“Senior Reflections”
by Emily Plukas, Leo Rapoport, Natalia Quintana, Cassy Williams

Psalm 111
Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.
Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.
He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

Emily Plukas
For those who don't know me. I'm Emily Plukas and my family has been a part of this church community for as long as I can remember.
From Preschool to attending Sunday School and becoming an active youth member, I have remained connected to this community. During past Youth Sundays, you have seen me giving the children's message or selling Girl Scout cookies after service…
This year we've gone digital! You can now purchase Girl Scout cookies using the link in the comments of this video.
Starting from the very beginning, art has always been a big part of my identity. I started as a toddler painting with my dad and this soon transitioned into making items out of materials around my house. Pizza boxes became laptops and old storage containers became castles. I was constantly creating and building upon new forms.
Art has always been a significant part of my life. My dad and mom are both very creative people. My dad, Roland, has painted many murals and facilitated many art projects for me. His love and passion for art has truly inspired me to push myself past painting a picture and more towards telling a story.
My mom, Dot Plukas, A.K.A. “the big loud lady at church” is extremely creative and practical. Through being a Sunday School teacher and an active member of the church, she has shown me the importance of thinking on your feet and creating something amazing from the supplies that surround you. Both of my parents have shown me that art is not only for self-expression, but it can create community for people to come together and have fun.
About 2 years ago, I was entering advanced placement art at school. Part of this class involved creating 12 pieces of work before the start of the year. I spent the first half of my summer before junior year staring at a blank canvas. I struggled to create art pieces because I was afraid to mess up. I often got overwhelmed by the idea of painting a piece that had a story and meaning. It was the fear of failing that stopped me from creating anything. So, I spent that summer staring at a blank canvas until the Youth Service Trip in 2019 with Sierra Service Project (SSP).
At SSP my team was assigned to work at a Family Resource Center. I helped design and build a kid friendly play area where our goal was to make this place colorful and inviting for all ages. We started by painting multiple planter boxes and we also began to build a “farm”-acy. This was a little shed we built so that kids could play pretend as doctors and nurses. When I was at the Family Resource Center, I was handed a paint brush and told to paint. Here I was, stumped with another blank canvas. I asked them “What should I paint?” and was told “Just make it colorful.” I didn’t have to think about meaning or a story, I could just create and experiment with different materials. I had total freedom. I had forgotten how fun art could be when there weren’t rules or mandatory deadlines.
When I returned home from the service trip, I could not stop painting. Some of the pieces weren’t very good or even finished, but it didn’t matter. I was doing art for me, and my love and dedication to art resurfaced.
Flash forward to my senior year and again I was in advanced placement art. Our main assignment was to create a 10-piece series on one topic/subject matter. Uh Oh, I thought. This was the same kind of project that stumped me before. I was overwhelmed and in need of creating art that had a story.
I wanted to push myself to do more than just a class assignment. I wanted to use art as a tool of reflection. And so I decided the story I would tell through my 10 piece series would be my own story.
When I thought of my story, the first thing I thought of was my struggle with body image and insecurities. As uncomfortable as telling my personal story was, I thought to myself “I’m going to be vulnerable and try to do this.”
I quickly realized; art is hard! I had no idea what “my story” was because I didn’t understand how I felt about my body. After a while of creative block and creating nothing, I approached my dad and sister for help. We sat down and I tried to explain my story to the best of my ability. To say I was frazzled and scatter-brained would be an understatement. I began to open up and explain my body insecurities to them.
“I don’t like my body.” “I say I’m fine to mask the fact that I’m not fine.” “I feel like if you admit you are ashamed of your body, others will shame you for not being confident.”

As I continued to babble, my dad stood up and grabbed one of my unfinished art pieces and wrote in sharpie, “I’M FINE, I’M NOT FINE.” He then passed it to my sister, who wrote the same. Then it was passed to me.

At first, I was baffled—my dad had just graffitied on my artwork! But then I understood. In those minutes of babbling, I did nothing but repeat “I’m fine, I’m not fine.”

