



The 2018 international Youth Justice Forum at Holy Names University in Oakland, California, drew Holy Names high school students – and Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary – from the U.S., Canada and Lesotho in southern Africa. A hands-on project at City Slicker Farm in Oakland provided insight about affordable food as a universal human right. *Photos, this page and next: Avery Haller. Article below: Courtesy of Holy Names University*

Empathy, activist mindset boosted for 2018 SNJM Youth Justice Forum participants

It's the first full day of an international youth conference and five girls from different points on the globe find themselves seated together at a Holy Names University picnic bench contemplating the unthinkable: If forced to flee their home country, what single item would each pack to assist in their survival?

Each participant wears a thin turquoise scarf draped around her neck or tied in her hair, signifying that she has been assigned to the same “family” for an immersive exercise in living as a refugee.

Reviewing the packing list options, such as flashlight or small tent, printed on an instruction sheet given to each group, Natalie of Seattle gets down to business. “A first aid kit, definitely,” she says.

“Are we supposed to choose based on our role,” asks Olivia of Portland, Oregon. “If I’m a 9-year-old girl, I want to bring a doll.”

Meet the “Michaels family:” Natalie assumes the role of mother, and Andrea of Montreal stands in as father. Their “kids” are: Olivia (9-year-old daughter), Anicia of Lesotho (5-year-old daughter), and Ashlynn of Winnipeg, Manitoba (2-year-old son). Over the next 3 hours, the team will take flight from their homeland, lose possessions, live in temporary shelter, treat wounds, and finally immigrate to a new country.

Strangers before today, collectively they’ve traveled nearly 17,000 miles for this meeting, part of the SNJM Youth Justice Forum VI, held every three years in cities that are home to high schools founded by the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. HNU was chosen as the 2018 site in observance of the University’s founding by the Sisters 150 years ago.

“These young women would make our foundresses proud,” says Sonia Caltvedt, director of marketing and communications for HNU. “We’re honored to promote our shared values, including dedication to justice, through engaged young people from around the world. We look forward to the ripple effect they will create as they take what they learn back to their homes and out into the broader world.”

Sr. Yvonne Massicotte, administrative coordinator of the SNJM Justice and Peace Network which piloted the Youth Justice Forum in 2006, shared a brief history of the event with participants. It sprung from the corporate stands — that is, policies and actions — taken by the Sisters regarding significant social and political issues, she explained.

“We do on occasion take a stand, but it’s better to take a stand in solidarity,” says Sr. Yvonne to attendees. “We can’t do it alone, you can’t do it alone. So these are some of the areas we’ve decided to work in: migrants and immigration, human trafficking, and water.”



Clean-up project at Lake Merritt, Oakland

“...[O]ne person doesn’t have all the answers. [The Forum] left me with more questions than answers – and that’s good sometimes.”

-Participant

In the early 2000s, Sr. Yvonne and her colleagues wanted to explore ways to make young people aware of and engaged in these issues. “We asked: How do we get young people involved? Why don’t we do something special with the girls from our (SNJM) schools?”

From this concept, the Youth Justice Forums were born; the first gathering was held in Winnipeg in 2009 with five schools participating. The 2018 forum drew 40 participants and 10 adult facilitators from 12 high schools in the US, Canada, and Lesotho in southern Africa. Due to its growing popularity, organizers had to turn away volunteers and prospective participants from three schools.

Anicia, among students who traveled from Lesotho where they have worked on recycling and environmental service projects, says participating in the Forum is unlike anything she’s done before.

“The experience I’m getting is different than ones that I got at home, getting to know each other, each other’s language and culture, and to see how the organization works,” she says.

“I wanted to come and get a better understanding of why the Sisters do what they do,” says Kamila, 16, a junior attending Ramona Convent Secondary School in Alhambra, California. “Now that I’m here, I really want to learn what ways I can help serve my community. I do some things, like tutor middle school kids. But now I feel like I have to do something big.”

Several participants called the immersive refugee exercise “eye opening.” Laurencia, a sophomore at Ramona Convent, says she wanted to attend the Forum to learn more about the Sisters’ work and, in part because her parents, Bo and Catarina, are HNU alumni. But the experience has already opened her mind to new ways of thinking, she says: “I never thought about that before, how much trouble immigrants have to go through to go to a new country.”

Kaycia, 14, of Windsor, Ontario was among those who seemed less daunted and more empowered by delving into the plight of a migrant in a first-hand way. What impressed her? “Learning about these issues in the world and learning how to fix them, it will take time,” she says.

For Kamila and classmate Hilda, 16, the exercise felt truly personal: both are daughters of immigrants. Not only did it help Hilda empathize more fully with what her parents and grandfather went through in immigrating from Guatemala, she also appreciated seeing participants with no direct ties to immigration become more knowledgeable. “I feel vindicated in a way,” Hilda says. “I’ve grown up with it; I know a lot of their struggle.”

That was not the case for Natalie, who took on the role of the Michaels’ family mother during the refugee simulation. She reports that by the end of the exercise her clan fared well. They immigrated to a prosperous country, were welcomed by community members, and ultimately found jobs, although she and her “husband,” a former journalist, were underemployed. One downside: their children weren’t interested in learning about their former home country’s culture. “It was hard,” she says about the experience. “Especially with politics now, one person doesn’t have all the answers. It left me with more questions than answers – and that’s good sometimes.”

The weeklong conference included service projects and panel discussions related to water as a human right and ending human trafficking, plus sessions devoted to charism and missioning,

<http://www.hnu.edu/about/news/empathy-activist-mindset-boosted-snjm-youth-justice-forum-participants>