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Mission Work Impact Comes Full Circle



Office of University Communications

July 7, 2011

This spring, Dr. Tracy Jessup, vice president for Christian life and service and senior minister to Gardner-Webb University, received a phone call from a school principal in Key Largo, Fla. Though Jessup did not know her, the woman and her husband had encountered a Gardner-Webb mission team at an ice cream shop in Key Largo. The team had spent half an hour listening as they spoke about God's work in their lives, and she was so deeply touched that she felt compelled to call Jessup to share the story.

Gardner-Webb is one of the nation's top 10 schools for mobilizing student missionaries through the North American Mission Board, and for that distinction, the NAMB recently awarded the University its distinguished Courts Redford Award for Excellence in Student Mobilization. But as gratifying as national awards are, one woman's phone call is just as powerful an affirmation that Gardner-Webb students are making a difference for Christ all over the world.

This spring, the University's Office of Christian Life and Service sponsored three mission trips: one to Miami, Fla., led by graduate students Rebekah Stanford and Andrew Woods; one to Chimaltenango, Guatemala, led by Stacy Mahler, associate minister to the University for pastoral care; and one to Jinotega, Nicaragua, led by Neal Payne, director of student ministries. These are their stories—stories of hope, of great need, and of the transformative power of God's love.

Miami, Fla.

While many college students spent their spring break partying or sunbathing in Miami, Rebekah Stanford and Andrew Woods led nine Gardner-Webb students to work alongside Touching Miami with Love (TML), an inner-city, after-school ministry designed to offer Miami's children God's love as an alternative to the challenges and temptations they face in their community. Since the trip coincided with the children's spring break, the Gardner-Webb team was able to spend an entire week teaching, nurturing, and sharing Christ's love with the children.



Each day, the group led the children through bible stories by teaching them skits, songs, and memory verses. They also led the kids' fitness, literacy, and social time sessions, during which they'd lead physical games, teach reading skills, or show the kids how to shake hands and open a door politely. "We had the chance to talk about Jesus and his character, and we also did things that taught them practical life skills," said Stanford.

In one particularly special moment, a visually impaired Gardner-Webb student was teaching the children about the story of Jesus and the blind man, when Stanford noticed one 9-year-old girl was crying. She asked Stanford, “Why would God make him blind if he is a good man?” “So that gave us a chance to share how God doesn’t cause bad things to happen, but how he sometimes uses them for good. We got to watch this little girl basically work out some of her own theology. That was truly powerful,” Stanford said. It was Stanford’s team who also encountered the family in the ice cream shop, an encounter Stanford called “an answer to our prayer that God would use us even after 5 p.m., when our time with the children finished.”

Chimaltenango, Guatemala

Agua Viva Children’s Home in Chimaltenango is a non-denominational Christian establishment that rescues Guatemalan children from broken and abusive homes. There are currently 85 youth, ages 2 through 18, living at Agua Viva, many of them dropped off by single parents who could no longer afford to keep them. This spring, Stacy Mahler led a team of 16 students to Agua Viva to complete construction jobs for the home, and to build relationships and share God’s love with the children who live there.



During the day, the Gardner-Webb team and another team from Indiana joined together to complete several projects for Agua Viva. “Some would clean out their livestock stalls, some helped pour concrete for a new barn, and my team dug a series of irrigation trenches to help them water the trees along the edge of their property,” Mahler said. The teams took snack and playtime breaks to be with the children, and then in the evenings, they gave the children their entire focused attention. They also brought along boxes of toiletries and supplies donated by Gardner-Webb’s athletic teams and other members of the community.

Mahler says the best part of the trip, for her, was watching Gardner-Webb students discover the various unique ways God has gifted them. “Our students just have such incredible gifts for ministry, and they found that God can use them in ways they couldn’t have imagined. Even for a few of our students who weren’t sure how God would use them, He just kept opening doors. It was incredible to see.”

Jinotega, Nicaragua

When Neal Payne’s planned trip to Brazil for the spring of 2011 fell through, several members of his team were incredibly discouraged. “They had been planning for Brazil, and praying about Brazil, and so it was definitely hard to switch gears and think about another place on short notice.” But when the group arrived in their alternate location, Jinotega,

Nicaragua—adopted several years ago by the Greater Cleveland County Baptist Association as Shelby, N.C.’s sister-city—it quickly became apparent that their mission in Jinotega was meant to be.

 nicaragua

Armed with generous hearts and a host of supplies raised by Gardner-Webb athletic teams and other members of the community, Payne’s team visited and ministered to several communities in Jinotega and the surrounding villages. “It was awesome for our team to get there and realize that the same Spirit of God was present even in Jinotega,” Payne said. The team led services at five churches in Jinotega and the surrounding area. They visited two schools, including a school for students with disabilities where they were able to deliver supplies donated by North Shelby School for students with developmental disabilities. They also visited a hospital, and donated boxes of medical supplies donated by a Shelby pharmacy and doctor’s office. “It was just unbelievable to see how God used the generosity of our team and all the people who donated items for us,” Payne remembered.

But if all that wasn’t enough, the group’s interpreter actually came to know Christ while they were there. “We assumed she was a Christian, but after several days of traveling with us and translating,” Payne said, “she started asking questions. She told us she thought she knew who God was, but that the relationship we had with Him was just different. She accepted Jesus and started a relationship with Him right there. Payne’s group, especially those who had planned to go to Brazil, viewed this as the ultimate confirmation of God’s purpose and his love for individual people. As Payne put it, “The fact that God would rearrange an entire trip so that one person would come to know Him—that was just incredible.”