It was the actions of my dad that reminded me that part of art is creating without limitations. Similar to how the Youth Service Trip helped me break through previous creative blocks, this moment helped me realize that I had been putting myself in a box throughout this whole process. I wasn’t having fun or experimenting for the fear of failing and destroying an art piece. Just as the service trip had taught me before, the openness and freedom of expressing oneself helped me love creating art again.

The service trip gave me many life lessons that continue to affect me to this day. I learned the importance of not needing the art piece - or myself - to be perfect, and approaching every experience thereafter as an opportunity to do something new and exciting. While I’ve only just started to understand who I am as an artist and a person, it was this experience that has given me the opportunity to overcome the fear of failure. As I progress into the next phase of my life, I know it is these lessons that will further me in my growth and development.

Leo Rapoport

Hi, my name is Leo Rapoport and I have been going to this church since I was a baby. While this church was a big part of my life, I grew up in a household that followed both Jewish and Christian faiths. My dad is Jewish and my mom is United Methodist. I feel very lucky to have grown up learning about the two traditions, not to mention the food- there was my Nonny’s matzo ball soup and brisket for one holiday and my Cece’s ham, deviled eggs and broccoli casserole the next. And there have been moments where the two faiths connected as well, for instance when my Pappy on my dad’s side was really sick, this church provided him with a prayer quilt which was laid over him in the hospital. The quilt brought him comfort during such a vulnerable time and for that, our family is very grateful.

I went to preschool here for two years and my mom always talks about dropping me off at preschool the first time, and she was so worried that I would cry, but instead, I went straight to the teacher, sat in her lap, looked up at my mom and said, “Bye mom!”

Apparently, she then went to her car and cried the ugly cry. For me, separation anxiety didn’t come around until second grade, and it was pretty intense. It’s a certain vulnerability that every human feels at some point.

And speaking of vulnerability, I also did a lot of plays here at the church. I played Smee in Peter Pan, the dad in Charlotte’s Web and Grandpa Joe in Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. I would get so nervous before the shows, but somehow the lines would come out. I especially liked being in A Christmas Carol directed by Dorothy Nichols. I got to play Young Scrooge and work with adult actors. I didn’t have any lines so I didn’t have to be nervous. My favorite part of being in the plays was having dinner with the cast every night during tech week. I loved that feeling of community.

Some of my other favorite memories are from youth group meetings and the Youth Service Projects. Unfortunately, I’ve only gotten to go on two trips. The year I turned old enough to go, it was my sister Carly’s last trip and we were so excited to go together. We were going to Bland County, Virginia which is near Tennessee where my mom is from. The day we were leaving, we literally had to get up at 3am to get to the airport and my temperature was 103.6. I was so sad and I became the sickest I’ve ever been.

The next year, I got to go to New Orleans for the youth service trip and I had an amazing time. Out of them all, my most memorable experience was definitely the Sierra Service Project. The summer of 2019 we went to Smith River to help rebuild homes owned by families who struggle financially and with their health as well. In my experiences with the Youth Group in New Orleans, I always just felt like part of the team.

Then when I found myself in more of a leadership role with the youth during the Sierra Service Project, it was really unexpected. At first, I noticed a few nervous glances looking for reassurance. Then, I heard a voiced concern about what is expected of our group at the site. Finally, one of the younger group members approached me to express worry that they wouldn’t know how to perform the tasks required. The kids I was traveling with were scared. Many of them had never been away from home and most were anxious about the responsibility of building another family’s house.

Considering the separation anxiety, I experienced earlier in life, I found it very easy to listen and show empathy. I did my best to talk through every fear and question. I told them it was okay to be nervous. I assured them that our construction site leader would have ample expertise, and that all we can do is our best. Through encouraging the younger volunteers, I reminded myself that this kind of work is more about human connection than perfection. The real reason we are here is to help our fellow humans.

Due to the pandemic, the youth service project was cancelled last summer and we don’t know what will happen this summer, but it will definitely be different. But my hope is to one day work as a counselor or project manager through the national service programs at either The Sierra Service Project or the Appalachian Service Project so I can continue to give back to communities in need.

