

From Dr. Jon Fancher —

One of the unique parts of my work at RRPC is the privilege of taking our youth on an annual mission trip. Removed from their customary surroundings and placed in areas that are in need of a “helping hand,” our youth experience first-hand what it means to serve those who are “less fortunate.”

This year’s mission trip kept us relatively close to home in Hamilton, Ohio near Cincinnati. There we joined 400 kids in the youth groups of two dozen churches from fourteen states. The organizing agency, called “Group Mission Trips,” specializes in ministry with youth. They were the ones who arranged for all those kids to have home repair jobs enabling senior citizens, disabled persons, and economically challenged folks to be able to remain in their own homes.

While on the mission trip I had asked this year’s four RRPC youth participants to share in worship what the experience meant for them. Those who were in worship were impressed by the thoughtfulness, the spiritual depth, and the humor displayed by our young people. So in this month’s column I’m sharing what they wrote (with their permission). In fact, the first entry is new to everyone—it wasn’t shared during worship that day.

From Libby Poole—

“Wakey-wakey, Workcampers!” For the past week, this announcement was blasted over the loudspeakers at 6:45 every morning, along with a painfully loud and catchy song, indicating that it was time to sprint for a spot in the quickly growing line for the bathroom. Because I am NOT a morning person, these 15 minutes of rushing to get ready before breakfast were my least favorite part of every day in Hamilton, Ohio. However, after I put some eggs and sugary cereal in my system, each day continued to get better and better. I danced and sang loudly with 400 other people, laughed with new friends on bus rides, played card games while snacking on Oreos dipped in peanut butter, and watched a field of fireflies light up during evening devotions. Still, none of these were my favorite part of the past week.

Rather, my favorite part was sweating for 6 hours a day as my crew worked our hardest to complete the project we had been tasked with—building a wheelchair ramp and new porch stairs for our resident. I believe that anyone who could meet her would want to do the same. Her name was Linda, and she lived in a trailer park. She had a son and two grandchildren who also lived in the trailer park. Linda suffered from back and knee issues, and for too many years, she had been using a wobbly set of stairs to get from the porch of her mobile home to walk across the street to watch her grandchildren.

When we first arrived on Monday, she lit up with a smile, and I rarely saw her without that smile for the rest of the week. It was evident that she didn’t have many visitors and wasn’t used to so much attention. She was a little shy, and didn’t really know how to address us as a group. She seemed surprised when we wanted to take pictures with her and when we invited her to attend our Friday evening program. Every day, I would notice her quietly surveying our work, not to critique or make sure things were being done how she wanted, but simply because she was so grateful to have this long-overdue project finally being completed. And after this experience, I understand why this came as such a relief to her. It took 13 people around 30 hours to complete, and was far more complicated than I imagined. In addition, when we knocked away her old steps, it was clear that the last builders had done the job with only time and money in mind. One of the youth leaders in my group said it was a miracle that the stairs hadn’t collapsed on her before we arrived. In this way, I am positive that the new ramp, stairs, and freshly painted deck will have major positive impacts in her life.

However, the work we did represented something greater than what we built. She and her neighbors saw us every day wearing tee-shirts with Bible verses on them, and cross-and-fish-symbol necklaces, smiling, laughing, and ready to work hard, still humming the songs from morning program. They saw us eat lunch together and then take 20 minutes for a group devotion. We talked with many of her curious neighbors about what we were doing and why we were doing it. I know that Christ worked to spread his joy and love in similar ways at each of the fifty-something worksites and the neighborhoods that surround them. While I had to leave the work camp a day early and wasn’t able to see the end result of my crew’s labors, this realization of the great impact I was a part of was my favorite part of the mission trip—even more so than Oreos dipped in peanut butter!

From Emma Poole:

The concept of youth mission trips seems both fairly standardized and quite insane. Four-hundred or so teenagers are piled into a middle school, deprived of sleep, filled with carbs, taught about God and sent into the community to serve.

