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Work at Jamaican boys' school taught lawyer to be 'outwardly focused'

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Oct. 15, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Author's note: It is with a heavy heart that we bade farewell toDave Cox[1], who died last week after a short illness. We are grateful that Providence gave us a chance to make this good man better known through our conversation.

This past summer, I spent some time with a home caregiver from Jamaica. I asked her if she had heard about the Alpha Boys' School and orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy in Kingston. She said she had but had never seen it because it's located in a very dangerous part of the city -- a part tourists never visit. A week later, I read Jay Sullivan's book about his time at the Alpha mission, *Raising Gentle Men: Lives at the Orphanage Edge [2]*.

Sr. Camille: Jay, what brought you there?

Sullivan: Boston College. In the 1980s, BC offered recent graduates the opportunity to spend a year or two as a teacher at a Jesuit high school in one of the mission countries of the New England Province, which included Jamaica, Belize and Egypt. The program subsequently became the Jesuit International Volunteer Program. I believe this program has helped hundreds of eager college students find an opportunity to be "men and women for others." I taught at St. George's College, a Jesuit high school. While there, I volunteered at Alpha Boys' School and eventually moved in to work with the boys there.

Although your in-depth experience took place more than a quarter century ago, you've returned many times. What draws you back?

I'm drawn back by a feeling of home and belonging. What brings us back to any place we've loved? Our schools, our hometown, our favorite travel spot -- they draw us back because they are the places where we found something special or found a special part of ourselves.

Your book begins and ends with Morris Mathers. Why is he a central character?

Many of the characters in the book are composites of several people, but 10-year-old Morris is an actual person, though I have changed his name in the book. Morris was at Alpha for only a few weeks, and yet I remember him for what he represented. He was vulnerable, dangerous, smart, conniving and, in many ways, just another boy. He challenged me to think about why I was in Jamaica and what value I thought I could possibly add. Because he was such a child of the streets, his impact at Alpha was striking. When he left, I promised myself I would not just forget him the way I had already forgotten so many others.

As the only man close to the sisters in the convent and the only big brother to 250 boys who came to Alpha scarred by abuse, abandonment and delinquency, you taught and learned from the inhabitants of that world, so different from your own. Who most touched you?

I was closest to the late Sister Magdalen and learned so much from watching her. She found a way to turn every

conversation and moment with one of the boys into a teaching moment. Morris had a lasting impact because of his behavior, but Desmond, Q, Richard and O'Brien were like younger brothers to me. The opportunity to watch them grow over the course of two years was a great gift.

Your book describes enduring relationships with some of the sisters. Please comment.

Sister Magdalen and I were very similar in temperament and in the way we communicated. She had a story for everything. Many of the more colorful side notes in the book are really the snippets of life that she would share with me while she was racing from one task or project to the next. We all learn through stories. When we listen to Jesus' parables in the Gospels, we envision him taking his time, speaking slowly, making a point. Sister's stories were more frenetic, delivered as asides, often hysterical given their context, and usually containing a universal truth or wry comment on life. Given that she cared for the 96 boys of Alpha's Junior Home largely alone, following her through the day felt like watching the theater of the absurd. I loved it.

And what of the boys of Alpha?

Desmond was a teenager when I lived at Alpha. He was the same age as my own younger brother back home. We stayed close over the years. I've watched him work toward his college degree, get married, have two children and take on his own mission as a youth minister in a tough Kingston neighborhood. He and his son have visited my family in New York. He is simply part of my life. Likewise, I've stayed in touch with Q, though he was just a child when I was at Alpha, so we weren't growing up together the way I was with Desmond. I wish I had stayed closer to more of them, but life has a way of getting in the way.

What life experiences did they bring to the table?

Given that all of the boys came from tough backgrounds of poverty and often violence, it's amazing how diverse their lives had been before coming to Alpha. They were as unique and special as any group of people you could meet.

What was your life like after leaving Alpha?

Busy! Law school. Two years as in-house attorney at Covenant House helping runaway and homeless kids. Marriage, followed quickly by four kids. A corporate law practice and a house in the suburbs. For the last 15 years, I have helped run a consulting firm.

This week, I have been getting my oldest three off to their colleges. It all goes by in a blur. And yet it's been easy to keep Alpha in mind as the years sped by. When I returned from Jamaica, my older sister, Laurie, created a collage of some of my pictures of the boys and sisters. It's been hanging in the hall of our house for 20-plus years. It was a terrific gift and a reminder of the terrific gift Alpha was to me.

Is your current work a byproduct of your faith as your time at Alpha most certainly was?

Currently, I help run a 50-person communication consulting firm, Exec|Comm. We teach business professionals how to give more convincing presentations, write better documents and emails, negotiate tougher deals, and build better relationships with clients and colleagues. Even though we offer a broad range of skills, there's a common theme to all of our classes. We teach people that we're all more effective as communicators if we focus less on ourselves and our own needs and more on others and what they need. It's very rewarding to have a career based on helping people be more outwardly focused. It's clearly how Magdalen and the other sisters led their lives. They lived that way out of a sense of Christian mission. It's both ironic and great that the same approach not only makes us better people, but it makes us more effective in what we do.

