



National Benevolent Association

XPLOR
FAITH, JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY

Saying Goodbye

Natalie Clark, 2015-16 NBA XPLOR Resident in Dallas, Texas



If you told me I'd be moving to Dallas Texas in August 2015, I probably would have looked at you a little funny, asking how you came up with something so random. But life is sporadic, and here I am... Right where I need to be. Now that the NBA XPLOR year is almost over, I'm trying to envision what it will be like going back to my little Oregon. It has been a whirlwind of a year, and I will be forever connected and grateful for my experiences in the city.

My involvement in XPLOR has me playing different roles at Juliette Fowler Communities here in Dallas. My main work experience is as an intern, a resource for young women who have aged out of foster care.

These women have my heart—and I cannot even begin to explain what it is like to work with these girls and my supervisors. They keep me humble; they've allowed me to uncover the tragedies and successes of this life. I am honored to be just a small part of their journey as they continue to transform and grow into influential, thriving, and beautiful human beings. I knew before meeting them that they would probably teach me a lot more than I could teach them, and it's remained completely true. I also serve the retirement community on the same campus, and I help teach Sunday School at East Dallas Christian Church. My days are filled with a wide span of people, ages 3 to 104. As a newly 23-year-old, I am blessed and fulfilled—and I have flourished during my time here.

I am still an undergrad. I plan to complete my senior year at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, this fall. This is my second year taking a much-needed break from college. I wanted to use the XPLOR time to do something wonderful, healing, and significant. I also want my brother to be proud.

Everything was looking good for me as a freshman in college at Willamette U.—until I lost my only sibling—my amazing, talented brother, to a skateboarding accident on October 17, 2011. I was 18 and he was 21. My heart, my soul. His name is Isaac. I was back in college within a week of his accident, never really having time to grieve or understand what life was going to be like without him. Wise beyond his years, Isaac taught me to love myself and to love others. I know Isaac would appreciate my commitment to the XPLOR program. He would have encouraged me. Just like the rest of our sweet family. We love you, Isaac.

This is my second experience living away from my home state of Oregon. I studied abroad in Galway, Ireland, my junior year at Willamette. I have also traveled to other countries and states, but living in Texas is the longest time I have been away from home. I am absolutely not the same, having seen the sun shine on different sides of the country and world. It sounds nerve-wracking at first, but to wake up in a strange town all by yourself is one of the most exhilarating feelings. I encourage everyone to travel and discover life through a different lens: get out of your routine, meet new people, debunk the stereotypes you heard before you left, seek out the differences and similarities between this new space and "home." Eat the food and gain a few pounds, dance around and be yourself, embrace culture shock, and make life-long friends along the way. To travel means to learn your roots. I find that you learn almost more about where you are from than the place you've traveled. Living in new environments adds perspective, it makes you a storyteller, and it forces you to learn and appreciate.

I have learned most about self-care and love through my experience in NBA XPLOR. I am revisiting personal life challenges and taking on new ones. I have finally been given the gift of time—to study and learn more about my own theology and what it means to call myself a Christian, and to be a child of God. My roommates, my spiritual companion, the girls I work with, the residents I serve, and my most amazing friends here have taught me that wherever I go, I am loved, and I am able. Traveling and meeting people makes you modest. I have been able to understand what a tiny place I occupy in this world, and that any positivity I can bring into it can make a substantial difference. My loved ones here have shown me a sense of community. They have reminded me of my young age and to embrace the time I have. They have shared inspirational stories of grief, happiness, and discovery. This is what life is all about.

Self-love is hard to come by, as I am still working on loving myself every day. What I have learned so far: Find yourself. Be your own light! Love your faults until you don't see them anymore. Look in the mirror, and feel your heartbeat. Try not to subject yourself to negative societal standards. Do not dwell upon your shortcomings; they are a part of you, but they do not define you. You are unique and valued. Remember, God created the universe, the stars, the mountains, the water, and your most favorite animal. He also created you—in His image. He made you who you are, and loves you for it. Since you took your first breath, you have been given everything you need within yourself.

For all my loved ones in Texas, I am going to miss you so much! Thank you for everything. Please know this is not a final goodbye.

I'd like to end with a passage that means everything to me. The words are filled with love and beauty: they are my brother Isaac James Clark's poetic words from a YouTube video he recorded his last year on this Earth. His words were read at his graduation ceremony from Lewis & Clark College in 2012—the ceremony in which I tearfully walked across the stage and accepted his *summa cum laude* college diploma. I think everyone deserves to be inspired by Isaac's words of affirmation:

“You are perfect as you are. You are part of the universe. You don't need anything more than what you have right in front of you. You can be whatever you want to be, you can do whatever you want to do. You can make the world an infinitely better place. You are eternal—your essence does not exist in space and time. You are everything. You are the universe. You don't need anything. Everything loves you.”

NBA XPLOR is a 10-month service residency opportunity for young adults ages 21-30, with the purpose of empowering young adults to discern and develop a “heart for care” as they live together in simple community, engage in direct service and justice work, engage in leadership development, and discern their vocational calls to honor the various communities they are called to serve. **Learn more and apply at nbacares.org/xplor.**