

CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Gardner-Webb Team Serves Families at Give Kids The World Village

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Nonprofit Resort Provides Cost-Free Vacations to Children Dealing with a Terminal or Chronic Illness



BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Over fall break, seven students and three adults representing Gardner-Webb University volunteered at Give Kids the World Village (GKTWV) in Orlando, Fla. Each child who comes to the Village is dealing with a terminal or chronic illness. Eligible children are paired with one of over 250 partnering wish-granting organizations from around the world, such as Make-A-Wish. They and their families receive a weeklong, cost-free vacation at the nonprofit 89-acre resort. They also receive free admission to nearby attractions, such as Disney World and Universal Studios.

Kim Downs, wife of GWU President William Downs, has been twice with students to GKTWV. She describes the resort this way: “Imagine a life-size Candyland game...with an enchanted castle, a magical carousel, ice cream and treats from sun up to sun down, joyful creatures, and beautiful flowering gardens everywhere. We were there to smile and spread joy. GKTWV motto is ‘Where

Happiness Inspires Hope,’ and our team was terrific at spreading happiness and I was blessed to be a part of it.”

In a three-day period, team members completed 224 hours of volunteer time—an average of 12 hours per day for each person. “Our team realized that we were part of a moment which could be the last fun and enjoyable time these special families have together,” reflected **Teresa Davis**, administrative assistant to the Office of Christian Life and Service, who led the trip with her husband, **Eric**. “By the end, we all were very tired, but the blessings outweighed any discomfort we had. God definitely worked through this team, and I am grateful to have been a part of it.”



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The various jobs included serving food and beverages, busing tables, carrying trays for families, and running food deliveries to families who ordered to-go meals. The team also operated amusement rides like the carousel, train, swings, and helicopter, and worked in several more areas.

“I would say my best moment of the trip was volunteering at the horse and ponytail ride,” said **“Snow” Nguyen**, of Vietnam. “I had such a lovely time hearing those little kids tell their stories, and the little things that make them happy. Even though they are fighting life-threatening diseases, every kid always had a smile on their face. They make me value (every) moment in my life—the life that I sometimes take for granted—and encourage me to use my life to serve God and glorify Him.”

One area of the Village, “The Castle of Stars,” is a sacred place to the families and deeply affected the GWU team members. Every child decorates a mirrored star, which is later placed inside the Castle. The Castle’s ceiling and walls glisten with more than 175,000 stars that represent the lives of terminally- or chronically-ill children.



“My favorite memory was working in the castle on the last day, and a little boy that I met the previous day came to make his special star that would hang in the castle forever,” shared **Sarah McLean**. “When the door opened, he had the biggest smile, and he ran and gave me a big hug and said ‘I remember you.’ It made my day. These families and children are going through the unimaginable, and through it all, they were always laughing and smiling. They found this happiness by fully placing their trust in God to guide them and heal their child.”



Senior **Michael Causey** said the trip was a breath of fresh air, alleviating some of the stress that comes with graduation approaching. “This trip reminded me to slow down and find joy in the moments, because they are there if we choose to look for it,” he affirmed, “As the families and children were able to display while we were there.”

Madison Eve Massie asked to go on the trip at the last minute. “God opened doors and was very faithful in providing and going before me,” she observed. “The Lord has called us to share the Gospel, magnify His name and take care of the less fortunate. After speaking with the parents and hearing their stories, I realized the amount of pain and suffering the children had endured at such a young age. This really opened my eyes to the fact that you never know what someone is going through. So smile, encourage and show the love of Jesus through the Great Commission every day. You never know who needs it.”

Annagrace Earwood wanted to make an impact on the children’s lives, but they taught her a lesson. “I learned that there are 5-year-olds out there who are emotionally stronger than I am at 18 years old,

simply because they don't let their circumstances define them, and even in the unknowns of life, they can find great joy."

To explain the impact of the experience, **Callie Owen** described what happened at the carousel when a family brought their daughter to ride. "She used a wheelchair and had very little motor functions," Owen said. "When she was riding the carousel, she was laughing and clapping and there was pure joy on her face. Something so small as riding a carousel made this little girl light up inside. You could see that the family enjoyed watching, just as much as the girl enjoyed riding. It was a beautiful moment."



Mission Team Members

- **Teresa and Eric Davis**, Teresa is the administrative assistant to the Office of Christian Life and Service. Eric is employee support manager for Cleveland County, lead chaplain at Cleveland County Sheriff's Office, and chaplain for Cleveland county EMS and Shelby Fire and Rescue Department.
- **Kim Downs**, wife of GWU President William Downs.
- **Michael Causey**, senior, sport management and communications major, Campus Ministries coordinator.
- **Annagrace Earwood**, freshman, Christian studies with a concentration in discipleship.
- **Blake Eilzalde**, senior, double major in political science and Spanish, Student Government Association president.
- **Madison Massie**, sophomore, nursing major.
- **Sarah McLean**, freshman, exercise science and psychology major.
- **"Snow" Nguyen**, freshman, chemistry major with a concentration in medical science.
- **Callie Owen**, junior, middle grades math major, minor in business administration.

Gardner-Webb University is North Carolina's recognized leader in private, Christian higher education. A Carnegie-Classified Doctoral/Professional University, GWU is home to nine colleges and schools, more than 80 undergraduate and graduate majors, and a world-class faculty. Located on a beautiful 225-acre

campus in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb prepares graduates to impact their chosen professions, equips them with the skills to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and inspires them to make a positive and lasting difference in the lives of others. Ignite your future at [Gardner-Webb.edu](https://gardner-webb.edu/) (<https://gardner-webb.edu/>).