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Breaking Bread – Virtually

Eric F. Spina
University of Dayton, efspina@udayton.edu

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Breaking Bread — Virtually

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Wednesday April 15, 2020

By Eric F. Spina

When Karen and I are invited to share a home-cooked meal with students in their UD houses, we jump at the opportunity. These have been our favorite moments during our time at UD.

It is not just the food — although that is typically outstanding — it is also hearing their stories, gaining insight into the intentionality with which the students live, seeing the depth of the friendships they have formed, and being a part of the community spirit they have created. These dinners truly hold a special place in our hearts — and are inspiring to us.

When our dinner with the seven women in the Faith, Vocation and Leadership legacy house was moved to the internet because of the unexpected exodus of students this spring, I wondered if we could break bread via Zoom and create the same warmth, hospitality — and connection.

This past Monday, as Ashley Kush asked us to center ourselves and thank God for “the space to share in community across the states,” all my doubts evaporated.

Karen and I truly felt as though we were in the students' home on College Park, under the Christmas lights they hung in their prayer room and among the random Post-it notes of encouragement ("You da bomb") found in unexpected places around the house. I could see in my mind's eye the plethora of photos they lovingly displayed under housemate Kristen Sanson's sign in the living room, "Your friends become your chosen family."

From bedrooms and kitchens in Pittsburgh, Chicago and spots around Ohio, we ate our own pasta and shared stories about our lives turned upside down, now lived over Zoom in virtual classrooms, meetings, and gatherings with family and friends.

Just as they now, over the miles, instant message each other during episodes of "This is Us" — a TV show about "how connections we share can transcend time, distance" — this group of housemates will be friends for life. As I told them, "Your relationships are so deep and reach so far, you won't ever be able to shake each other."

We learned about the unfortunate pipe burst that spilled sewage in their basement before Family Weekend and their impressions of remote learning — "my professors are very relaxed, and I like seeing everyone's dogs," one said. Mostly, they shared vivid UD memories, ones that will last well beyond graduation.

Teresa Depasquale described how her fiancé, RJ McCarren, proposed to her at the gazebo. Ashley Kush, president of the pep band, joyfully recounted how the stars aligned on her birthday, allowing her to snap a quick photo with broadcaster Dick Vitale on campus for ESPN College Gameday and to play the flute with the band at the exuberant men's basketball season finale: "It was the best day ever. Being #3 in the country was wild!"

Lanna Klausing thrived doing summer research under the guidance of a faculty mentor. Shannon Hansen recalled her time as a student ambassador in the School of Engineering. Emily Busch shared that she would recharge her soul for the week as she strummed her guitar in the chapel choir. Kristen Sanson found a spiritual home when she led "Callings," a Campus Ministry summer leadership and faith-building program.

Maria Dascola had her heart set on attending the University of Pittsburgh until she visited UD's campus and experienced "a welcoming feeling, a warm presence. Community, she said, "is an overused term, but we are a community."

Indeed, UD is a community without parallel. That is the biggest lesson that I have learned in my four years here. And as I struggle myself with the loss of direct contact with students on our beloved campus, this dinner with the Faith, Vocation, Leadership women turned my attitude from one of loss for what I don't have to one of gratitude and appreciation for what I have gained at UD and will retain forever. Karen and I have been truly blessed.

As the women and their mentors, Megan Reissman and Tiffany Hunsinger, waved good-bye and logged off, we felt renewed. Yes, we are a community — a chosen family.