Did your parents or siblings appreciate your dedication to Alpha?

My parents and some of my siblings visited me in Kingston. They were only there for a few days but understood implicitly the impact the place had on my life. They always supported me in anything I did connected to Alpha. My mother had an uncle, Fr. Andy Cervini, who was a Jesuit missionary in the Philippines. He and his work were the focus of her large extended Italian family. I think she saw my time in Jamaica as a parallel to her uncle's.

Please say something about them and your childhood -- where you lived and were educated.

I grew up in a close Irish-Italian family with one brother and four sisters. We moved around a lot when I was younger, starting in Fall River, Mass., passing two years in Toronto and landing ultimately in Pleasantville, N.Y. When my wife and I moved out of New York City, Pleasantville was the obvious place to settle. I attended five grade schools (three Catholic and two public). For whatever reason, I was very conscious even as a child of the difference in their approaches.

Where did you meet your wife?

After eight years in her family's food distribution company, Mary took a sabbatical to join the Covenant House faith community. Members of the faith community work full-time at the agency but also live together and follow a Franciscan order of prayer (morning prayer, Mass before supper, and evening prayers). They also learn to live on $12 per week. (Yes, $12 per week. That's not a typo!) Mary lived first in Toronto and then in New York, working at Covenant House as a child care worker and then as the ombudsman. As ombudsman, she was an independent voice for the kids to make sure they felt they had an ally within the agency to represent their interests. She started in New York the same day I started at the agency as the lawyer. We worked closely every day with some very tough kids on some thorny issues. Her own sense of faith and strong family background helped her serve the kids by providing structure and discipline. Her days were chaotic and fast-paced, and she never had time for lunch. I used to bring her a milkshake or ice cream in the middle of the afternoon. I think it won her over. For some women it's furs. For others, jewelry. For her, it was dairy products.

Has she ever journeyed to Kingston?

Mary and I traveled to Jamaica when we were dating and stayed at Alpha. It was important to me that she meet Sister Magdalen. It helped years later when I asked her if we could name our second daughter Magdalen. She didn't hesitate.

Your dedicating the proceeds of your book to the Jesuits and Sisters of Mercy testifies to your continued loyalty to them. Please explain.

Mary and I have supported Alpha in various ways over the years. The book was just one more way to help two great institutions, Alpha and St. George's, that gave so much to me. It's easy these days to poke fun at people in religious life or to think of them as one-dimensional stereotypes rather than the complex, multitalented and multifaceted people they are. The nuns and priests I've met have been tremendous role models for me not because of their saintliness, but mostly through their utter humanity. In spite of being as flawed as the rest of us, they just keep trying to do God's will as they see it. I thought everyone deserved to know their story.

You know, Jay, I've been to Alpha twice and each year raise money for that institution through the sale of Christmas cards made by death row inmates. I must confess having a personal interest in your efforts, past and present. Did your experience at Alpha express or affect your faith?

Absolutely.

How?

Bible stories are nice. Mass is important. Seeing faith in action, particularly in tough environments, brings everything into perspective. It makes faith real instead of a concept. When you watch the nuns at Alpha and the priests at St. George's and the laypeople in both institutions, you suddenly say, "Oh, that's what it's all about!" It makes everything clear.

How do you pray?

I say the Prayer of St. Francis every day on my morning commute. I add one word: At the start, I say, "Lord, make me a channel of your peace *today*." I reflect on the conversations I need to have that day and where I am likely to see hatred (rarely), injury (occasionally), doubt (often), despair (usually hidden), darkness (some people get moody), and sadness (heard in voices more often than seen on faces). And I think about where I can provide love, pardon, faith, hope, light and joy. Fortunately, I have a long train ride in the morning.

What in contemporary Catholicism encourages you?

I'm encouraged by the vibrancy I see in so many churches, particularly in young people. The church is a dynamic, living organism, constantly evolving while staying true to the tenets of the faith. Even when there's conflict in the church -- different factions trying to assert their own perception of Christ's message -- each side in the debate seems to respect that the other side is approaching the conversation from a position of integrity and with motives that are pure. There are many disagreements on what we each think Christ wanted, but we seem to trust that we each want Christ.

Is there anything you would change?

The church is the people. When I think of what I would change in the church, I start by thinking of what I have to change in myself. First, I would like to find time to read the Bible more often. Second, I used to attend daily Mass on my lunch hour. I look forward to when my work life will allow that again. Finally, I hope I eventually stop making excuses for why I can't get to the first two things on the list.

Would you encourage today's college students to volunteer in places that could use support?

Yes. I will be speaking at college campuses this fall to encourage students to do exactly that. Loyola University Maryland, Oct. 28. Others TBD.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

Two things I wished you had asked.

First: What about humor and faith?

When trying to live our faith, I find it very important to keep a sense of humor. If our own shortcomings, blind spots and good intentions that lead to lousy outcomes don't give us cause to laugh every day, we're missing a big opportunity to learn and grow.

Second, where can people buy your book?

I'm so glad you asked. It's available on Amazon.com [2] and at BN.com [3]. It will make a wonderful Christmas

gift for everyone you know.

I agree. Thanks, Jay.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [4] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert signup [5].

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