Before traveling to Hamilton I had attended a mission trip and was fairly sure I knew what to expect: awesome new friends, squeaky air mattresses, thought-provoking devotions, carbs by the bucket-load, energetic worship services, a hour-long shower line, and an amazing chance to serve people in need. I didn't, however, expect to find myself perched on a roof, covered from head to toe in paint, singing Sweet Caroline with an 80-year-old man and loving every minute. I also didn't expect to find myself sitting in a dugout on the school's baseball field every night with Aileen, Michel, Libby, and Pastor Jon in "dugout devotions," or to become such close friends with my four other crew members and advisor.

Our trip to Hamilton showed me something I've never seen so powerfully before: how Christ can use the simple work of our hands to change the lives of others forever. After being split up into a crew of five campers and one adult, we were assigned to a small house owned by a Mr. and Mrs. Owens. Upon arrival, we found piles of old wood and appliances, car repair tools, and rusting cars stacked around the back of the house. Gutters hung off the roof and boarded up windows peek out from the side of the tiny house that was so cluttered you could barely walk through it. Despite the chaos, we were greeted by a beaming Mr. Owens, who promptly showed himself a kind man who loved to talk but was unable to get out much or do the car repairs he so loved because health issues and age confined him to the house, where he and his wife live alone. After talking to him, we realized he didn't set much store by God or His power to work in our lives.

The morning flew by as we got to work, and, in afternoon devotions, the other campers and I were energetically discussing the gutters and vents we could nail, handrails we could continue to build, and fence posts we had already replaced when Bryan, our group leader stated that he thought our job would only be done when Mr. and Mrs. Owens realized we were serving them out of love for Jesus. That was hard to grasp. I knew how to replace fence posts, paint, assemble shelves, and clean out porches, but realized we would have to rely on God to work in their hearts. That's when I found 1 Corinthians 15:57-58; *"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."* We gave ourselves fully to God's work and set out to show the Owens His love by taking care of their needs; attending to both their home and want for company.

Our crew worked so hard that we finished our week-long job in a few days and were able to help another crew that had lots of work left. The knowledge that the work of our hands was directly fulfilling someone's desperate need made every bug bite, drop of sweat, and sunburn worth it. On our last day at the Owens home, they joined us on the porch for post-lunch devotions, something we had invited them to do each day. We formed a circle and prayed, each person saying, *"Jesus, you are..."* and finishing with what Jesus had revealed himself as on this trip, like *"...my strength"* or *"...my friend"* or something like that. With tears in their eyes, both the Owens thanked God for sending us to work in their home. They were thankful beyond expression and in prayer poured out to God their appreciation and love. I think God works a great many miracles in our lives, if we are only open to seeing them, and although He's given me so many blessings, the opportunity to witness the miracle that occurred in the Owens' hearts in Hamilton, Ohio is one of the greatest I've ever received.

From Michael Wilson—

Good Morning! As I share the eye-opening experience I had on our mission trip to Hamilton, Ohio I wanted to begin with what this last week has truly been all about... GRIT. It's defined as a dish of coarsely ground corn kernels boiled with water or milk. As I read this seemingly odd definition last night I became clouded with confusion: either I had gone to the wrong camp or I simply did not understand what I learned last week. After a few seconds I realized it would have helped to have placed the word "spiritual" in front of the coarsely ground kernels and form a new phrase: "spiritual GRIT." That could be defined as the engine that drives perseverance in life, the core strength that helps us overcome obstacles. Most importantly, it is the essential characteristic that sustains our life long pursuit of Jesus.

During our mission trip, we dove into 5 sections of spiritual GRIT: Courage, Forgiveness, Trust, Surrender and Love. As the week has come to a close, I now see the ways in which we all have demonstrated these 5 characteristics while working as "the hands and feet of God."

First, it took *Courage* to begin this mission trip. I truly was anxious about what lay ahead. It took courage to meet and develop amazing relationships with individuals I had never seen. But most importantly, it took courage to not allow my own fear inside overcome my desire to serve our Lord.

