

LOVE IN ACTION

Reflections on SPC Mission Experiences

(Brandon Dennison led SPC's Arizona Vision Quest to the White Mountain Apache Tribe Reservation. He shared these reflections on Sunday, August 10, 2008.)

Where is the Hope?

"Where is the hope? I meet millions who tell me they feel demoralized by the decay around them. Where is the hope? The hope that each of us has is not in who governs us, or what laws are passed, or what great things we do as a nation. The hope, that each of us has, is in the power of God working through the hearts of people. That's where our hope is in this country and that's where our hope is in life." The words of the Rev. Billy Graham.

Upon arriving on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, I don't think I was the only one in the group wondering, "Where is the hope in this place?" We looked around and saw decaying homes that many in this area would consider tracker sheds. We marveled at the incredible amount of stray animals roaming the streets hungry. Even horses roam wild across highways, their ribs showing. We listened as the YouthWorks staff told of a 51% poverty level, high alcohol, drug, obesity, and suicide rates, and devastatingly high levels of abuse. It was easy to feel overwhelmed by the darkness of the place. And of course we felt guilty. This is our country's fault. This is our fault.

Ahmanesch was a 90-year old Apache lady who barely spoke English. My crews first assignment was to do some light repair and painting on her home. We rolled up in our shiny vans, jumped out with eager faces, paint brushes in hand, ready to work. But Ahmanesch wouldn't speak to us. She only looked at the ground. I tried several times to start conversation but she would have none of it. I understood. We had been warned that many refused to speak to whites. After working for an hour or so, I stopped and asked her if she wanted a glass of water. She said yes. After I gave her the drink, she opened up to me and once she started she couldn't stop. "Three weeks ago, my husband had a stroke. He died in Phoenix. Now I'm all alone. My daughter is a devil and doesn't care for me. I'm scared the drunk men will get me." Tears streamed down her cheeks.

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After our work on Ahmanesch's place (where we picked up nearly 70 empty beer cans) we moved on to Emily's house. Emily was elderly too. As we worked on the home we couldn't believe anyone possibly lived there. It was in bad shape. On our second day of work Emily learned her brother had died. As the funeral processed past her home she stood on the street corner and wailed.

Also, 12 newly born puppies lived under the house. We cringed as we watched them try to milk on their mother. Their mother had nothing to offer because she was starving.

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The next day as we went to pick up kids from their homes for a day of fun at what we called Kids Club, we were shocked to see their living conditions. Many had not had their clothes and even diapers changed in days. Bruises were evident on a good number of them. During the day, several of us had to break up fights. During one I saw a

9-year old boy try and choke another with a jump rope. I stopped him and the boy swung at me. "I'll kill you," he said angrily. "I'd kill my own mother. I'm a killer." I was stunned. I was speechless. I was sad.

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Midweek, we were rocked by the news that Eli's father had died. Our hearts broke for Eli and his family. This sad event served as a painful reminder to so many of past loss and as a hard illustration of our mortality.

Where is the hope?

As I contemplated the week and the conditions on the reservation I realized that it's easy to be furious at our government for allowing such conditions on the reservation to persist. It's also easy to assume the government can make it all better through new policies. And, it's easy to be angry at God for it all, to blame God. It's also tempting to assume God will bring hope to the world and we're not responsible, or we're not capable.

We cannot wait for hope to come from progressive policies in D.C. or from promising national leaders. We will eventually be let down. And we cannot put everything on God and remain idle. The truth is God is the hope, and through God, WE are the hope.

Here's the rest of the story. See, I couldn't make Ahmanesch happy, but at least she had someone to tell her story to. Emily's home was in bad shape, but by the end of the week she had a new deck, new stairs, repaired windows and a fresh coat of paint. We couldn't take away the pain of her brother's loss but Melinda gave her a ride to the funeral and a chance to see her brother one last time. We couldn't save all 12 puppies under the house or all of the stray animals roaming the reservation, but we did save one.

Our kids along with kids from the other two groups there that weekend donated a combined \$370 within five minutes to have a puppy shipped cross country to live with me for awhile and to later be adopted by Tasha. The dog's name is Apache. We couldn't adopt all the little kids either. And we couldn't improve their home lives, but we could give them hugs and piggyback rides and love. You should have seen their faces as we came through their neighborhoods to pick them up. It was clear Kids Club was a major point of light in their lives. And the boy who said he would kill me? The very next day he came to me with a cut on his foot. He sat quietly as I cleaned it off and bandaged it up. He even smiled at me. And we couldn't make Eli's Dad come back but we could tell Eli he wasn't alone. We could tell him we cared about him and we were there for him.

1st Corinthians says: "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it." We must be His feet going to hurting places, His hands healing the hurting, and his Heart praying constantly and endlessly for grace. Where is the hope? We are the hope. Through God, we are the hope.

—Brandon Dennison

(Ellie Lloyd traveled to Mettu, Ethiopia with the Shenandoah Presbytery. She gave this talk on Sunday, August 17, 2008.)

I learned one thing in this world that is okay to be addicted to—travelling. The wealth of knowledge I gained by visiting Ethiopia this summer is something I'm not sure I'll ever

be able to explain in words. It has truly opened my eyes to the differences in communication and culture in our countries.

As a proud American citizen, I walked into the classroom on the first day thinking, "Here I am to save the day; I'm going to change someone's life," but by the end of the trip I was more changed than any of the Ethiopians I met. Part of this idea stems from our [American] belief that anyone who isn't us needs our help. What starts as a positive idea often times falls to the wayside due to lack of communication and understanding of different cultures. Linguistic barriers often inhibit or prohibit productivity. As we experienced in Mettu, setting up something that seems so simple to us, like English classes for students, proved to be very difficult to communicate to the local government and schools. Our idea of a "good thing" doesn't always follow others' customs or beliefs and we lacked the patience to strive for good communication.

One of my favorite songs describes this dilemma perfectly. "A little less talk and a lot more action." If everyone spent a little more time DOING and less time talking about what they want to do, what they're going to do, publicizing what they did, imagine all the good we could accomplish. If we all used that one common language God blessed us ALL with—LOVE—and built each other up instead of always trying to be the best, imagine how many lives would be different. You'd be surprised how much loving gestures—a smile, a handshake, a hug, learning some words in another language, a helping hand—can make someone's day no matter what language you speak or cultural background you come from.

I experienced some of the biggest and most beautiful smiles from people along the road as we walked to school just because I said "Attam Bulte," good morning, in the local language. Complete strangers shook my hands, patted me on the back, and hugged me everyday. Though I didn't understand a word they were saying, I could understand the love they were trying to convey. I could tell they appreciated me, and the work we were doing there.

Another thing I definitely learned: it's not worth it to be scared of what is different. So many people asked, "Aren't you scared to be going to Africa?" Next time, I know I can say, "No." What do *you* think of when you hear *Africa*?? I think new friends, Illubabor Synod, beautiful continent, loving people. Ethiopia embraced me, and my differences, even my CRAZY blonde hair, from the very first day.

It isn't how you do something or what you do, but what is accomplished that matters. How did you grow, what did you learn, and can you share your knowledge with others who may not get the chance to see and do what you did? My experience in Ethiopia has changed me forever, and I hope that through me, you will gain a little knowledge too. It seems like change is far away, in the distance, but slow and steady really does win the race. If people changed inch-by-inch—learning what to change in their own lives to make this world more like a community rather than property and who has the most power—language and culture wouldn't be such a barrier because we all, regardless of what language and culture we're from, understand love.

So get going. Put your *gypsy* feet on and move around the world.

—Ellie Lloyd