

- [Home](#)
- [Magazine](#)
- [Social](#)
- [Class Notes](#)

To search type

[Scroll to top](#)

[Xavier Magazine](#)

Turning Points



• **By France Griggs Sloat**

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SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR ALL

It's mid-morning on July 14. Katie Heins slips on a T-shirt and shorts, grabs her large, hand-lettered banner and heads out from her apartment onto the steamy streets of Over-the-Rhine. Passing by Washington Park, she casts a sympathetic eye toward the crack addicts and homeless men bedded down on trampled grass and benches, then makes her way to the Drop-Inn Center Shelter House, where many of Cincinnati's homeless residents seek refuge.

Usually she goes to visit a fellow Xavier student who works there. But today is different. Heins is participating in her first real civil action, a protest and demonstration orchestrated by groups advocating for the homeless and fair housing. Their target is an empty building in the low-income neighborhood.

Raising her banner – a bed sheet on poles that spells out “Housing Now” in bright red letters – Heins and several dozen protesters make their way to a large brick building with boarded-up windows and doors. A group tears off the boards and enters the building while Heins stays outside, listening to speeches and waiting for police to arrest the trespassers.

But the police don't come, so the protesters decide to march on City Hall, where they win an audience with Mayor Charlie Luken. They demand the city give them the vacant building so they can convert it into livable housing. To their surprise, and with the TV cameras rolling, Luken agrees. Heins is floored.

“The sit-in was a turning point for me because I saw people with a well thought-out plan who won,” she says, recalling the 1989 housing protest. Today, formerly homeless tenants still live in the house. “It was a real civil rights movement of people deeply committed to their cause. This showed me that people who are activists can do these things and win.”

The experience led Heins, a senior at the time, to commit herself to a life of social justice work – at a women’s shelter after graduation, then as director of the anti-poverty Contact Center for 12 years, and last year leading the successful Ohio campaign by Let Justice Roll to raise the minimum wage.

But Heins isn’t alone. Such a path is increasingly embraced by college students both at Xavier and nationwide. According to a 2006 report by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, the value of “helping others” is the highest it’s been in 20 years and was the third highest common value held by incoming students. At Xavier, more than 500 students participated in service work in the last 25 years through the peace and justice programs, and nearly 30 members of the 2007 graduating class chose service-related positions with non-profit groups for their first jobs.

What motivates students to bypass the path to the corner office and follow their hearts into the service life? The work can be grinding and gritty and the financial rewards slim. Alumni like Heins say it’s the human connections they make – and the chance to make a difference in the world. But they also give Xavier a lot of the credit.

Ben Urmston, S.J., knows the pattern well. He founded Xavier’s peace and justice programs in 1982, and many alums today say his Faith and Justice theology class and rural and urban plunge programs were what opened their eyes and triggered their transformation into advocates for social change. Others say it was theology professor Paul Knitter, often remembered for quipping, “The Jesuits ruined me for life,” for inspiring them to go out and live the Xavier mission.

“With my students,” says Urmston, “I’m trying to get across the dignity of each human person, that we can love and be loved, we can understand and be understood, we can love so much that we are willing to try to change any structure that’s oppressing any person.”

DESERT WAL-MART

Up one aisle and down another, Jon Gromek and his friends selected supplies for their week in Mexico – mac and cheese, bottled water, hamburger, cereal. The Wal-Mart in Douglas, Ariz., had it all, so they stocked up. After flying from Xavier to Tucson to spend spring break doing service work in an orphanage

and home for the elderly in Agua Prieta – a village just across the Mexican border – they didn't want the villagers to feel obligated to feed them.

The store was just a mile from the checkpoint, where the Mexican border guards passed them through without incident. But the incongruity of the well-paved, brightly lit U.S. side next to the rough road and darkness of the Mexican side was as obvious as a neon sign. And as they rolled past the iron slatted fence that separates the two countries, Gromek looked back and noticed another incongruity – there, in plain view, was the Wal-Mart they just left. Suddenly it hit him.

“I realized what these people need and we take for granted every day is in such close reach,” he says. “It's right over the border, and these people can see that, but it's not reality for them. This imaginary line is all that separates this country known for wealth and power and this other with such poverty. You look at this giant wall that separates us, and it seems a little overkill – barbed wire and posts and armed guards – for two countries at peace.”

