



"I'M HERE BECAUSE IT'S SOMETHING I BELIEVE IN"



ANNA HERNING

ORIGINALLY FROM CHICAGO (USA)

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND: COMMUNICATIONS AND PEACE AND CONFLICT

SERVING IN NAZARETH FOR 11 MONTHS

Anna Herning making flatbread at the Nazareth Village kitchen.

How did you end up volunteering here?

It's a very long-winded story. I was at a random college event where two retired professors opened their house to students, made dinner and had speakers come in. We had some people talk about reconciliation in Rwanda, a counsellor from Romania, etc. One day, a group came to speak about the MCC (Mennonite Central Committee), which is the organization I am coming through. And I was thinking: "Wait, why am I so on board with this?" I applied and got it. I was with them last year, and they invited me to come again. Nazareth was one of the placements

with SERVE in the Nazareth Trust. It looked good, and it felt like that's where God wanted me, so now I'm here.

Is this your second time volunteering?

It's my second time in this part of the world. Last year I was supposed to be on this side of the Jordan river the whole time. But after lots of COVID closures and letters of approval expiring, I ended up in Jordan for five months and then Israel/Palestine for six months, but not in Nazareth.



What tasks do you do as a volunteer?

Anything and everything. Right now, I am at the Nazareth Village for the busy season. Eventually, they might put me as a volunteer hospital chaplain sometimes. I am mostly based at the village restaurant, doing lunch service. I do the dishes, talk to the tourists and explain how we prepped the 1st-Century meals. We've done some tour guiding, which has been really fun: bringing all this information together about the history, the archaeology, and the Bible and making it make sense. I've also done other things on the land, such as harvesting some olives or picking rosemary. It's been fun!

Are you taking this volunteering experience as a personal retreat? a disconnection from the busyness of life?

Yes, it's a little bit outside of my normal career interests, but just felt like that's where God wants me to be, so not totally sure why that is yet. Not sure how He is going to use it. But if I am meant to be here, something will happen. Something will be how He needs to shape me. For me, it's been really helpful. I was here in Israel/Palestine last year and got to learn a lot about the context and what's happening. And this year, I feel like I am able to fill in the new volunteers a little more about the culture. Do more language study. Form more relationships with people. It's more of a deeper learning.



A birthday celebration at the Pilgrim's Guest House.

So, you're learning Arabic? What tools are you using?

Trying! I started out learning on an app called *Mango languages*. When I was in Jordan, I took some lessons. And then last year, I learned some more just from immersion. Now I'm about to start in-person lessons here with a tutor.

I guess if you know the language, the interaction with the locals is much different, right?

So much better and deeper. It's meaningful to speak to someone in their language, even if you're awful.

What do you love the most about volunteering?

I think service is one of the biggest aspects of deepening your faith. That's how you give back. I think it's very important to learn to love people through that. I also think service is such an interesting time





Anna with Majdoleen, SERVE Coordinator.

because so much of the world is so career-driven and ambitious. It's all about going forward and up. Volunteering breaks that ideal of productivity. I'm just going to be here. I'm not saving, and I'm not making money either, but I'm here because it's something I believe in. I feel it's good for my heart in a way. Just making sure my focus is on the right place and my priorities are straight. And I love the people. When you're volunteering, you meet like-minded people, and you hear stories from people. You get to see other people's lives, but other people get to live this 365 days a year. They don't have a choice to come or go, so especially in places where there's a lot of struggle, volunteering is really a privilege; to be able to live with people and choose intentionally to see what you wouldn't otherwise see.

Is there someone you have met here that particularly inspired you?

I love the staff at the village: everybody's super great. It's really cool to have a mix of Messianic Jews, Palestinians and internationals... a mix you would never see. Everyone has their own story about where life has been really hard and how they've seen God work in it. And the generosity of someone who says I'm going to bring *Nutella* tomorrow for everyone. Or those people who check in on everyone, making sure everyone is okay.

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Do you feel like you have become a temporary family?

Yeah. People look out for each other. I've met people who really embody God's love and care as a shepherd, really looking out for people, which I don't see very often.

What would you say to someone who is considering volunteering at SERVE but is unsure?

Living abroad is definitely a big decision, and it comes with a lot of difficulties and sometimes loneliness. Really pursue what you feel you're called to. Do something you believe in. There's so much learning and growth with it, but you need to know it's a commitment before you step in.

What has been your highlight so far from your time in Israel?

There's been a lot of fun things. Honestly, the work culture at the village is super sweet: there's so much tenderness and people who really care for each other. That's the big over-arching highlight. One specific incident highlight, Majdoleen, the SERVE coordinator and Lina and some of the other volunteers went down to a coffee festival in the old city. We were just walking around, and it was all hustle and bustle and music... that was sweet, I like that.

What has been the most challenging part of the experience?

Living cross-culturally, not the culture shock aspect, but creating community. I work with these people all day, and they are amazing, I love them, but then they all have kids and a family, so nobody is really hanging out after work. The people in the guest house are of different ages and languages... We built really good relationships, but it's very difficult to know how to do community with other internationals and locals, making sure you're taking care of yourself and processing enough when there's not enough hours in the day.

Are you thinking of repeating the experience in the future?

I'm only a month in, so I don't know yet. I am open to what God says it's next. I kind of feel two poles in my heart: my home community and here...



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