

October 2013

Do-Gooders-really: Inspired at Colby, these alumni choose to face society's problems head on

Gerry Boyle
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2013) "Do-Gooders-really: Inspired at Colby, these alumni choose to face society's problems head on," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 102: Iss. 3, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol102/iss3/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the College Archives: Colbiana Collection at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.



DO- GOODERS —*really*

Inspired at Colby, these alumni choose
to face society's problems head on

By Gerry Boyle '78

Like many idealistic students, Catherine “Cam” McDonough ’99 came to Colby wanting to save the world, or at least a piece of it. She still does. • “I want to be part of the solution,” she said. “You can’t see problems in your community and just walk past them.” • Sure you can. In fact most people do just that when they encounter those to whom McDonough

has devoted herself for nearly a decade—homeless men, women, and children. • A religious studies major at Colby who went on to become a registered nurse, McDonough worked for six years for the nonprofit Boston Health Care for the Homeless. Her emphasis there was respite care—treatment for homeless patients who had just been released from the hospital or needed a medical break from life on the streets. “A lot of them have terrible, terrible stories of trauma and abuse and neglect and heartbreak,” she said. + *McDonough is unwavering in her commitment to the medically underserved. She’s among those alumni who were inspired at Colby by professors or community service or a classmate—or a combination of all of those. Head on, they face thorny problems that most people tend to avoid.* • *For Colbians, the catalyst for that engagement comes from different directions and at different moments. Some have been moved by their community service projects and are inspired to do more. Others, like McDonough,*

get inspiration in the classroom. Whatever the source, the outcome—alumni who try to make the world a better place in large or small ways—is fundamental to the Colby experience. “When I talk about what my hopes are here,” said Jim Terhune, vice president for student affairs, “I do want to impart on students a sense of the extraordinary privilege of this sort of an education and the responsibility that comes with that.” >



McDonough came to Colby from Beverly, Mass., and the Winsor School, a private school for girls in Boston. Her dad, a stockbroker, flew medevac helicopters in Vietnam. Her mother, Linda O'Connor McDonough '66, has worked in addiction treatment. In August Catherine McDonough entered a program at UCLA to become a nurse practitioner specializing in underserved populations. Her practical training includes regular work at Union Rescue Mission, a clinic in L.A.'s Skid Row.

It's a world away from Mayflower Hill, where McDonough was inspired by lectures by religion professors Nikki Singh and Deborah Campbell and spent hours with

friends discussing the world's problems and how to address them. "I remember going to a supper," she recalled. "You got either a First World ticket or a Second World ticket or a Third World ticket. The First World dinner was all the fixings. The Third World, you got some rice. Maybe."

For McDonough, Colby led to America's own Third World—a harsh and unpleasant reality in the world's richest nation. Deciding to become a nurse was "a eureka moment," she said. "If people don't have their health, they can't move forward."



Terhune talks about the willingness of Colby students to apply themselves to social

problems, big and small. On the micro level, the College offers a smorgasbord of community service activities, through the mentoring program Colby Cares About Kids and the Colby Volunteer Center, which helps direct students to everything from working with area people who are homeless to assisting at the local humane society.

The community service opportunities—says Amanda Whitman, director of academic and strategic initiatives at Campus Compact, an organization that promotes community service at colleges and universities—aren't just welcomed by students. They're expected. And students who make service a part of their lives

in high school and college usually do the same after graduation.

"I really loved working in the soup kitchen," said Natalie Maida Nava '05, who recently finished her residency in anesthesiology and moved to the Pittsburgh area. "And something I've never been involved with is Habitat for Humanity, so I'm going to do some research on that. I like working with my hands."

The community service bent is so pronounced that Colby alumni clubs, long a hub of socializing and networking, are moving toward making volunteering their focus. The Colby Club of New York recently helped with cleanup efforts after Hurricane Sandy and was to participate in New

York Cares Day in October. The Washington, D.C., club has participated in Earth Day cleanup projects there.

Richard Schwartz '11, a management consultant and head of the Boston Colby Club, said that group is working toward having a quarterly volunteering opportunity for alumni and hopes to mimic Colby Cares Day, an annual volunteer effort in the Waterville area, with Colby Cares-Boston. "Volunteering is definitely something we want to make a cornerstone," Schwartz said.

+++

McDonough was one of several Colbians at Boston Health Care for the Homeless. Sam Clark '01 is a registered nurse who designed a drug addiction treatment program. Michael Lawrence '98 works in the agency's information technology section. Catherine Minahan '15 has interned in the agency's development office for two summers.

They do this knowing that their work doesn't deliver instant gratification and not all of their patients move steadily forward. For many of their clients—grappling with alcoholism, mental illness, and/or bad luck—it's often one step forward and a step or two back. "One of the nurses there was trying to explain it to me when I was new," McDonough recalled. "She said, 'It doesn't matter how many times our patients fall down. We're there to pick them up.'"