Looking back, I can say whole heartedly that I am very grateful for connections I’ve made with both friends and the counselors. There were fun times, moments of vulnerability and doubt and many opportunities to grow as a person. To believe, not believe, question and wonder, knowing I was with people that didn’t judge me and who supported me no matter what.

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Due to the pandemic, we have all been separate from each other for so long. What will it be like when we all come back together? Will we remember how to talk to each other? Will we have the opposite of separation anxiety? Togetherness anxiety? I think we will come back with a deeper sense of gratitude and never ever take human interaction for granted again.

I want to thank all of you for the love and support you have given me throughout the years. I have applied to many colleges and I'm not exactly sure where I will land. I plan to study history. Considering the part of history we have lived through since March: a global pandemic, the innocent life of George Floyd lost to police brutality and the Social Justice movement on behalf of him and so many others and the events on January 6th, there has been a heightened sense of vulnerability around the world. So many have been deeply impacted, dealing with fear, anxiety, isolation and anger that someone’s life is more valuable based on the color of their skin. It is for those very reasons that the idea of studying history now feels more important than ever. Thank you.

Natalia Quintana

Hi. I'm Natalia Quintana. I've been going to this church my whole life. You may know my mom, Glenda Martinez, or my brother, Alejandro Quintana. Back when church was in person, you could find us in the front pews, sitting next to Carol Greenwood. Now though, it's more likely to find me watching church in bed with my dog.

My parents have worked hard their entire lives. They made certain that my older brother and I were not only cared for, but given all the opportunities available to us. Within my family I have been in the position of being someone to bring us together, usually through my baking. I love being able to connect people and being able to do that in my family is something I am grateful for.

While I've always felt comfortable within my family, I haven't always felt comfortable with my faith. I remember some time towards the beginning of high school trying to figure out if I really was Christian. I learned about other religions, and was fascinated by many. The one that stood out to me the most was Quakerism. I never thought I would be interested in Quakerism or that I had so many of the same beliefs but I did. I vividly remember asking my mom if she would take me to a Friends Meeting. While she was supportive, albeit a little confused about my newfound interest in Quakerism, we never got around to it. Still, I am immensely grateful for her support.

Now I'm certain that I love being Christian and a United Methodist, that I believe in God and Jesus. What brought me to this is the belief that God is a loving and kind God. That he directs us to serve.

I have been extremely privileged. I have never once worried about where my next meal is coming from, how I will afford clothes, or school books. But growing up in the church allowed me to see that my privilege is a gift, and that with it, I must help others. Still, being charitable all felt vague, blurry in my mind, until I went on the Youth Service Project.

My first YSP trip was a new experience for me. According to people who had been on trips before, we were staying in the least comfortable accommodations yet. It was definitely the most interesting place I've stayed. We were staying on the border of Virginia and West Virginia, on a site with cabins. The girls' cabin happened to be crawling with bugs, and spiders. It was something that put me very out of my element. As I said, I've been very privileged, and this was something unlike anything I had experienced before. I remember early on feeling regret about going on the trip. That quickly changed when we finally got to work.

We were on a site with a family of four, with a baby on the way. We were working on building an extension. The hardest work was already done, all we had to do was add insulation and drywall. Little did I know that working with insulation is a pain. A literal pain. It gets itchy very quickly. This was another moment when I felt a twinge of regret. I thought, what am I doing here? I was being challenged by God. Quickly though I learned that someone on my team enjoyed working with insulation, much to my surprise, and gladly took over the work. I was very grateful. Instead, I spent my time focused on drywall.

The work was tiring, long, and though not complicated, it was hard. My saving grace was the family's five-year-old girl, Ashleigh. We immediately connected. I would spend most of my time working, but about a quarter of my time was spent playing with her. She was happy, so full of joy. Even though it was clear her life was a hard one, she was loved and cared for, and to her that was all that mattered. On one of the last days, we were putting drywall up in what was to be the baby's room. I'm not quite sure how it started, but we started drawing on the back of the drywall, making pictures of our work team, their family, and more. It was so fun, that it was sad when we actually had to put the drywall up.

