



*Striving for Mutuality: Re-Imagining University/Community  
Service Learning Experiences*

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Martina Hyacinth, Sabina Marroquin, Bethany J. Welch, Ph.D.



**AQUINAS  
CENTER**

1700 Fernon Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19145  
[staquinas.com/aquinascenter](http://staquinas.com/aquinascenter)  
[facebook.com/aquinascenter](https://facebook.com/aquinascenter)

# Our Mission:

Aquinas Center builds unity in diversity,  
supports learning, & inspires thoughtful action.



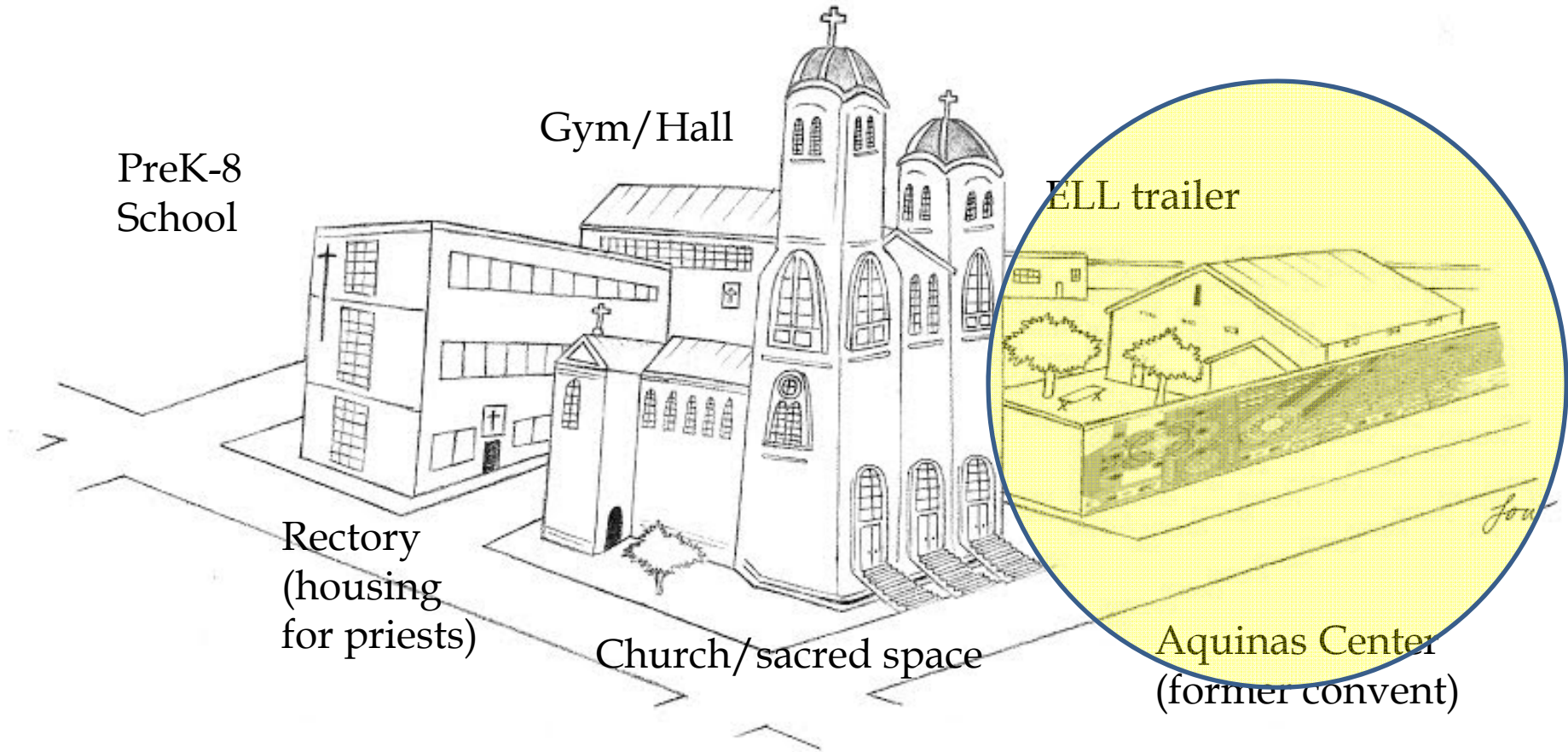
**Our Community includes: Latinx, Pacific Island, Caribbean, African-American, African, Asian, and Anglo-European neighbors**

