

COUNSELING ALUM BECOMES AGENT OF CHANGE AS MISSIONER IN EL SALVADOR

Serving a rural village in Central America, Melissa (Blythe) Altman '06 and her family are operating programs for local children in an effort to better their futures.

Childhood is a precious time for development and discovery, but for many, especially those growing up in developing nations, it is interrupted by violence and poverty.

Melissa (Blythe) Altman '06 is making a difference in the lives of children in the rural village of La India near San Salvador in Central America.

In Dec. 2013, she and her husband, Peter, became [Maryknoll Lay Missioners \(MKLM\)](#) to live and work in solidarity with the poor. They are joined by their children Elijah, 8, and Evangelina, 5.

On top of providing educational support to local teenagers and young adults, they run a children's program, which includes activities such as soccer, art projects and story time. The goal is simply to give the children an opportunity to play.

“Unfortunately, many children in El Salvador don't have the opportunity to enjoy their childhood because of the violence that plagues the country,” says Altman. Books are too great an expense for most families, so they've recently started a small library collection for local children.

On afternoons when the center is closed, the Altmans participate in the local social ministry projects such as visiting the sick or delivering food to families in crisis.

Since their move from Long Island, N.Y., the Altmans have acclimated to a simpler lifestyle devoid of some of the comforts of a developed nation; their bathroom is located outside of the house, and they often go many days without running water. Elijah and Evangelina easily adapted to their surroundings. They are attending the local Catholic school and are fluent in Spanish.

“My husband and I hope that our mission experience will be life changing for our children [as] they are learning valuable lessons by living amongst the poor,” she says. “They have learned to reach out to people and in many ways are more effective missioners than we could ever hope to be. They have already learned that each person is intrinsically valuable.”

While some days feel like an uphill battle, the Altmans are often reminded of the real impact of their efforts. Recently, the mother of three boys that regularly attend their programs approached them at a community gathering.

“She thanked us for all of the opportunities we’ve given her boys and explained that she usually doesn’t allow them to leave the house because she worries about their safety. She expressed how grateful she is that her boys have the opportunity to play and learn in a safe environment,” says Altman. “As a mother, I was deeply grateful that the young woman shared with me her challenges and her appreciation for the work that we are doing here.”

Altman always felt called to help others. As a youth, she was involved in a lot of service projects through her local church and, later, through college.



Heeding the Call

After graduating from La Roche College in Pittsburgh, Altman joined a Lasallian Volunteer program and worked at Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn. As part of the program she had the opportunity to earn a master’s degree at one of six Lasallian colleges or universities. She chose Manhattan College’s [Mental Health Counseling](#) program so she could continue her work in New York.

Working at a Lasallian high school while attending a Lasallian college, Altman recognized a shared dedication to service and a commitment to building relationships with students.

“I appreciated the attention and support I received from my professors at Manhattan College,” she says. “I always felt like my professors cared about my learning and encouraged participation in class. I also had the opportunity to build strong relationships with my fellow students, who shared a passion for serving others.”

Just because Altman doesn’t conduct formal sessions doesn’t mean that she’s not using her counseling skills.

“One of the most essential things I learned at Manhattan was the importance of listening,” she says. “In a part of the world where trauma is commonplace and people are in need of listening ears, I regularly utilize the tools that I developed as a graduate student.”

Altman encourages anybody who is considering serving in mission to use their skills and “go for it!”

“If you have a positive attitude, trust in God, an adventurous spirit and a willingness to be vulnerable, mission life might be exactly what you’re called to,” she says. “It has been a challenging, life-giving, inspiring and faith-building experience. I have learned so much about myself through the people I serve.”

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