She does just that.

McDonough points to her successes, like starting a wound-care team, a program to treat skin ulcers, fungal infections, and damage from frostbite, all chronic



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Facing page, registered nurse Catherine McDonough '99 with a patient at Boston Health Care for the Homeless. McDonough has gone on to a nurse-practitioner program at UCLA. Above, Tracey Tomlinson '12, a Teach For America teacher at Gallup High School in Gallup, N.M. Tomlinson plans to work in public health.

ailments for people who live outdoors in New England winters. McDonough had many repeat patients, some of whom pledged that they would change their lives. When change doesn't come or it's short-lived, they are back.

"You have to have some weird resilient hope," McDonough said. "It's not logical but ... you have to have that or else—why?"

+++

Terhune said a big piece of the effort at Colby is the post-volunteering reflection. He recounted a speaker at another college saying he'd met a student who said she loved volunteering at a soup kitchen and hoped her children would do the same.

The intent, at Colby and elsewhere, is to find solutions to the problems that make the soup kitchen necessary, Terhune said. Key to that is

"The intent, at Colby and elsewhere, is to find solutions to the problems that make the soup kitchen necessary."

—Jim Terhune, vice president for student affairs

"the reflection part" that takes place both in and out of the classroom.

Said Julia Bruss '11, a teacher in a therapeutic school in Massachusetts, "People do a lot of incredible things before they get to college, and certainly Colby students are among those people. I think something that was different for me at Colby was the 'meaning making' that took place after the actual work."

The "meaning making" can come at different times from different sources. Often it links extracurriculars with academics.

The combination sometimes moves Colbians to find new volunteer opportunities; often it inspires careers.

+++

Tracey Tomlinson '12 remembers the moment, or at least the class. It was an intro course for the global studies major, Patterns and Processes of World History, taught by Professor James Webb. "He talked a lot about the spread of disease, epidemiology," Tomlinson said. "It wasn't something that I had ever really thought as something that could be patterned or contributed to world history."

She took all of Webb's courses, learning about the ways disease shapes cultures and history. "It got me thinking about social disparities that led to these outcomes," Tomlinson said. "It piqued my curiosity."

And sent her into the world of public health.

Tomlinson is in her second year as a Teach For America teacher at Gallup High School in Gallup, N.M. The biology major picked New Mexico because she knew of the health problems in underserved Native American populations there.

"I started to see the gap between what you get when you live on the reservation and what you get if you live off the reservation," she said.

Tomlinson teaches life science, mostly to ninth-graders. It might seem an unlikely way to continue work that, in her time at Colby, included building hydroponic vegetable gardens in the Maldives Islands and working to support a system of rural health clinics in Peru. But in

Gallup Tomlinson has noted the nutritional problems for many students and is working toward addressing them.

She's enrolled in a master's degree program at the University of New Mexico, studying ways to use science curriculum to bolster health care. And she's applied for a grant to develop ways to have students design and execute nutrition and health-care projects.

"It's not just about health care, but giving them access to knowledge that they need," Tomlinson said. "Biology. How the human body works."



Service is built into the Colby DNA. Founded as a Baptist seminary, quickly converted to a secular liberal arts institution, Colby has educated thousands of ministers and teachers. Early on they fanned out across Maine and beyond, and they undertook missions to far-flung parts of the world. Debate over the value of a liberal arts education versus its vocational or technical counterpart began in the 19th century. To this day Colby administrators, including President William D. Adams, stress that an education like that provided at Colby is a privilege.

"It's the opportunity to participate in this—and the responsibility that comes with that," Terhune said.

As Mitchell Bartkiewicz '07, a charter school administrator in Memphis, Tenn., put it: "Not everyone wins the lottery of life, through no fault of their own."

But it's one thing to recognize that life is unfair. It's another to feel it's your responsibility to try to find ways to correct those overwhelming inequities. "You don't have to tell Colby students that," Terhune said. "They're there."

Bartkiewicz, who tutored at Winslow Elementary School and worked in the CVC, remembers how rewarding it was to see "the light bulb go on" in his mentee. Following a track that has often begun with Colby Cares About Kids, he joined Teach For America upon graduation, teaching for three years in a public school in Washington, D.C., that serves low-income students. He then moved to a Knowledge Is Power Program charter school in Memphis. Three years in, he's now completing a KIPP fellowship, visiting high performing schools around the country in preparation for heading up a second KIPP school in Memphis.



Mariah Buckley '07, a nursing student at Phoenix College in Arizona. Volunteering at Colby led Buckley to a career of service.

"It's wonderful work," Bartkiewicz said. "The most wonderful work on the planet. Waking up every morning and knowing that what you're doing is important—it's an amazing gift."

A mission of the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement is to meld academics and public service at Colby. Sometimes it happens

in overt ways—visiting fellows and scholars—and sometimes in ways that are more subtle.