*We are responding locally to migration and globalization*

# South Philadelphia



# Our Campus



PreK-8 School

Gym/Hall

ELL trailer

Rectory  
(housing for priests)

Church/sacred space

Aquinas Center  
(former convent)

# *Aquinas Center Scope of Activities*

<b>Service</b>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>Activism</b>	<b>Legal Outreach</b>	<b>Education &amp; Research</b>	<b>Cultural</b>
Days of Encounter and Mercy	Adoration	PA Fight for Driver's License	DACA	Adult English Class	Multicultural Community Garden
Week long Immersion trips	Daily Mass	Right2Work	Naturalization	Girls of Color Writing Group	Community Meals
Youth civic engagement	Prayer & Rosary Groups	New Sanctuary Movement	Citizenship	Youth Writing Group	Feast days and festivals
Beautification and streetscape improvements	Youth Groups	Education access for undocumented youth	Know Your Rights	Youth Entrepreneurship Project (YEP)	Art & Folklore in summer camp
Vacant lot remediation	Al Anon	PA is Ready! Voter registration	Deportation Defense Prep	Adult and Youth Yoga	MuralCorps
Girl Scout Troop	RCIA	Youth Voices parcel mapping & workers rights		Health, nutrition, and other workshops	Movies on the Block
Paid tours of community	Choirs/Music	Racial justice dialogue			

# Welcoming All



Because our community has come from other places, we are oriented toward welcoming all.



This includes 52 interns, AmeriCorps, full time volunteers, and research students since our founding in 2013.



We average 32 visiting groups annually, from as far away as the University of Arizona and as close as Cabrini University! These are typically for service learning experiences for high school, college, and faculty.

*We have long term, multi-year partnerships with University of Pennsylvania, West Chester, Villanova, Cabrini, and the Bridging the Gaps program (summers).*

# Why do we host visitors?



*We know we  
are stronger  
together!*

- We need help on big projects that use a lot of hands and human power.
- We see ourselves as a teaching institution and a place where students/others can learn in real life setting. Any gains in understanding will eventually benefit society.

The center serves as a launch pad to support other organizations, such as soup kitchens, after school programs, food pantries, shelters, gardening efforts, etc.

- Visitors share specific expertise that we might not have, such as legal support, teaching in English class, and more...

# Example: Help with larger projects



Placemaking **through** MURALS



# Being on the receiving end of visitors

Can you describe a situation where you felt the visiting group **did not respect** the community that was receiving them?

- What was said?
- What was seen?
- What was felt?

Can you describe a situation where you felt that the visiting group and the community truly bonded and was able to **work on a project together as equals**?

- What was said?
- What was seen?
- What was felt?



*“Groups help us to know what kind of people we are.”*  
- Martina Hyacinth

# Real Life Scenarios

## *Service Learning and Volunteers*

- 1) **Bad attitudes:** A visiting group is working with community volunteers to clear a vacant lot in their neighborhood. The visitors stick to themselves and make comments about the nature of the community, the perceived laziness of the residents that left the lot in that condition, and repeatedly sit down claiming "exhaustion" after working in five minute spurts.
- 2) **Perceived lack of "impact":** Three medical and dental school interns are helping with a summer camp in a multilingual community that includes both documented and undocumented neighbors. The first two weeks of their assignment includes going for walks, visiting corner stores to pick up items for staff lunches, attending faith services, and planning lessons. There is a lot of tension around productivity and pacing, with the students feeling that they aren't making an impact.

# Real Life Scenarios

## *Service Learning and Volunteers*

- 3. Not enough work to do:** A group arrives at a volunteer site to work on an outdoor mural. There are a lot of volunteers and only one community leader directing activities because one staff person called out sick and another one is stuck in traffic. Once the volunteers are assigned to tasks, it feels crowded so some volunteers sit down, complain, or look at their phones.
- 4. Cultural conflict:** A group is at a faith based site. The pastor in charge begins with a sectarian prayer specific to that faith and asks everyone to participate. He directs the female students to prepare food in the kitchen and the male students to the basement to start moving out furniture using language that is about gender and abilities.

# Discussion

# Four Principles

## *For Re-Imagining Service Learning*

1. Respect - *for someone else's story/community*
2. Flexibility - *With tasks, program goals, cultural norms*
3. Initiative - *Make something happen*
4. Mutuality - *Benefit you, benefit community*

### *Ways of proceeding:*

- Be loving , generous, helpful, and communicative

**Together we can imagine a new Philadelphia!**

