A Balancing Act
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If there is a definition of one word that has changed the most for me over the last few years, it’s probably the definition of the word ‘service’. This evolution has definitely continued during my time serving at Bon Secours Baltimore Hospital as a Bon Secours Volunteer. I think often about the right way to serve, or if certain things qualify as service and other things don’t qualify as service. I may not have any more concrete answers to these questions than I did before coming to Baltimore, but I have begun to realize that this ambiguity may be an answer in itself. Perhaps the reason it’s so hard to determine a formula for the correct way to serve is because it’s not black and white, but a mixture of many different aspects. Indeed, everything I’ve learned about service this year seems to come back to another word, one that coincidentally means an equal distribution of many different objects or ideas: balance.

One of the most important ways that balance has influenced my work this year has been through the types of relationships that I’ve formed with patients. In my role as a Patient Liaison in the St. Martin’s Inpatient Unit, I spend time with many different patients trying to address as many of their needs as possible. I feel blessed for every interaction I get to have, but the work can be draining sometimes, especially since it’s my first time working in a healthcare environment.

This week, a patient whose room I entered and exited probably 10 times in a 30-minute span, to get him snacks, crossword puzzles and information from his care providers, showed his gratitude by asking me a few simple questions about my life. It was a small gesture, but it meant so much. He seemed to be saying that if the roles were reversed and I was the one lying in that hospital bed, he would have done everything he could to help me too. After such conversations, I can’t help but feel refreshed, recharged, and ready for whatever other obstacles I may encounter that day. Moments like these serve as testaments to the power of service done between two people who view the other as an equal. It is a balanced equation.

It is also necessary for me to balance when a patient’s request is best addressed through a ministry of presence approach versus a more concrete action. For example, while I truly enjoy talking with and hearing the stories of patients, sometimes what a patient seems to need most is something more tangible. In these situations, giving the patient something simple like ChapStick or graham crackers can be the type of service that makes the patient most grateful. Sometimes this even opens the door for a longer interaction that may not have otherwise happened. These scenarios remind me how important it is to let each individual define his or her own needs. I strive to be an effective listener when talking with a patient, but a major part of my ministry involves realizing that a conversation may not be something the patient wants. In these cases, I must respect the patient’s wishes.

I think the balance illustrated in these examples is crucial because it makes it impossible for me to fall into a savior complex, viewing service simply as one who has more giving to one who has less. That is an imbalanced ideology. When I have an interaction with a patient that feels balanced, it reminds
me of a family. Members of a family seek to make their relationships reciprocal, with equal parts they give and take. Families also contribute to each other not only through emotional support and quality time, but through chores and other physical acts of service as well. The more I focus on balance, the more essential I feel it is to the definition of service because it allows me to approach what I’m doing as if I am serving my own family. And in the end, since the patients I work with are my brothers and sisters in Christ, I wouldn’t want it to feel like anything else.

Gerard Ondrey (Back Left) with his BSVM community; Photo courtesy of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry
Gerard Ondrey (right) with fellow volunteer Nicole Odlum; Photo Courtesy of Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry

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