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Serendipitous, to Say the Least

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 stephanie and kendra

When people discover strange and unexpected connections, like random friends they share in common or obscure places they've both visited, they often remark, "Wow, it's a small world." But in the case of Gardner-Webb sophomore Kendra Bragg and GWU community engagement coordinator Stephanie Richey, that's a bit of an understatement.

Shortly after the fall semester began, Richey was sitting outside the cafeteria offering applications for community service opportunities when a new student she didn't recognize approached and asked, "Hey, you're Stephanie Richey, right?"

"I just thought she was going to ask a question about service," Richey said, "but then she asked if I was from Winston Salem. So now I'm thinking, 'Ok, we're both from Winston so we've got some personal connection.' I still had no idea."

Then Bragg asked, "Did you ever do this program with your youth group in high school called Ceaseless, and did you write to a kid whose family was doing relief work overseas? Yeah, I was that kid. My name's Kendra Bragg."

Now weeks later, Bragg just laughs as Richey recounts the story of their serendipitous reunion outside the cafeteria. "That moment right there? That's the coolest thing that's ever happened to me," Richey says, still shocked. "That's the story I'll tell for the rest of my life."

As it turns out, Bragg met Richey at a "Ceaseless" event in either 2005 or 2006. Ceaseless was an initiative in the Winston Salem area to bring youth groups from various churches together to pray, especially for the persecuted church around the world. Bragg, a 13-year-old whose parents worked for a non-government relief agency in Jordan at the time, was back in the U.S. for a brief visit and was at the Ceaseless event with her youth pastor.

"They paired us up for a silly, ice-breaker game," Bragg remembers. "I was usually very shy, so when I noticed I would be paired with someone, I thought to myself, 'I need to seize this opportunity to make a friend.' I got paired with Stephanie, and I asked if we could exchange email addresses since I was heading back overseas. The rest is history."

Born in Germanton, N.C., Bragg lived in the U.S. until she was 10, when God opened the door for her parents to move overseas, where her father did electrical engineering work and her mother taught English. They lived for several years in Sudan and then for several more in Jordan, before moving back to the U.S. when Bragg was 15.

Bragg discovered a passion for music and songwriting during her time overseas that she says kept her centered during the difficult periods of adjustment. “Music was just one thing that was constant for me when a lot of other things were changing. I was a teenager, and I was thrust into cultures that I wasn’t used to, and music was one of those things the Lord sent me to get me through and to reveal Himself to me.” Bragg’s whole family is musically inclined, and both her parents are musicians and worship leaders. She says music was one of the things that deepened their family bonds while overseas.

“One July in Sudan,” she remembers, “we only had a couple of days of electricity. But I didn’t mind because we would find different ways to grow closer together. The one CD player we had ran on batteries, so we would all pack into one room around it, my siblings and my parents, and we would just listen together.”

After moving back to the States, Bragg graduated from high school at 16 and went on to a community college, where she earned her associate’s degree last summer. She then began searching for colleges that would accept her into a music program, despite her lack of the formal music training she missed during her time abroad.

“I’m majoring in music business because I want to open a studio for artists and songwriters in this area who can’t afford the really big-name studios, to allow them to have a platform to share their music,” she says. “I want to continue writing my own stuff, too, to share my experiences in the hopes that music can do the same for others as it has done for me.” Gardner-Webb gave Bragg that chance, offering her a music scholarship and enabling her to pursue her dream.

It was only after she arrived that Bragg realized the strange connection with Gardner-Webb staffer Richey. Serendipitous, for sure. But the more the two talk, the more their connection seems like more than coincidence. Richey worked with a man at a radio station in Winston Salem, for example, who knew Bragg’s parents because they helped him once when his tire blew. Bragg and Richey attended the same concert during another one of Bragg’s stateside visits. Bragg is from Germanton, and Stephanie attended GWU as a student on a scholarship from Germanton Baptist Church, which Bragg’s family attended.

And somewhere, little porcelain dolls sing that all-too-familiar tune, “It’s a small world after all...”