

“Baltimore, the Greatest City in America”

By Rachel Koller

“The Greatest City in America.” Wow, what a statement. When I picture the greatest city in America, I envision beautiful tall buildings, clean streets bustling with happy, successful work-goers, quaint restaurants and shops, a few tree-lined park areas with plenty of benches, a variety of sophisticated museums, and old musical theaters. How could a city like Baltimore, a city recognized for corruption, riots, discrimination, and shootings, also be referred to as the “Greatest City in America”?

I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia and attended Catholic school my entire life. I had never felt threatened or feared a violent encounter. Little inequality existed in my town because of the unfortunate lack of diversity. Bluntly speaking, most people were white, middle-class, Catholic families. Participating in community service projects in the lower income neighborhoods

was just one way we gave back. We’d clean up leaves for senior citizens, make sandwiches and care packages for veterans, and a few of us even got to travel abroad to build houses for impoverished families living in Guatemala. It was during these service projects, occurring outside my community, that I became aware of the higher crime rate in major cities like Philadelphia, where my community projects took place, and Baltimore, the greatest city in America.

As I weighed the pros and cons of colleges on my list, the city atmosphere wasn’t something with which I was concerned. Instead, I focused on classroom size, athletics, engaging faculty, and distance from home, when making my selection. A renowned school like Loyola University Maryland seemed like a great fit. My Jesuit values, strong work ethic, and dedication to Division 1 athletics made Loyola the quintessential university for me. Perhaps I did not factor in

the crime rate in the communities surrounding campus as I made this major decision. When I began telling people

where I decided to go to college, a few of them responded

with things like, “Make sure you carry pepper spray,” and “Stay off York Road.” As I heard these reactions, I began to wonder if the neighborhood around me was a dangerous place. I wanted to separate myself. I did not pay attention to the cars driving past me as I walked back from the library at night, and didn’t bother to keep myself updated on the local news. I just wanted to be a college student protected in a bubble from the surrounding area full of inequality and infringement. Who was I to judge? Two weeks after I arrived, I heard the same concern from residents who lived in the city their whole lives. During one visit, my parents and I met a longtime-resident who said, “Well, the city used to be a nice place to live.” He had clearly been affected by the riots and noticed a change. This amplified my anxieties about living in a city environment that has been plagued by crime. I decided it would be best for me to keep my peace and not open myself up to the community.

That wouldn’t last.

Before I could call this “land of pleasant living” my home, my track team was asked to volunteer at Living Classrooms, an organization focused on helping young children reach their



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full potential academically as well as their future goals. I had the same preconceived notions going into this project as I would any other—the people served were less fortunate and I was offering up my knowledge to them. I felt hesitation as we traveled through the rough streets of Baltimore. I was expecting the kids to be disruptive and act out. Much to my surprise, however, the environment was not at all what I anticipated. The students of neighboring public schools asked questions about my college major, plans for my future, and educated me on their similar expectations and goals. The students were just as smart and respectful as third graders anywhere. One girl told me her mother was a lawyer. She expressed that she knew she wanted to go to school for dentistry. She had the same goals I had when I was her age. I really did not notice the social divide I expected as I came into the opportunity. In the article, "Helping, Fixing, or Serving?" Rachel Remen, a Professor of Family and Community Medicine and one of the pioneers of Relationship Centered Care and Integrative Medicine, writes, "When we

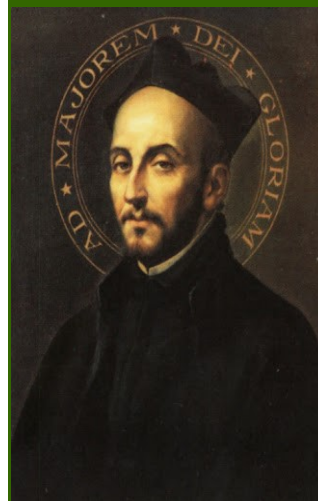
help, we become aware of our own strength." She describes that serving is a relationship between equals and "...makes us aware of our wholeness and its power." The difference between the two, Remen notes, is that "In helping we may find a sense of satisfaction; in serving we find a sense of gratitude." The work was not charity, but rather created a feeling of gratitude that we are able to serve those around us—an opportunity. I was serving fellow-students in my new city by assisting them in achieving their full potential through tutoring and information. I acquired a new perspective, as I realized I had much in common with the people in this area, as I got to know them.

As my team squeezed onto the Loyola shuttle and headed back to campus, I noticed something unusual on the road back. In a deserted park, filled with trash and overgrown plants, a park bench caught my eye because it read, "Baltimore, the Greatest City in America." I think many ignore or consider the phrase unrealistic. The city is often associated with crime and division. Peo-

ple probably expect that the quote was placed on the park bench as a sign of someone who sought hope, or who might be unaware. What I realized after volunteering at Living Classrooms is that Baltimore really is a place of hope—hope for equality, social justice, and peaceful living. Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, a member of the Society of Jesus and Jesuit author, interprets that harmony is reached through "contact" rather than "concepts." He says, "When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change" (Kolvenbach). Working first hand with these kids helped me realize their intelligence, which isn't limited to a prestigious area or class. The bright, ambitious children of Living Classrooms want to succeed and are motivated to realize their potential. Generally, this charmed city has one common goal. Joe Curran Jr., an Attorney General for the State of Maryland, said the objective is simple: "People want to own their own homes, to be safe, to take care of their families, and to work" (qtd. In Alvarez). I found myself coming to a similar conclusion after several Uber rides

"The single most visible signifier of identity is physical appearance... such as feeling the texture of your hair or asking if you speak a particular language, are commonly used to interrogate people whose physical appearance especially, but also behaviors, do not match the characteristics designated as belonging to established categories."

- Gwyn Kirk



St. Ignatius of Loyola



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back and forth from the Inner Harbor for lunch, the aquarium, Belvedere Market, and the Towson Mall.

The people of Baltimore experience tribulation, but that helps them develop grit. And this fosters perpetual regeneration. Francis Scott Key wrote America's Star Spangled Banner at Fort McHenry. The city also manufactured sugar cane during the Civil War, and the Second Continental Congress meeting was held here. Even a century ago, Baltimoreans demonstrated their grit and hope. The Great Baltimore Fire of 1904, an explosion in the John E. Hurst & Company building, spread throughout downtown. As other cities came to help, Baltimore responded with denial, indicating that they could build the city back themselves. *The Baltimore Sun* reported that the city had risen from the ashes and "One of the great disasters of modern time had been converted into a blessing" ("Great"). Baltimoreans do have hope for their future and believe. Baltimoreans aren't leaving the place they call home.

We venture back to the renowned quote, "Baltimore, the Greatest City in America," to try and uncover the meaning. Was Baltimore the greatest city at one point? Or does the quote have a deeper meaning, signifying hope for the city's future?

When the students who go to the after-school program Living Classrooms get dressed for school in the morning, they're merely deciding what color ribbon they should put in their hair that day, what shirt or hat to wear—as any other third grader would. Those devoting their time to volunteer to serve these children must open their eyes to understand the lesson these young children are teaching them. Each day, we eat the same food, read the same books, wear the same uniform, and play with the same toys as others outside our social circle. The positive point of this is that we are working together to make a better world.

"Knowledge will break down the walls of discrimination and intolerance. People must take a step back and realize that we are all created equally no matter race, gender, religion, or ethnicity."