the key for potential volunteers is that they understand there are different types of programs, some that focus on work and others that focus on the spiritual development of the volunteers.

The life Furlong found when he arrived in Chile was not what he expected. He quickly learned that it's important not only to serve, but to find a program that fits one's personality.

The personal tone of comments he posts on his blog allows readers to gauge for themselves whether they are interested in an experience like his. If not, Furlong provides links to the blogs of nine other volunteers serving in South America, the South Pacific and within the United States.

Furlong's blog posts deal with everything from encountering racism in Chile, to hearing bits and pieces about the Virginia Tech shooting from a Chilean woman at the post office, to how he had to pull a group of orphaned boys off a handicapped child they were beating.

In another post, Furlong tells how he learned about love and saw the face of God in a 13-year-old orphan girl named Paola.

Although it was a little rough at first, Furlong said serving as a volunteer in a foreign country has opened him to experiences he could never have had as a tourist abroad. He also is more grateful for the small blessings in his life.

"To be invited into people's homes and pass the day with them, it's something rich and unique," he said. "I try to give an accurate picture of what I'm going through, but also to tell the stories of the people here, the stories of the kids I work with at the orphanage who are abandoned.

"It makes some people uncomfortable, but I think it's important that we tell stories, whether they be good or bad. The stories need to be told," he said.

When he started the program, Furlong said his fears ranged from having to compromise his eating habits with meals of beans and tomatoes to missing his friends and family. The worst, he said, was leaving his mother, who lives alone in New Mexico.

"One of the hardest things for me is to think ... is she doing OK?" he said. "Should I

be home? Am I a bad son for being halfway across the world?"

He said people who consider volunteering deserve to hear about the bad days and the self-doubt, along with the highs of traveling and serving, but in many ways volunteering abroad after college is no different from moving out of town and starting a job.

Either way, starting something new involves losing some of what you leave behind, he said. "The reality is things change. Yeah, I probably lost friends (being) down here. I've lost contact with some; our relationships have changed."