

At the heart of the matter

Young Catholic returns from year of volunteering abroad

Auger to speak at campus ministry retreat

by KATIE MOORE

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CHARLOTTE — In 2006 Stephanie Auger attended a “Give Your Heart Away” community service weekend sponsored by the diocesan Catholic Campus Ministry.

That weekend had a profound impact on her life and the direction it would take during the next two years — it was then weekend that Auger was inspired to dedicate a year of her life to serving others.

“On the last day of the retreat, they had two or three people who had just volunteered come and give their personal accounts,” said Auger, a parishioner of St. James the Greater Church in Concord.

“Hearing other people talk about their own experiences, that made me really want to do it,” she said.

“I decided I didn’t want to just go straight into graduate school or a job,” said Auger. “I new I wanted to do something; I just wasn’t sure what.”

Fast forward three years and Auger has just returned from a year of volunteering in the Dominican Republic.

This weekend Feb. 13-16, she will attend the fifth annual “Give Your Heart Away” community service weekend at the Catholic Conference Center in Hickory. But this time she will be the one giving a first-hand account of her experience.

Good Samaritan

Auger first traveled to the Dominican Republic on a two-week medical mission last January with a group called Intercultural Nursing.

She assisted the group of nurses at a medical clinic in a remote area on the western part of the island near the border of Haiti.

While there, she was introduced to Sister of St. Joseph Beatrice Barry from Long Island, N.Y., who has been serving the sick of the Dominican Republic for the past 30 years. Sister Barry offered Auger a spot serving at her medical hospitality house, La Posada del Buen Samaritano, or “The Inn of the Good Samaritan.”

Within two-weeks of returning home from the medical mission, Auger boarded a plane and went back.

“This was the craziest decision I’ve ever made in my life, but I couldn’t imagine not going back,” said Auger. “You don’t say no to something like that.”

While volunteering at the hospitality house, Auger worked closely with sick people from both the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Auger lived in the house with Sister Barry and anywhere from 15 to 20 patients at time, mostly children with cancer, HIV, AIDS, severe burns or orthopedic problems.

The most rewarding part of the experience was “the relationships I formed with the kids in the house,” said Auger.

There was one child in particular, Alberto, a 16-year-old Haitian who was being treated for lymphoma.

“He was the love of my life,” Auger said. “We really bonded.”

Auger received daily Spanish tutoring for the first two-and-a-half months of her stay. But for the most part, she wasn’t given a lot of time to ease into her surroundings. Driving in Santo Domingo definitely took some getting used to.

“There’s no rules,” she said jokingly, and “they don’t pay attention to the lights.”

Her daily responsibilities included driving patients to hospitals, clinics and labs; food shopping; and buying medication.

“If they were kids and they couldn’t really talk to the doctor, I would talk for them,” she said.

Adjusting and focusing

When Auger speaks at “Give Your Heart Away” this weekend, she plans to share how the experience has impacted her life.

“It’s changed me, in a good way,” she said.

She wants the students to know how fulfilling a volunteer experience, like the one she had, can be.

Although she credits the good work of the many domestic volunteer organizations here in the United States, she said there is definitely something to be gained from living abroad.

“I think it’s really important for people to leave the United States — to see how other people live,” she said. “You become so appreciative of everything you have.”

Auger is also likely to share some of the challenges she encountered while living in a developing country — such as not being able to drink the water, take hot showers or flush toilet paper down the toilet.

“I ate rice and beans almost every day for a year,” she said.

And she had to adapt culturally.

“It’s hard to be a woman, especially an American woman in the Dominican Republic,” said Auger who had a hard time blending in with her tall frame, fair skin, blue eyes and blonde hair.

“It was hard adjusting to all the attention I was getting as a white person,” she said.

Her experience also has changed her plans for the future.

“Before, I wasn’t really thinking about any kind of job where I would be serving others,” she said.

Now, she is considering going to nursing school or graduate school for international studies.

Sewing seeds

Whether she goes into the medical profession, works for a nonprofit organizations or immigration services, she knows that she wants a job that is focused on helping others.

“In campus ministry we sow seeds of faith, hope and justice, and we pray that our students will answer the call to do more for our church,” said Mary Wright, director of diocesan campus ministry.

“Stephanie (Auger) is a great example of a student saying yes and giving back to the community through service,” she said.

This year approximately 70 college students from around the diocese are expected to participate in the “Give Your Heart Away” weekend.

On Saturday the students will take part in a variety of service projects at several locations in the Hickory area.

Afterwards, they will have a chance to reflect on the service projects in the context of Catholic social teaching, as well as spend time in prayer and fellowship.

On Sunday there will be a panel discussion on living a life of service, at which time Auger will share her story.

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