

Former JV Spotlight

Mark Weller (he/him)

St. Mary's, AK '78-80

Susie Leonard Weller (she/her)

Seattle, WA '78-80



IN THE LATE 1970s, Susie Leonard and Mark Weller each answered the call to serve with JVC Northwest. What began as a year (or two) of intentional service would ripple into their lives in ways they never anticipated. The two met through the Seattle FJV community, married in 1984, and have spent the past 4 decades living out the values and being proudly 'ruined for life'.

WHAT IMPACT DID YOUR JV YEAR HAVE ON YOUR LIFE?

Susie: My time as a JV transformed and "ruined" my life in many ways. I experienced the power of living in a community that encouraged me to stay in Seattle after completing two years as a volunteer. It also encouraged me to become a world citizen and peacemaker.

I felt inspired by Archbishop Hunthausen, and other JVs, who were committed to peacemaking and advocating for those most vulnerable. When I was a JV Campus Minister at Seattle University, my supervisor, Fr. Chuck Schmitz, S.J., supported my involvement in non-violent civil disobedience at the Trident Submarine Base.

I also received significant tuition assistance to complete my master's degree in Pastoral Ministry. This led me to become one of the first female Young Adult Ministers serving in NW Seattle.

Mark: My placement was at St. Mary's Mission High School in a rural village of Alaska '78-80. It was a boarding school for Inuit and Alaska Athabaskan high school students. I was a "prefect" in the boy's dorm, taught an electrical skills class but was mainly a facilities maintenance worker keeping the complex of 12 buildings operational. The impact and lessons, both positive and challenging at times, were vast, and I found them an invaluable base to build upon and apply again throughout my life of 70 years.

WHAT PRACTICE OR LESSON DID YOU GAIN AS A JV THAT YOU STILL CARRY WITH YOU NOW?

Susie: My JV housemate, Leo, particularly inspired me. Even though Leo disapproved of my choice to commit an action of non-violent civil disobedience, he chose to attend my trial and sentencing. He explained, "You're my housemate, and I am here to support you." He demonstrated being a bridge-builder and how to stay engaged through dialogue and relationships with those who hold different opinions and beliefs.

Mark: Whether I was navigating cultural differences with students, building relationships with fellow JVs, or collaborating with the Jesuits and Ursuline sisters at the mission, one lesson kept surfacing: I had to adapt.

That ability to adjust and build community with a wide range of people became invaluable when I later worked as a registered nurse in Spokane. Leading a hospital unit meant constantly navigating the stress, pain, and complexity of patients and staff. My time as a JV helped me build those relational skills early on.

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HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A JESUIT VOLUNTEER MADE YOUR LIFE RICHER?

Susie: Motivated by our experience as JV's, Mark and I opened our home in Seattle to provide housing for refugees escaping brutality in El Salvador and Guatemala. Most recently, we hosted a Ukrainian refugee family for over a year in the downstairs of our home in Liberty Lake, Washington.

WHAT DO YOU DO NOW?

Susie: I retired after serving Head Start and ECEAP families through the Community Colleges of Spokane as a Social Services Manager and Parenting Instructor for 24 years. I also provide spiritual coaching, serve as a guest speaker for faith communities, support those with an ostomy, and write reflection books.

Mark: I am retired. I volunteer as the Property In-Locale Coordinator for the JV house in Spokane. I advise on maintenance for the house and grounds. I work with each community of JVs to ensure a safe, secure and functional house as they work to make it their unique home.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR SOMEONE WHO IS CONSIDERING A YEAR OF SERVICE AS A JESUIT VOLUNTEER?

Susie: Be prepared that your life will not be the same after your JV year(s). You will see the world with a new perspective. Living in a community can be challenging. At the same time, conflicts can become a "polishing stone" for our rough edges, inviting us to grow in new ways.

Mark: When I was considering St. Mary's Mission in Alaska I had mixed emotions from excitement to trepidation. After getting more info, I realized there was no way to KNOW what to do. This was going to require a "leap of faith". I then just asked myself- why not?