

Lee Valentyn is a man on a mission to Nicaragua through Cap Corps

By Tom Collins
For the Times-Villager

While some young people are getting their feet wet in their first jobs following college, starting out in married life or going on to professional or graduate schools, Lee Valentyn, son of Mike and Pat Valentyn of Kaukauna, has chosen another option.

He's committed himself to serving for at least 18 months with the Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer Corps — popularly known as Cap Corps. It is a volunteer organization that combines spirituality and service as volunteers are immersed in

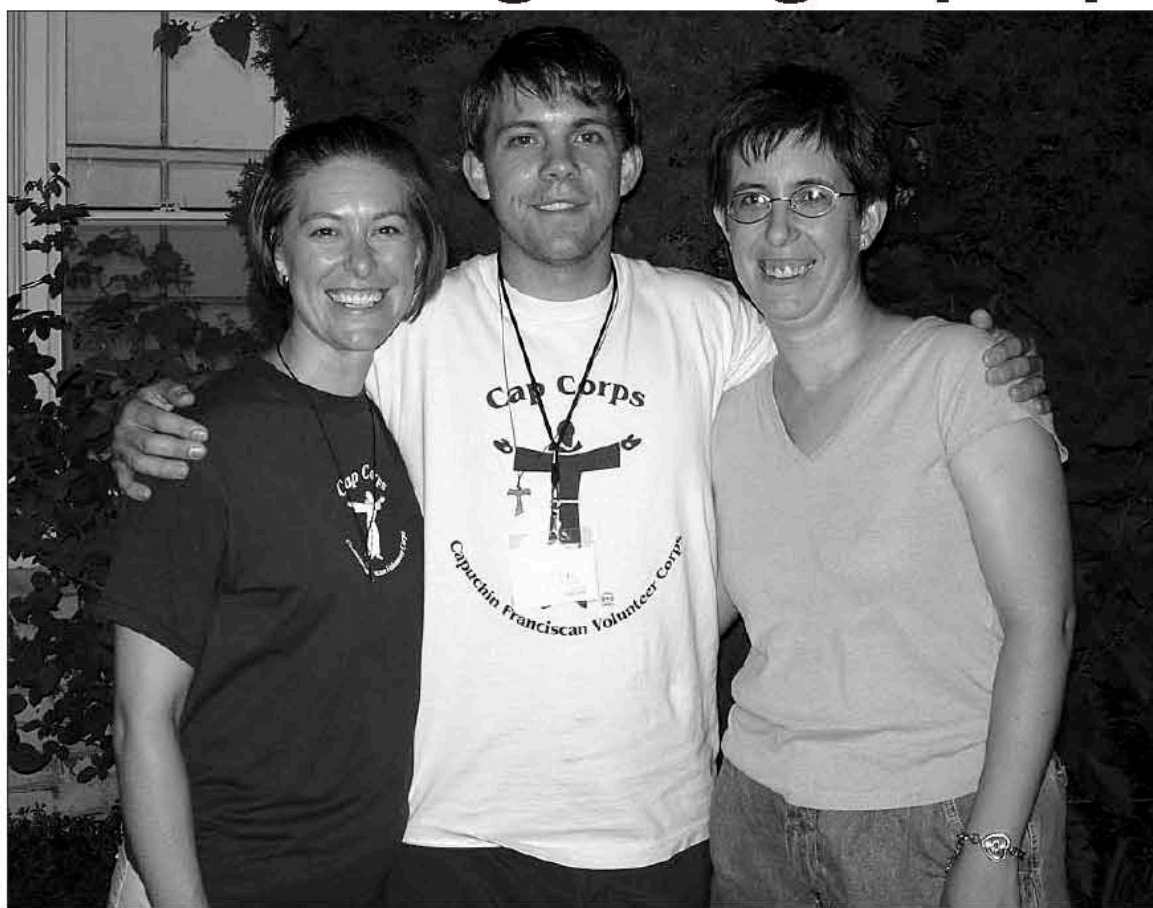
communities in the United States as well as countries like Panama, Peru and Papua New Guinea in addition to Nicaragua.

Lee follows his sister, Katherine, now married and teaching in Milwaukee, who made a similar commitment to Cap Corps in Nicaragua several years ago. He also looked into the Peace Corps. Before he departed on Aug. 16 to begin his commitment, he was interviewed for this story.

"Thanks to my sister's involvement with Cap Corps, I was familiar with the program and thought it would be worthwhile to apply," noted Valentyn who also considered the Peace Corps. "I joke with people that I'm following my sister wherever she goes. We went to the same college [Carroll College in Waukesha] and now I am going to participate in the volunteer program."

