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by Liam Fitzgerald

JSRI Upcoming Events

August 22

JSRI fellows formally begin their collaboration Honors Program freshman seminar.

September 5

JSRI will co-sponsor the address of Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ, founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles and author of *Tattoos on the Heart*.

JSRI Recent Activities

August 5

JSRI co-sponsored a teach-in on refugee children on the border at St. Anthony of Padua Parish in New Orleans.

July 31

The new U.S. Central and Southern Province became JSRI's co-sponsor- replacing the New Orleans Province-together with Loyola University.

July 19

The National Catholic Reporter published Dr. Mikulich's "[A Last Will and Testament for Freedom](#)".

July 11

Mr. Bustamante discussed payday lending with the [Miami Herald](#).

July 10

Dr. Weishar discussed immigration reform on the [Louisiana Radio Network](#).

July 10

Fr. Kammer and Dr. Weishar discussed Immigration Reform in a telephonic media conference organized by The Partnership for a New American Economy.

Summer 2014

Dr. Alex Mikulich's review of *Where Justice and Mercy Meet: Catholic Opposition to the Death Penalty* was published in *American Catholic Studies*.

I walk in and see the mural of water on the wall: the Great Flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the Baptism of Jesus, and Hurricane Katrina. Waters of rebirth. I see dozens of people, mostly men, all around, greeting each other, greeting me, making appointments, taking care of business. Off to my left I hear names being called. A few names every few minutes. Everyone pauses to listen. "Oscar B ____." A sixty-year-old man in a baseball cap smiles and strolls off to take his turn. The buzz of conversation picks back up. It is sticky and hot—a typical New Orleans summer day. We are outside, but shaded. I do not really mind the heat; it is comforting in a way. Palm trees and vines grow in planters all around. It feels like an oasis from the asphalt of the city. A wooden deck connects six brown trailers.

This is the Rebuild Center. Oscar and the other men and women are homeless. At the Center they are called guests. Volunteers call their names from lists to take showers, get their laundry done, see a doctor, or make phone calls in the various trailers that surround a central courtyard. Why fresh air and plants? Calm is the focus of the Center's outdoor design. It is a new way of serving the homeless, and I am a part of it.



Guests gather in the Rebuild Center patio.

Too old for summer camp and too young for a job, I began volunteering at the Rebuild Center when I was fifteen. I felt good about what I was doing. Felt important. The work was simple, and there was no obligation to go. Most often I would call out names from either the list for the showers or the list for the phones. It would get hectic at times, but usually things were relaxed. Guests would often come up to me during the lulls just to talk, but I had a hard time opening up. I could not handle the pressure of talking to a stranger, especially a homeless one. I was perfectly content with sticking to my lists to avoid conversation. To avoid human contact – just as I would have had I seen one of the guests looking for a buck on the street.

The next summer I went back for more. The sense of social justice my parents instilled in me overcame my typical sixteen-year-old awkwardness. I had spent enough time at the Center to overcome my initial discomfort. The calm of the Center had worked on me as well. I began to connect with the guests. These conversations became what I looked forward to the most. I would not just hand the guests the soap or the razor they had asked for. We would talk. Through these conversations I made connections and friendships. I learned where my friends slept, whether it was under the highway, in a homeless shelter, or on the floor of an apartment recently obtained.

Last summer I went back to my home, the Rebuild Center. I had to go. I had other obligations; I ran in the mornings and earned money at an ice cream shop in the evenings, but this was my summer job. This was where I belonged. Between the lists and my conversations with the guests, I had one over-arching job at the Center. I have a calling. My job is to know their names.

The author can be reached at liam@wustl.edu and for more information on the Harry Tompson Center/Rebuild Center see <http://www.harrytompsontcenter.org/site.php> and on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Harry-Tompson-Center/205625902803839>