While I know I was challenged during this trip, I look back on it all fondly. The brief moments of regret only put things in perspective for me. I could choose to live a slightly uncomfortable week and help others, or live in comfort but not help anyone. The selfish thoughts about my own comfort were quickly overtaken by the memories I was making with this family.

I tell this story because in my mind this is what it means to be a Christian. It is about being able to connect with other people despite our differences because we are all children of God. It is giving back to the world, and helping those in need. While we are tempted by selfish thoughts, God teaches us to acknowledge them and move on.

As I look towards my future, I have a plan. I've already been accepted into one college, although I'm waiting to hear from others. And I hope to after college go on to law school. From there I want to become a lawyer working for a non-profit, fighting for civil rights. Even if my life does not go down this path, I know whatever I end up doing will include helping others, because I truly believe that is what God sent me here to do. As our scripture says, “The Lord is gracious and merciful” and I hope to act with that same grace and mercy.
Cassy Williams

Hi! My name is Cassy and this church has been a part of my life for a really long time; well, as long as one can really have at less than two decades old. I was baptized in this very sanctuary and began regularly attending in the fifth grade. I'm surprised I made it even that far after making a crime scene instead of a gingerbread man during Sunday school. Shouldn't have let me use the red frosting. As sixth grade came around and I began my time in youth group, I didn't think much of it at first. What started off as just this little weekend activity evolved into a formative experience that has helped mold me into the young adult I am today, and ultimately has given me a place to call home.

It feels a little ironic that I should get to deliver a message to all of you today, standing here in front of a congregation of a religion I can't confidently say holds my convictions. Many young people struggle to find how religion fits into their lives, and I can't say that I've had a particularly easy time with this either.

Other sources of religious influence in my life saw to that fact, what with my Christian school's insistence that evolution is a myth, the Earth is a measly 6,000 years old, and that women are best seen barefoot and pregnant. The message consistent across all of it was one of a fire and brimstone punishment at the hands of a wrathful god. These people who were calling themselves Christians were some of the furthest from the actual teachings of Christ. The one place unlike all the rest, the only one that truly embodied the compassion and love of the words of Jesus, was this church right here.

But it was hard to really recognize that at first. I had become so depressed that it was hard to see the good in anything really. I actually wanted to quit youth group altogether. My mom had to basically drag me here every weekend, and I'm entirely grateful for that.

At the time I had no friends at school, nor any outside school for that matter. So, getting an opportunity to hang out with people my own age after feeling like I didn't belong anywhere was instrumental in salvaging what remained of my decaying mental health. I started opening up, little by little, as I discovered that I wasn't going to be turned away. I'm really really glad I stuck with it, because as things gradually got better, I was able to have some wonderful experiences.

One of the best parts of youth group has been the service project trips. I know everybody says this, but it's only because it's true. My first year was a trip to Louisiana. My team got to know our homeowner really well and she was one of the sweetest people I've ever met. It really felt like we were making a positive change in the life of others. And we got really lucky too, most of our work was indoors, saving us from 105 degree weather combined with frequent downpour.

My second year was a bit tougher, but I came out better for it. I wasn't particularly happy with the no phones rule. And after having to walk a mile hike to pull some weeds in the piercing cold and rain, I was really not a happy camper. But after hitting rock bottom, the only place left to go is up. I learned to grin and bear it through the rest of the work, and enjoy the rest of my time there.

I don't know, maybe I was brainwashed into enjoying singing along to the overly sappy songs that seemed to laugh in the face of my misery. I also became closer to some of my fellow youth that I never really talked to all that much, doing my best to help someone who was struggling through a lot that week. It was a good time in the end. I even brought home with me a slight southern accent for a couple weeks.

This community that we have here, it's such a rare and beautiful thing. The love that we share with one another and with the world, is something that's hard to come by. The little things we do have more of an impact than we realize. I really have to thank Tricia, this youth group, and this whole congregation really, for the compassion that very well may have saved my life. Things have gotten very tough. Many of us are stumbling, feeling lost once again, and that's okay. Whatever it is you're going through right now, you can make it through. You are surrounded by love, each and every one of you.