

## **Back Bay Mission Long-term Volunteer**

May was my month to write an article for “The Vine” on behalf of the Witness and Proclamation Team. It’s actually my last act as a member of the team!

I am writing this message during our time as long-term volunteers at Back Bay Mission in Biloxi. My husband Dan and I have been committed to this place since 2006 after our first trip the year after Hurricane Katrina hit the area. My love and respect continue to grow for so many reasons. For this message, I needed to find a focus, and that focus is on community.

Community is my “word of the year.” It speaks to a shared mission or geographical location. It’s also bound by our personal perspectives and experiences. Here at BBM, community looks different than it does from our world in Northwest Ohio.

The mission statement from Micah 6:8 is not just a sign on the wall or on the peace pole on the property. To act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God is the guiding principle of the staff in their daily work. Craig, who oversees the housing rehabilitation programs, has been here 17 years and is the most tenured staff person, notes he found his church here at Back Bay Mission. Jesus’ ministry of what community is all about is here in full force.

The community many of the unsheltered know is one of abuse, addiction, destitution, and poverty. The cycle is broken, bit by bit, each day at BBM. Folks come for assistance with many things. It is easy to say, “why don’t they just get a job?” The roadblocks are overwhelming. Things we take for granted like transportation, showers, washing our clothes, having the ID we need, educational opportunities...the list goes on and on. Access to healthcare is another critical area that is dismal for those unsheltered or uninsured. The case managers (Kirsten, Michael, Shemiko) are investigators, researchers, debaters, and rule benders when needed.

The mission supports those with a job and housing as well as the unsheltered and unemployed. Some people live in their cars, come in for a shower, pick up their clothes that were washed the day before, and then go to work...can you imagine? I can’t.

We’ve had storms while we were here. I woke up one night wondering what it would be like to be in a tent or under a bush in a sleeping bag with the rain pouring down. There are no overnight shelters in the area. BBM does its best to find housing alternatives, but not everyone is ready to be sheltered, again for many reasons. One man who moved into an apartment stayed a few days, saying there was just too much stuff and the walls were confining. He moved out, back to the streets. Change cannot be forced.

Each day, there are myriad and complicated needs. BBM doesn’t look away or back down in addressing these needs. Providing hope and restoring dignity are no small feats that are tackled day after day.

So community here is about meeting folks where they are, not where you think they should be. It's about acceptance, love, sometimes tough love, and advocacy. Pastor James, the executive director, spends much of his time at the state capitol and with the local authorities having the hard conversations to change policy that continues the oppression of poverty. Shawn, CFO who has been here 7 years and is the only CFO BBM has had, came from the for-profit world where greed seemed a way of life, and now says every day she knows that she's part of doing what no other agencies do and squeezing every dollar to make it happen. Jonathan, Dhiana, Amanda, Raysha, Carlin, Samantha, Todd, LaChondra, Sandra, and Robert are the mainstays of this team that brainstorms, agonizes, and challenges the status quo all with compassion and care. Some of the staff have been on the other side of the need and understand all too well.

This, then, is the community of Back Bay Mission. One other huge piece of the community is the short and long-term volunteers. BBM could not be as effective or reach as many as they do without the hundreds of us who serve every year with their time, talents, and resources. Please prayerfully consider joining a team and seeing BBM for yourself. I would also be happy to talk with you about being a long-term volunteer, which is a month or more commitment.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, said: "the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice." Back Bay Mission is doing all it can to hurry the bending along.

Blessings,

Dawn

Rev Dawn Balduf

St John's UCC, Genoa