

**2020 St. Vincent's Youth Award Winner**  
**Ryan St. Jean**  
**Salesian High School, Class of 2020**

Over Easter vacation of 2019 I participated in a mission trip to a small Catholic parish in Belle Glade, Florida. The community is largely centered around the parish, as it is the source of many of their community events. Over half of the community falls beneath the poverty line, and jobs are hard to come by in the area. The largest employer in Belle Glade are the five prisons and jails located within a thirty mile radius. This creates a lot of trauma for many of their workers, not only because of what they see in the correctional facilities, but also because many of their loved ones are inmates due to the presence of gangs and illicit activity in the community. Parents are also forced to work long hours in order to provide for their children, this leaves many children isolated and without their parents for most of the day, often pushing them to participate in illicit activities due to the lack of guidance available to them. This is where the parish steps in. Our volunteer efforts in the parish were centered around both physical and emotional reconstruction. On the physical end; we painted parts of the playground and the Church, mulched, and set up their annual "International Food Festival" that brings the community together through culture and faith. On the emotional end; we tutored young children after their school day ended and interacted with teenagers our age at night through the teenage recreation nights that provided wholesome activities for them and reduced the risk of them participating in illicit activities.

This mission trip opened my eyes to things that I've spoken much about yet never attempted to try and tackle directly. I've always been a distant supporter of community projects that aim to help disadvantaged youth or restore community centers in low income neighborhoods, but I never participated in any of the activities where I'd be able to see the people that I'm helping. I had grown too comfortable with my current life situation, often taking it for granted. This experience where I was serving others was a humble reminder that some of the things I have every day aren't available to all. Something as basic as having a safe place to go after school where I can learn and interact with others, or having a choice of what I want to eat for dinner are some of the things I take for granted daily. This experience allowed me to put into perspective the many privileges I have and encourage me to attempt to share them with others.

Another service activity I've partaken in is peer tutoring. Every Friday morning I meet with a freshman who needs help in a particular subject. I believe it's important that freshmen are placed on a right path early on because the habits they create now, will continue on through the rest of their high school experience. It's often challenging to work with some of them, especially those who don't want to work. This difficulty in trying to relate to them taught me to change my approach in tutoring. Instead of teaching them concepts, I taught them the strategies I used to understand the material. They began to understand the material much better, and each week showed significant progress.

These experiences reflect the mission of St. Vincent's Hospital because of their focus on the struggling, commitment to community, and compassion for others. Service is essential in the pursuit of eternal life. Selflessness, love, and compassion are all

characteristics of service. These characteristics model the life of Jesus. Jesus set the example of a good moral life through his ability to relate to those in need. Service allows humans to connect through the common good and put aside whatever differences may divide them. I learned this through some of the service projects that I worked on this year. Reaching out to disadvantaged people in my community and talking with them opened my eyes to many of the struggles that people have to go through daily.