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### **Gardner-Webb Students Find Passion and Purpose through Human Trafficking Awareness Week**

Office of University Communications

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# Gardner-Webb Students Find Passion and Purpose through Human Trafficking Awareness Week

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Office of University Communications

April 8, 2013

## *Campus Events Raise Awareness and Offer Opportunities for Future Service*

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—When Julie Sliwinski left her home in Atlanta, Ga. and came to Gardner-Webb University as a freshman just three years ago, she envisioned attaining a degree in health and wellness where she could offer people tips and techniques to eat better and establish more active lifestyles. She never imagined that her participation in a community engagement activity in the spring of 2012 would lead her to such dangerous surrender and a burning desire to do whatever God called her to do and to go wherever He led.

“I came to school to become a personal trainer or physical therapist,” Sliwinski recalled. “But as I came to know the Lord in a deeper way, I no longer had peace to pursue that. By the fall of my sophomore year, everywhere I looked and every conversation I had led back to human/sex trafficking or abuse.”

Unable to shake the feeling that she needed to know more, Sliwinski began intense study. She wanted to uncover more about the victims; she desired to know what drove the industry from every perspective. “I have a history of abuse, so I am familiar with some of the emotions and thought processes the victims experience,” she shared. “I sat on pins and needles just desperate to be involved but not sure exactly where the Lord was calling me to plug in.”

The answer came in the form of the Gardner-Webb University Community Engagement “Human Trafficking Awareness Week,” held in April of 2012. Sliwinski wasted no time. “I immediately got involved and helped organize some of the campus events,” she reflected. “Through my involvement that week, I got connected with ‘On Eagle’s Wings Ministries’ and their ‘Hope House,’ which is a safe house for girls coming out of sex trafficking.”

She applied for an internship and was accepted. Last fall, she visited the girls at Hope House every other weekend. “My responsibility was to just be with the girls, to serve as a role model like a big sister,” she explained. “I was deeply blessed through my relationships with these girls and I feel honored to have met them and been part of their recovery.”

With a sense that this was just the beginning, Sliwinski began to feel pulled toward street ministry, bearing a special burden for those being prostituted. “I did a quick Google search for organizations with street ministries in my hometown (Atlanta, Ga.) and stumbled upon

‘Nightlight,’” she shared. “I didn’t know much about what they did other than street outreach. But I knew the Lord had spoken about it, so I applied.”

As soon as her fall semester finals were over, she received a reply. “The email simply said, ‘When can you start?’” she recalled. “So, over the three weeks of winter break, I joined Nightlight on outreach every Friday night. We would go to the strip clubs and brothels of Atlanta and walk the streets most known for solicitation. The goal isn’t to save souls, condemn, or even preach to these men and women. Our job is to simply love them where they are.”

Because she is not yet 21 years old, Sliwinski was not allowed inside the clubs, but she still actively serves by providing prayer coverage from outside while others work to build relationships with the girls. “I have had the privilege of meeting a few of the girls in brothels and on the street and the Lord has been good,” she shared. “Following the third night on outreach, the two team directors told me they wanted me to intern with them this summer. After prayer and seeking God’s will, I’ve decided to take the internship and follow where he is leading. Through this opportunity, I will be equipped to become a director of this organization.”

Julie Sliwinski (left) and Caroline Nethery (right) coordinated the 2013 Human Trafficking Awareness Week activities at GWU.

Sliwinski was once again instrumental in the planning and organization of Gardner-Webb’s second annual Human Trafficking Awareness Week, held March 18-23. She and sophomore Caroline Nethery worked with GWU Community Engagement Coordinator Stephanie Capps to orchestrate several activities as part of this year’s awareness week. Nethery is also a student who has been profoundly impacted by her involvement in various social reform projects at Gardner-Webb, including the trafficking issue. A psychology major, she is currently making career plans to work specifically with victims of human/sex trafficking.

“I’ve been blessed to grow up in a family who loves me and loves the Lord. We’ve been fine financially,” Nethery shared. “I just think if I had been born in any other situation, it could just as easily be me as anyone else who is enslaved. I had no choice in where I was born and they had no choice in where they were born. If the roles had been switched, I would want someone to fight for me. They need people to come from the outside and fight for them. That’s one of the biggest motivations for me.”

The week’s activities included an awareness fair, a paint fight, a documentary screening, a lecture on slavery throughout time, a “Stand for Freedom” event in which participants stood on their feet for 27 hours in honor of the 27 million people worldwide who are currently enslaved, and finally, a celebration dance party. The goal of each and every event was to raise awareness and teach fellow students that everyone can do something.

“The main focus of the week was just to get people thinking about the issue,” Nethery said. “When people are thinking about the fact that there’s human trafficking going on and modern day slavery... well, you can’t fully understand that without wanting to do something to end it.”

Sliwinski agrees and is grateful for the chance to make a difference. “This is where my heart and my passion is,” Sliwinski shared. “My eyes were opened to it and I couldn’t ignore it. I know this is what I will be working on the rest of my life.”

To learn more about On Eagle’s Wings Ministries, visit their web site at [www.oewm.net](http://www.oewm.net). For more information on Nightlight International, visit [www.nightlightinternational.com](http://www.nightlightinternational.com).

*Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University blends a liberal arts core curriculum with more than 55 specialized major and minor programs, a comprehensive academic experience grounded in a Christian environment of service, leadership, and intellectual freedom.*