

# Youth Sunday

Feb. 11, 2007

Amber Johnson

“Change is good...you go first” is a theme that Melanie has been talking about for the past month or so, and I can tell you, those are words that I’ve lived by. I love change and I hate change, much like I’m sure many of you do, but my most consistent feeling about change is that I don’t want to be the one to instigate it. Instead, I’d rather be given the option for change – and then I’ll think and rethink and overthink it until I’m convinced that it’s not a good idea at all.

When Jim Marshall asked me to chaperone my first mission trip in 2003, I said I’d think about it. What I really meant was “no”, but I didn’t want to say it outright – I wanted it to look like I was at least considering it. Instead, I forgot all about it until he asked me again a couple of weeks later, because he needed to solidify plans. Before I knew what was happening, the word “yes” flew out of my mouth. What? I did give him one stipulation – it was my brother’s last mission trip, and I said I would only go if Tim said it was ok. I figured I was in the clear – there was no way my brother would say “sure – let my exceedingly bossy older sister go along on my senior year mission trip.” Yeah. I was wrong – he said he was ok with it, and so with that, I could start officially freaking out about spending a week with a bunch of high school kids I hardly knew as their “adult leader”. Oh good. Sometimes I can barely be responsible for myself and yet now I’m going to be responsible for a bunch of teenagers who will a) think I’m the biggest nerd ever b) not listen to me when I try to discipline them and c) think I’m the biggest nerd ever.

Four years and eight trips later, I can’t remember what I ever did before I spent my summers traveling with these kids. What did I look forward to before the excitement of finding out where we were going for our mission trip or what the theme for camp was going to be. And the changes that come along with that? Well, they’re extensive. I’ve been so far out of my comfort zone, both physically and mentally, that I’m not even sure what my comfort zone even IS anymore. Am I afraid of reservation kids throwing lit bottle rockets at us? Nope – if they’re aiming for you, you’re pretty safe. Am I afraid of Juarez, Mexico, and the reputation it has for violence and danger? Nope. I have never felt safer or more welcomed than I felt in Juarez. Am I afraid of 108 degree heat, plumbing that is sketchy at best, scorpions, cockroaches or lice? Nope. I’m not saying I’m a fan of those last few things, but I’m not afraid of them. Ok, maybe the scorpions.

Anyway. What about my original worries? Well, it’s true – the kids really do think I’m the biggest nerd ever, but as it turns out, that has worked to my advantage. I like to think of it as part of my charm – nerdiness as an asset. As for the discipline, well, I don’t know what it is about LUMC kids, but discipline is never high on the list of things we have to deal with. Our kids are the kindest, hardest working, most engaged of any group on any trip. I attribute that 100% to Jim and the fact that he makes it known what is expected and the kids love him so much they don’t want to disappoint him. We call ourselves “The Lakewood Show” because even if we’re the smallest in numbers at a work site, the kids

are at the front of any and every project, no matter what it is. They know what we're there for and they go above and beyond every time. They're team players and they're team leaders – they do whatever is assigned to them with no complaints and even better, with a happy spirit and true servant's hearts. I can't praise them enough for that, and you should know – both as a congregation and as the parents of these fantastic kids – they represent exactly what the embodiment of being like Christ truly is.

I came on as an adult leader thinking I would impart my vast wisdom to these kids, to teach them by example what it means to be a Christian, even though at the time, I felt like not only was I not that wise, but I also was pretty shaky on “walking the walk” of Christianity. I was selfish, and I was willing to always let someone else take care of stuff that needed to be done. I mean really, there are always going to be people to volunteer for things, why should I muddy the waters with my inexperience? There would be someone else to do it. I was impatient and self-centered and judgmental and not so much for the sleeping on the floor. Am I now an expert on these things? Not by a long shot, but I can say that my attitudes on pretty much everything have changed. Selfishness pushed down by seeing that the people who have nothing appreciate the little things we do for them so much that they want to give what they can as thanks. Patience borne of hours in a van with kids who are just as tired and just as grumpy as I am, but who want to take advantage of every second and every adventure that the trip has to offer. Judgment disappearing as I look at these kids that I would do anything for and can say with complete honesty that no matter what bad decisions they might make, I'm here to listen and I'm never going to stop loving them.

Just like everyone else, I've had my share of struggles and pain and tragedy in my life. And I've wondered why – why me, why that loss, why that pain, why that struggle. On one particularly painful day, my mom said something that made me think. She said that even though what I was going through was hard, maybe the reason why was so I can better understand and empathize when the kids go through similar hard times. Not to overthink it, but sometimes I think I've been preparing my entire life to be able to understand these kids and all the stuff they have to deal with that maybe other people can't understand. And if that's the reason I've had to have some hard times and heartbreak, well, I'm totally ok with that. If I can give better advice and truly understand what they're feeling, then I know the answer why and it's an answer I can live with.

Besides, one of my favorite quotes is “If I can't be a good example, I'll just have to be a horrible warning”. And give some of the – let's call them “questionable” – decisions I've made in my life, when I tell the kids that something isn't a good idea, I'm not just saying that. Seriously, not a good idea. You know, I've heard. But the bottom line is that I'm still here – a walking example of grace and that even if you fall into a really deep ditch along the path of life, those hard times will pass. Sometimes it just takes more time and more faith than first expected, but also? The blessings I've reaped are amazing.

So have I taught them anything in my time as an adult leader? Who knows. But what I do know is that they've taught me. They've taught me about all the things I just mentioned, and most importantly, that being my true self is the best thing I could possibly be. Your

kids make me feel important – more important than any job could ever make me feel. They make me feel valued and 100% accepted and above all, they make me feel so loved. This church is so blessed to have the youth program and the youth that we do. And I can tell you firsthand that those blessings extend far outside these walls. Our kids have left indelible marks on the hearts and lives of people across the U.S. and Mexico. They've done selfless deeds for strangers and learned about the richness of culture.

I think the deepest indelible marks have been left on my heart and my life. I've changed and grown and I think about what would have happened – or more importantly, what wouldn't have happened – if I would have waited for someone else to stand up here and talk about the millions of ways the youth here have blessed their life.

Sometimes you truly have to take a leap of faith. And this is one leap I'll NEVER regret taking.