This past July, my church gave me the opportunity to serve at the St. Francis Inn in one of the worst sections of Philadelphia known as Kensington. If you were to search the word Kensington online, the first words that would appear are “drug trade,” “crime,” and “prostitution.” These are words that are quite often used in the book “Nobody” by Marc Lamont Hill. While reading the book, I couldn’t help but notice similarities in the book and in my personal experience talking to guests I served at the Inn.

When my group and I first arrived at the Inn, we were greeted by two men who were visibly homeless and who couldn’t have been kinder. They asked us if we needed help and when we politely declined they told us to “have a blessed day.” Those four words had such an impact on me. These two men sleeping on the sidewalk, have barely anything that they own, wishing us a blessed day? I was truly speechless.

Once we settled in our apartment across the street, we walked over to the Inn where we began to prepare the food for the dinner service later that night. The special thing about St.
Francis Inn is that they have a sit-down dinner for the guests. While volunteering there, you have a different role every day, and my all time favorite is serving the guests.

The residents of Kensington walk in from the gate outside a get a ticket. Once they have their ticket, they wait on a line to be seated and served. My job as a server is to bring the guest a meal, a piece of fruit of their choice, and a dessert. But that’s not why I like it. The best part is when you get a minute to talk to the guests. They are most often some of the kindest and most forgiving people I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.

I sat down and talked with a man named Richard who grew up in Kensington and who had a cast on his arm. I asked him what happened and he said he was walking to an AA meeting when he was stopped by a police officer. When he asked why he was stopped, he said the officer told him to “shut up and turn around.” When Richard asked again the officer grabbed his arms, breaking his left wrist. When he fell over in pain the officer grabbed him up by the wrist he had just broken and wrote him a ticket for disrespecting a police officer. Keep in mind Richard had done nothing wrong; he was on his way to try and better himself and his life at an AA meeting yet he was treated like he was disposable, like his life didn’t matter. Like he was nobody.

While reading the book “Nobody” I couldn’t help but think of Richard and the other guests at St. Francis Inn. These people who may be perceived as criminals can be some of the kindest people you’ll ever meet. Most people don’t care enough to see past the stereotypes. For example, Freddie Gray. He was only trying to help his family, but people assumed that he was this monster and he was put into a chokehold by the NYPD and was killed. Trayvon Martin: All he was doing was getting a snack for his brother and a drink for himself. We will never know what Trayvon Martin could have done with his life, what he could have become, because his life was brutally taken from the world far too early.
After finishing the book, I realized that the Franciscan values that were prominent in the book were also very prominent at St. Francis Inn. Discovery, community, and individual worth were noticeable wherever you looked. If someone struggled to eat his food, the man sitting next to him would help him eat, without knowing anything about him. Not only that, but the hope that these people had in God blew me away. They wanted to learn so much about God and all that he does for us. Not only did they realize how important God was, they realized how important they were and how much their lives mattered. They knew they were a somebody, no matter what anyone told them. They are somebody.

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