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January 30, 2012



Jessica Greer, a marketing major and biblical studies minor, likes to sing and play the guitar. And she loves to go to prison.

During her freshman year, Jessica learned about Gardner-Webb's outreach to Livesay Correctional Institution, a minimum-security prison in Spartanburg, S.C., while attending a chapel service on campus. After the service she approached the group's leader, Prison Fellowship® volunteer Stephanie Gibbs. Greer, who has a loved one serving time in a state prison, wanted to know how she could get involved.

Greer joined the group of students who make a monthly visit to Livesay to lead a chapel service with music, Bible study and breakout prayer sessions. Her first time through the gates, she didn't know what to expect. As she and the other students crossed the prison yard on their way to the small, crowded chapel, she could feel the inmates' curious eyes on them.

But her initial anxiety evaporated once she arrived in the prison chapel, where the all-inmate worship band was set up with a keyboard, an electric guitar and drums.

"Only half a drum kit, not a whole one," she laughs, describing how the inmates' free worship style – incorporating gospel songs, rap and traditional hymns – made her feel at home.

Greer has returned to Livesay on a regular basis throughout college, and she has found a personal connection with the inmates: Because she cannot regularly visit her incarcerated family member, she can ask the inmates questions about their experiences behind bars. They, in turn, can ask Greer what their families are going through.

Greer, who writes, performs and records her own songs, also shares her gift of music with the inmates. Once she sang for them a song called "Tough," an emotionally charged piece about falling short of the world's standards of perfection and learning to lean on God's strength. She wrote the song as an expression of her own teenage experience and was surprised when the inmates asked her for a recording of it. She gave a CD of the song to Livesay's chaplain. The next time the Gardner-Webb students returned for a chapel service, the inmates asked Greer for an encore performance of "Tough." As she began, they belted out the lyrics along with her. They related to the struggles she describes in the song, and they had learned the words by heart.

Greer doesn't know what the future holds, but she would like to stay involved with prison ministry in some capacity. For now, she knows that ministering to inmates in a "tough" environment has given her solace over the incarceration of her own loved one.

"I'm glad to be able to share the love of Christ with them," she says. "I just hope that someone else is doing the same for him, since I can't."

Written by Alyson R. Quinn – Used by permission – copyright – 2012 by Prison Fellowship Ministries