Bruss, who teaches in the therapeutic school, said she was impressed that service was part of Colby's broader mission as well, a fact she learned while doing research at the Goldfarb Center.

She went directly to Harvard after Colby, earning a master's degree from the university's school of education. At Harvard she worked in a university children's center with a child with special needs. "It was great that I had the CCAK background," she said. "I had the mentor part down."

In September Bruss took on a bigger challenge, as an

THE LONG VIEW

"In the 'old days' there were clubs and organizations on campus that did [community service]. But it wasn't institutionalized in the way it is now, and the Goldfarb Center, for the most part, has done that. ... It means it's there for the students to think about, the notion of service learning, becoming involved in the community. The students are bringing an interest into the College, [and] the faculty are supporting it in their own ways. We're doing public scholarship in a way that's not been done before."

— Thomas Morrione '65, Charles A. Dana Professor of Sociology

assistant teacher at the Walker School in Needham, Mass., a therapeutic school for children with emotional, behavioral, and learning challenges.

Bruss works in a classroom for children with autism with eight students, ages 6 to 9, and four teachers.

“It is a very high-energy environment,” she said, just four days in. “You’re always on. You’re always there. You go with the kids to every activity. You travel with them to their specialists. It is very hands-on.”

Bruss read the extensive records for each student, studying the reports like she studied at Colby and Harvard. And then she met the children.

“There is no textbook, there is no journal article that could provide you the kinds of information and experience that being in these classrooms for four days has provided me,” Bruss said. “And I just

started. I can’t imagine how I’ll know and understand them in four months.”

+++

But if there is no journal article that could have prepared her for her teaching, there was much in and out of the classroom at Colby that did just that, she said.

For one, Colby academics and volunteering taught her that “learning is never ending,” she said. “There are always more opportunities, if you look for them.”

For another, she recalled English Professor David Suchoff going over a paper with her when she was a sophomore. “He said to me, ‘When you’re a senior you won’t need me to sit here and read this with you. But we’ll get there. I’ve never forgotten that.’”

She said she remembers that message when she sits down with a child in her classroom.

“I approach these children with a similar attitude. You’re doing what you can do now and I’m supporting you, but we’re also moving forward. You’re not in this school forever. You’re not in this classroom forever.”

+++

Mariah Buckley ’07 is enrolled in a nursing program at Phoenix College in Arizona. Soon after graduation, she heard a comment she still remembers. “I had a [non-Colby] friend in Boston. She said, ‘Colby churns out the coolest and most compassionate people I have ever met in my life.’”

Hyperbole? Consider Buckley herself.

A former stalwart volunteer at Waterville’s South End Teen Center, she “signed up for everything” and helped run the CVC, among many other activities.

After Colby the Spanish and Latin American studies major took a job at Unum in Portland. Finding that she was “really missing that giving-back piece,” Buckley volunteered at Maine Medical Center, helping young patients to be comfortable during their hospital stays. That led to a job at the Make-A-Wish Foundation in Boston, where Buckley literally made wishes come true for seriously ill children. She sent them to Disney World, NASA (she couldn’t fulfill the boy’s wish to go into space), and even to meet the pope. “[The child] was very Catholic, and she wanted him to heal her,” Buckley said. “She went to Italy and met the pope, and he blessed her, talked to her. It was incredible.”

But not incredible enough to satisfy Buckley’s urge to do more. With just one Colby science course, she enrolled

in a prerequisite program and now is in the bilingual cohort of the nursing program in Phoenix. Her goal is to become a nurse practitioner and work in pediatric oncology.

“I loved being able to distract them, but I wanted to fix them,” she said.

+++

On Mayflower Hill the next generation of altruistic alumni is hard at work. Julia Cohen ’15 and Catherine Minahan ’15 run a program called Birthday Wishes. The Massachusetts-based nonprofit provides birthday parties for children in homeless shelters; Cohen and Minahan worked with the program before Colby and established it on Mayflower Hill.

“I wanted to start this program at Colby last year, and within three days I had deans behind me, the Colby Volunteer Center behind me,” Minahan said. “I had huge support networks immediately behind me, rooting for me. Students come up to me and say, ‘You’re the Birthday Wishes girl. Can I volunteer?’”

Cohen and Minahan find students to bake birthday cakes and take Colby students to the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter for a monthly party. Each child with a birthday that month gets a cake with his or her name in frosting. The Colby students lead the singing and do a craft project.

Without the program, there likely would be no party, Cohen said, recalling one little boy who arrived in a three-piece suit. “He was so excited,” she said. “A birthday party seems like such a simple idea, but it means so much more to these kids.

“It sounds simple,” Cohen said, “but it’s so much bigger.”



PHOTO BY JEFF POULAND

Julia Cohen ’15, with a young resident of the Mid-Maine Homeless Shelter. Cohen runs Birthday Wishes at Colby, a program that puts on birthday parties for children in shelters.