The experience with the alternative breaks club two years ago so affected him that he plunged into more social justice work last year, working on immigration reform and traveling with the club to El Salvador after graduating in the spring. Not surprisingly, his degrees are in theology and political science with a minor in peace studies.

Now, as one of Xavier's newest graduates, he's preparing to join Network, a non-profit national Catholic social justice lobbying group in Washington, D.C., that will allow him to explore his political activism. At Network, Gromek will be researching and writing about issues such as war, health care, Darfur and the farm bill.

“I could be making four times what I'm making at Network, but I don't feel I'd be living up to my potential and doing what Xavier prepared me to do,” he says. “I need to be working for those people I met in Alabama and Mexico and El Salvador who would say, ‘Don't forget us, don't forget us.’ This is one way to do it, and I'll always choose that over something else.”

A JESUIT AT HEART

The August deadline was fast approaching. Ben Krause should have felt elated, but instead he had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Something wasn't quite right. Everything was going as planned – he graduated with degrees in philosophy and Spanish, taught at Creighton Prep High School in Omaha, Neb., and entered the Jesuit order as a novitiate for the two-year term. But now, as he faced taking his first vows, he suddenly wasn't so sure anymore.

Then he realized that if the prospect of taking his vows made him this uneasy, it wasn't God's plan.

“I came to a point where I had to admit that after three years, if I was not at peace with that way of life, I couldn’t justify taking the next step of perpetual vows for the rest of my life,” Krause says. “Leaving was by far the most difficult and painful decision I ever made, but when I decided to go, it was the greatest sense of relief. That feeling of peace I was missing was suddenly there.”

Krause tells his story while sitting on a broken bench outside a restaurant by a busy, dusty street in Iganga, Uganda, where he’s been a project coordinator since 2006. He’s surrounded by six children age 10 or so. It’s late, and the laughing children should be home in bed, but not tonight. They are mesmerized by the young man from Omaha who’s been talking on his cell phone for almost an hour.

“I love it here,” he says. “I wake up every day and know I’m doing something that’s helping other people. I know that in small ways, I’m making the world a little bit better.” In the months since he made his fateful decision not to be a Jesuit, Krause has learned a lot about himself. He’s doing work he did as a Jesuit – and for which he prepared by doing service work at Xavier. But he also has found the freedom to choose where to live and what to do. His choice of work was the Uganda Village Project, which brings medical students to work in the developing country. His job is to coordinate projects that contribute to better health, such as digging wells near villages, educating people about safe water practices and malaria prevention.

“My favorite project is safe water promotion,” Krause says. “Their sources, where they get it, how they transport and store it, how to keep it safe. We’ve got a dynamic and entertaining program where I act things out, and the people get a big kick out of it. We have a great time, and it has the potential to make a real difference in people’s lives.”

FLYPAPER MEMORIES

Jim Bunker drives a yellow school bus down a road in Hillsboro, Ore., picking up pre-school children along the way. They’re going to Head Start where Bunker, a 1991 graduate with an English degree, works in the Spanish language program serving the Hispanic migrants who settled on the Northwest coast. The migrants are poor, and the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, spotting the need to help provide child care for their families, has sent Bunker to lend a hand.

As Bunker drives the bus full of chatty children, the road comes to a dead end in front of one last house – a shack, literally, with unpainted walls falling in against each other. Out runs a little girl, excited that the bus is here. Her clothes are faded. Her mother comes outside to wave goodbye. On other days, she boards with her daughter and becomes a fixture in the classroom or lunchroom.

“It struck me that with as little as she had, she was the one who had the least to give,” Bunker says.

One day, Bunker goes to her house to help her fill out forms so her daughter can receive the free government lunch program. He's never been in a home like this. When he steps inside, he takes it all in – the single room, the plywood floor, the single bed for mother and daughter. The flies.

"I remember the flypaper hanging from the ceiling and the oppressive air," he says. "But we sat at her kitchen table and filled out the papers. Thinking back, for her to allow me to come into the house must have been hard for her."

It was a pivotal moment for him, though. He thought the woman needed his help. "But by the end of the school year, she taught me so much about living and respect and taking chances. I thought, Who am I to go into this woman's home and try to help her? She didn't ask for my help, but she took a chance and it paid off for both of us."

