



**2023 Recipient ~ Ryan Irving
Fordham Preparatory School, Class of 2023**

"Faith, scholarship, and service."

As I stood with my two parents in the Commons as a newly accepted Fordham Prep student, these words echoed through the overhead speakers as the three pillars of the Fordham Prep experience.

On that eighth-grade evening, surrounded by hundreds of unfamiliar faces in an unfamiliar building, I saw myself as an unsure piece in the larger puzzle of my next four years. I had no idea the larger picture this community would assemble over my high school experience, but I was slowly learning the model my puzzle was supposed to resemble: a model of faith, scholarship, and service.

Raised in a Catholic household with two deeply faithful parents, I knew my puzzle piece would fit right into the corner of faith. So far, so good.

Having graduated at the top of my middle school class, I knew my puzzle piece would similarly fit into the corner of scholarship. My puzzle was coming together.

However, the final model of this puzzle – service – broke down my assurance as quickly as it might take a four-year-old to gleefully destroy any assembled puzzle. When had I ever served? Sure, I helped my parents around the house, washing the dishes or walking our dog. I had spent afternoons with my orchestra and choir in elderly facilities, playing the cello or singing the occasional "Happy Birthday" for the nursing home community. However, while these actions certainly held meaning, they never felt like service. I never saw myself as having accomplished any *real* change, and so I never saw myself as having participated in any *real* service. To me, these actions were just convenient responsibilities requiring nothing except the willingness to listen to my parents or participate in a fun extra-curricular activity.

In fact, it was not until late in my sophomore year when I received arguably the greatest gift of my Fordham Prep education: The realization that I was wrong. *Real* service was more profound – and more simple – than I ever could have imagined.

At the end of my sophomore year, nine students and I spent a week serving the community of Camden, New Jersey. While many of our friends were starting their summers at the Jersey shore riding on surfboards, the ten of us were riding on an overheated and undersized bus, headed to one of the most impoverished cities in the United States: Camden, New Jersey. There, I saw the reality of social injustice at every corner: in the tortured faces of those at the grocery store hoping to find an affordable meal on food-stamps; in the careful tread of little league

players as they watched their step for loose needles on the field; in the broken streets of an underfunded and abandoned city, left to suffer in poverty, violence, and an unceasing drug trade.

The following summer, my friends and I traveled to Scott County, Tennessee, where we helped build an affordable home with Habitat for Humanity. Like our experience in Camden, we found ourselves confronted with the reality of the world existent beyond our own spheres: parents burdened with the task of raising children without proximity to a hospital, without equitable access to high-quality education, and without a sustainable place to call home.

The next year, I faced the beginning of my personal senior service project, which called for me to serve as a volunteer piano teacher in an underprivileged community of young families who otherwise could not afford music lessons for their children. Unlike the music lessons of my childhood, there was no receptionist to greet me at this organization with a staff of professional teachers; instead, I found myself spending my Saturday mornings in a dimly lit, dusty basement of a local church filled with used and partly broken keyboards, surrounded by a community with which I had very little in common (including my first language, which is certainly not Spanish).

In each of these three experiences, I left my service with great desolation (and even a trip to the hospital once, after getting a rough speck of church-basement-dust stuck behind my eyelid for over twenty-four hours!): Where was God in the poverty of Camden, in the lack of affordable housing in Scott County, in the lack of opportunity my innocent students faced in their life?

While these questions remain a great mystery, God strangely never appeared more present to me than through these experiences of service. In Camden, I bore witness to citizens with a profound love for their own community, willing to share a conversation (and a laugh!) as we worked together to declutter a children facility or rip weeds from a vegetation cite. In Scott County, I saw pure hope in the eyes of the home recipient, who wore a beaming smile as our group handed her the keys to her new home. As a piano teacher, I found myself forming emotional attachments to the students I taught each week, who brought me stories of their favorite video games, their least favorite classes, and the genuine curiosity to learn about music. (My 3rd grader is also teaching me Spanish!).

Each of these formal service experiences blessed me with grace – a true communication of the presence of God in the world. This sense of grace taught me service delivers the love of God - a lesson imprinted into me like a meaningful tattoo. Earlier this year, I ran into Adam – a freshman living with autism – at the local bagel store in my community. Inspired by the simple mission to be “man for others,” I felt called to ask if Adam wanted to hang out after I finished teaching piano. Half a year later, Adam and I have spent nearly every Saturday afternoon together on drives in my car, sharing the our week experiences and giving one another advice on everything from schoolwork, to bullies, to girls. It was always important to me this weekend tradition remained private, separate from my formal service curriculum. My friendship with Adam was not about credit or hours; it was about treating Adam with the dignity so many had denied him on account of his disability.

Harkening back to eighth grade, I have learned – in a way - I was correct. In a world of suffering, we certainly need *real* service. Experience has taught me, however, as long as one is doing something for the benefit of another, there can only be *real* service. Walking my dog so my exhausted father could go to sleep was *real* service, just as helping an underclassman with his homework was service, just as working alongside the impoverished was service. Service is service, is service, is service.

As I conclude this essay, a letter from one of my students sits in my drawer, reading, "I luv you, Rian" (spelling errors and all). A different student shared with me I am "his favorite teacher," Adam knows me as "his best friend," and a letter from Camden detailing my service rests next to a framed picture of my Tennessee service group on my shelf. Service has shown me the love of God. It's the reason Adam and I plan to hang out this Saturday; it's the reason I have remained a piano teacher months after my hours exceeded my requirement; it's the reason my cross from Camden – my first service experience – hangs above my work desk, inspiring me to do the *real* service for the rest of my life: whether it calls for a trip to another state or just a conversation with a new friend.