Upon entering one of our nightly services we were given a pencil. After opening in prayer and song we were asked to think of someone that you have not yet forgiven. Next, we discovered the importance of the almost always challenging decision to *Forgive*. In Romans Chapter 12 we read Paul's seemingly counterintuitive message stating, "Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them." Then we were asked, "If you are

ready to forgive the one who went against you, and to bless the one who went against you, please snap your pencil in two and lay the pieces at the cross. During the next period of time I found myself in prayer and deep thought. I would have never guessed a pencil could teach me so much about forgiveness.

During this past week, the resident I had the pleasure of serving—"Linda"—demonstrated *Trust*, the third characteristic of GRIT, perfectly! Although she had so little, she was willing to give so much. She trusted us with her home, tools and family and always did so with open arms. Ernest Hemingway once said, "The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them." Linda did exactly that: she put faith in complete strangers, and to me that is what taught the importance of trust.

Walking into Thursday night's worship service we were given a strip of cloth—a "flag of *Surrender*." The leaders discussed the importance of surrendering to Jesus any negative energy, thoughts or actions. Simply put: allow Jesus to take the wheel. Afterward, we were told, "If you are ready to surrender something to our Lord, lay your cloth on the cross." After a very long time of prayer and thinking I watched 400 kids ready to surrender to Jesus; young adults just like me, wanting to become a better version of themselves.

Lastly, *Love*. For this trait let me give an example from camp. Sadly, one of my crew members sadly on a nail at the work site. Immediately I saw kids younger than me bow their heads and pray for that young girl. It was so powerful to see love in action, and especially from kids younger than me. Throughout this last week, not only did I strengthen but I grew in my spiritual GRIT. (But to be honest what took the most GRIT was trying Skyline Chili—it truly was better going in than coming out!)

This last week has been incredible; while serving others I learned more about myself than I ever saw possible. I was able to make new friends who gave me hope that there are kids just like me struggling to not lose who they truly are during these tough and tempting teenage years.

Finally, I would like to thank you guys for the support which encouraged me to go on this mission trip and of course a special thanks to Aileen, Emma, and Libby for allowing me to love every second of our spiritual journey together. Likewise, thank you very much Dr. Fancher; we all appreciate your dedication to making us all have an amazing trip. Mark Twain truly hit the nail on the head when saying, "Preachers are always pleasant company when they are off duty." Thank you!

From Aileen Busher—

To be honest, I was really nervous for this mission trip. I hadn't been on a mission trip before this week, so I was not exactly sure what to expect. To start things off, I packed all of my things at 11 o'clock the night before we left and the next morning I showed up with way too much stuff. (that's okay because Michael and I both overpacked). Before we left, I think it is safe to say that we were nervous about meeting people. But soon after we arrived, we met a group of kids from Springfield, Illinois who played cards with us and showed us the ropes. A day or so later, we met 2 girls from Louisville, Kentucky, Grace and Mikayla, who taught us the art of dipping Oreos in peanut butter, which I highly recommend, and introduced us to Brazilian soda. Our friendships with these people made it so much harder to leave.

Aside from our new friends, my favorite part of each day was definitely working. Out of 69 crews, Emma and I were on crew 41 (also known as "the best crew"). Our assignment was to cover some vents, add some hand railings, build some extremely frustrating storage shelves, and fix the gutters for the Owens family. They were so kind despite their hard lives. We were able to finish our work for the Owens family in just 2 days. We packed up our tools and were reassigned down the street to help other crews paint the exterior of a giant Victorian house. Our work at this house was so important to me because the city was going to give the man who lived there an eviction notice if his house wasn't painted by July 1st—the day after the work camp ended. If our mission trip was any later, our friend wouldn't have his house. In other words, our work literally meant that he could stay in his home, which made it so much more meaningful. On the last day we gave him one of these necklaces which he was so excited about and that night he even came to worship with us.

I will always remember how grateful our residents were that we came and helped them. After a week of work, playing cards, getting weird tan lines, eating carbs and chili, it was time to come home. It was sad to say goodbye to all of our new friends who I will be forever grateful for because of all of the great memories that this week brought/ And it was time to say goodbye to the residents we served—they I will never forget. Thank you all for letting us experience this amazing week.