Bunker didn't come easily to the field of social justice. He stumbled into it through friends who brought him to the Dorothy Day House on campus for a presentation by the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC). That's when it all started to come together – his political leanings, the English works he was reading, his friends' conversations about social change. He accepted the one-year position with JVC in Oregon, but the experience so moved him that he stayed. One service job led to another – at a diversion program for delinquent juvenile boys, an intervention program for low-income Portland Public School families, a middle and high school counselor.

Times changed, and Bunker is now a counselor at a private Episcopal high school. He finds the students, though economically better off, face some of the same issues as the troubled students and migrant families he worked with before. So his challenge is to pass the baton that was passed to him and educate the students on issues of social justice. Last spring, he led his first group of students on a service trip to El Salvador with Habitat for Humanity. While they learned a lot about giving of themselves through labor, he says, they learned a lot more from the people they met.

"We went to a cultural exchange evening at one of the homes and the mom created this evening dance and taught us to make a corn meal-based bread," he says. "It became clear – and I let the experience unfold on its own – that the actual building of the house was beside the point of why we were there. What it was really about was building authentic relationships with the people we met."

BOOKS FOR GUATEMALA

It was just a minor problem. Or so Jeff Berninger thought as he completed his first day as a volunteer teacher of English for middle school students in the Guatemalan village of La Labor. Someone obviously forgot to drop off the textbooks he needed for class. So he went to the other teachers to ask where they get their books.

“They looked at me and said, ‘What do you mean? We don’t have books.’ I asked them, ‘How do you teach?’ They said, ‘We write everything on the blackboard and the students copy everything into their notebooks.’ It’s called chalk and talk. They couldn’t afford to buy books.”

Rather than despair, Berninger put his Xavier business degree in information systems – and his faith – to work. Upon returning home, he launched Cooperative for Education, a small initiative that would become an international non-profit education business and sustain him and his family for the next 13 years. The company buys textbooks for the schools, which in turn rent them to the students.

“We started with one school and one math book for seventh and eighth grade, and now 13 years later, it has grown to 155 schools and four subject areas – math, science, language and social studies,” he says from his Cincinnati office staffed with Xavier grads. The cooperative is now a \$1.6 million operation with a staff of 55 and offices in the U.S. and in Guatemala.

Discovering the need for schoolbooks in a Guatemalan village was a major turning point for Berninger, although it wasn’t his first. When he got to Xavier, Berninger found a passion in Urmston’s theology class and in a rural plunge—a service project at a Central Ohio seminary that is also a working farm. “He really challenged me to think and to question what the social responsibility of business is and the actions of our government and to look at things with a critical eye,” Berninger says.

Before graduating in 1991, he traveled to Guatemala to see the Mayan ruins but found himself overwhelmed by the abject poverty amidst military rule. Nevertheless, he took a lucrative job with Procter & Gamble as a systems analyst, thinking that if he got settled into a career, he would be better able financially to give back to society in the future. But on two subsequent trips to Guatemala, he met a cousin who lived there, and his plans unraveled.

“It was for me a conversion experience,” he says. “He introduced me to the real Guatemala – the beauty of the country and the difficulty and strife the people were confronting daily. I spent several days in the little village of San Juan Sacate Pequez. What impressed me was this traditional Guatemalan village and the people walking around carrying baskets of corn and vases of water on their heads. I came home changed and determined to go back.”

He quit his job with P&G and returned to Guatemala. The plan was to go for three months, but he ended up staying for three years, living with his cousin and helping at the family bakery. He supported himself with contract work as an information systems analyst. At one point, low on funds and fearing he would have to go home, he received an e-mail from a favorite Xavier Jesuit, who inquired about his finances. He wrote back saying how desperate he was for money.

“But before I sent the e-mail,” he says, “I took a walk in the community and realized my situation was nowhere near theirs. So I erased the e-mail and said I’m fine and I trusted in the Lord to provide for me. And the next morning, Chiquita called and offered me a very lucrative contract.” It allowed him to stay for six more months. After a short trip home, he returned to Guatemala and started the non-profit, staying for eight more years.

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[Fall 2007 Features Xavier Magazine](#)