"I guess I'm hoping this experience will give me more direction in life, in terms of a career. I've thought about a lot of different professions and haven't settled on one quite yet. But I don't think that's my primary goal," Valentyn said about his service commitment.

"I think I'm like a lot of volunteers in that I'm going with the hope of having an impact on somebody else. Then again, I am also aware of how



Submitted photo
Lee Valentyn is starting his commitment to serve Cap Corps, which will last at least 18 months. He's pictured with sisters Katherine (left) who also volunteered in Nicaragua, and Sara Hooyman.

much I will be impacted in Nicaragua. Hopefully, I can learn something about myself and what it means to walk with someone else through their difficult times and their joyful times."

Valentyn adds that he intends to make service a part of his life whether or not it's out of the country, like his current commitment, or in the United States.

"I am at a point in my life where I know I can offer my gifts to do good work and walk alongside people who are struggling, influencing them while they influence me. I am not sure what might happen in the future that might impact my ability to go abroad so it makes sense to go now. I believe it is important to have a worldly view and to seek out an

understanding of things that seem different or counter-intuitive to the things I already know."

While in college, Valentyn had an opportunity to live and study in another Spanish-speaking country, Ecuador, in South America. The fact that he's studied the language since grade six and graduated from Carroll with a dual major in psychology and Spanish helped.

"Being placed in a Spanish-speaking country is important to me for a volunteer experience at this time," said Valentyn. "Hopefully, Spanish will be a part of my career because it is a language I've studied and practiced for over a dozen years now and I know the time I spend in Nicaragua will enhance my Spanish-speaking skills."

"I have lost a lot of vocabulary in the last four years, but my Spanish-speaking skills are more advanced than they were when I left for Ecuador in the fall of 2004."

"I will certainly encounter challenges I hadn't know in Ecuador," he adds. "I am confident about my ability to handle these challenges, and part of that confidence comes from having lived abroad previously."

Of course, an important element in the experience is faith. Both the orientation he received and three retreats during the service experience are meant to enhance the overall experience.

"I believe that accepting Jesus as my savior means that I must follow his call to walk with the poor, work for social justice and love other people," said Valentyn who added that he sees borders among Christians as made by humans. He feels there are no borders among Christians.

"I get the sense that this experience will deepen and possibly alter my values as a Christian," he adds. "The experiences I have and the interactions I witness all will go a long way to giving more meaning to what it means to be Christian."

Valentyn will not be alone as he lives in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua. He will live with two others there as well as three more in the nation's capital city, Managua, where his sister, Katherine, served in Cap Corps.

He noted that volunteers he's trained and prepared with have come from Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Hawaii, Maine and Missouri.

He will be working with both young people and adults in Nicaragua.

"I think working with youth can be very rewarding and very difficult," says Valentyn. "Rewarding in the sense that you can see them grow and learn. Also difficult in that there is a sense that youth in many countries have a certain ceiling above them they won't necessarily be able to overcome."

Each Cap Corps volunteer must raise \$1,500 for the Cap Corps ministries. The funding helps get volunteers to their service sites.

The volunteers also follow the Franciscan tradition of living simply and within a community. They receive stipends to help them get along.

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"The stipend is small and does not provide for much wiggle room in terms of other activities that have a cost," Valentyn explained. "Volunteers often pool their food money together rather than making shopping trips on their own. If we have a need, Cap Corps will cover the cost. If there is a want, it is typically out of our own pockets."

"One important point that has come up in our training is how valuable it will be for us as volunteers in the community to sit — sit and listen to what people have to say to us. Understanding where the other person is coming from goes a long way to strengthening the relationship."

Valentyn said he had feelings of both anxiety and excitement prior to leaving for Nicaragua.

"I do have noticeable anxiety about leaving the people in my life. It's hard to think about being away

from people for an extended period of time." Valentyn said modern communications make it easier.

"I also get excited when I think about the idea of actually being in the country and experiencing the community, the culture and the individual people. I anticipate being changed by the experience and think it will prove to be invaluable in my development as a Christian person."

The beginning of his experience will be more immersion in language, joining five other Cap Corps volunteers in Granada, Nicaragua, before beginning his Cap Corps commitment.

Valentyn adds it's not important what he or other brings, it is the Cap Corps journey.

"Rather than going with the intention of leading people, the importance is placed on walking alongside the community so that they and I will be transformed as a result."