Moving to the Heart of Service
By: Celina Santiago, 2016-2017 Volunteer
A graduate of Villanova University

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. ~1 Peter 4:10

As we, the volunteer community, walked and drove around Baltimore during our first week with Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry, I could not help but take in everything around me. Entering this new city, I saw block after block of boarded up houses, a closed down library, and a multitude of corner stores, yet few places with substantial nutritious food. I saw deserted lots full of garbage and few people out on the streets, although the days were pleasant. I saw street benches that read Baltimore: The Greatest City in America alongside remnants of beautiful brick houses, now with broken windows and surrounded by rubble, visible signs of the changes the neighborhood had undergone.

As my first impressions sank in, I asked myself what I was doing here, once again reflecting on the questions that had been posed to me months prior to arrival. What does it mean that you’re doing a year of service? So what exactly are you doing this year? Where are you living? Why would you do that? Others, who had done a year or more of service, encouraged me. I loved my year of service, it changed my life! I learned more about myself than I could’ve ever imagined. Now, I was here in Baltimore and the reality of my year of service was beginning to unfold.

I think service had become a buzz word in our society, sometimes glamorized as the ‘thing’ to do. The widely accepted belief is: whatever a person’s motivation may be, doing something will help in some way. As long as the walls are painted, the garden is weeded, the donation closet is organized; good results will be the effect of action.

For a long time, I held this perception of service as well; service equaled action. It meant doing something and thereby accomplishing something. Throughout my college experience of service, my view changed. I began to understand, for the first time, the concept of ministry of presence. I realized after my first weeklong service trip that while these actions were not bad, I learned more from the trip than I could ever give. By making connections with people and being present during everything I was doing and experiencing, I heard the stories of the people and places I encountered and carried these stories with me.

During my time with BSVM, my understanding of service has continued to expand and grow. Service is no longer actions separate from my everyday life. With my community members, service is integrated into the very heart of everything that we do. It is not something we can step away from. As a community, we serve each other each day, mindfully taking steps to be more intentional in motivating each other, challenging each other, and being present to each other. As a community, we serve our neighborhood by being present to the people of southwest Baltimore. One way that we do this is by picking up trash on our block and enjoying the grassy
area across the street. As we learned during BSVM orientation, it is through small acts like this that we can recognize and honor the life and dignity of our neighbors.

Serving within my ministry placement site at the Women’s Resource Center is also a daily lesson in evaluating and reevaluating the meaning of service. The Women’s Resource Center is tucked away among row houses, a place you would likely miss if you were not looking for it. It is a place where we have the opportunity to help each other feel worthy and dignified as we work together to keep the space clean, intentionally organize the clothing donations, cook the meals and create engaging workshops.

The translation of Bon Secours is “good help.” In the short time I have been here, I have learned that “good help” will mean something different to every single person that walks through the doors of our Women’s Resource Center. In our society, driven by achievement, learning to serve by being present is often difficult. The most important thing I may do today is to take my time making breakfast for our ladies, knowing that it will not solve each problem that they carry into our shelter, but also knowing that in each, “Hey the eggs are really good today, what did you do to these eggs?” I learn more about what it means to be intentional, to be present, and to serve wholeheartedly as Christ did.

As we walked and drove around Baltimore during our first days as a community, it would have been silly for us to think we alone could change an entire city; a city with a long history that lead to the disparities we saw. Even so, I am beginning to understand that through serving here we have the opportunity to see something new. We have the chance to see a place forgotten by many, a place many people touring Baltimore will never visit and people living in other parts of the city will never see. I could have visited the city of Baltimore many times before coming to live here and I still would not have seen Baltimore the way I see it now, the way I will see it one year from now. Service is not about creating something out of nothing, but about being present enough to actually see the life and lived hidden by claims that there is nothing here and honoring this life and the lives of those we meet. The stories of those we encounter each day become the story of the Baltimore that we see.