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LIVING IN ATLANTA

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CLOSING RETREAT

On Saturday, August 4th our house embarked on its final group activity, our closing retreat at Tybee Island, GA. Our City Director had two condos for us that were just a block and a half from the beach. We arrived shortly before dinner and settled in. After enjoying some "Jersey style" pizza (I cannot wait to be back in New Jersey to enjoy REAL pizza) we participated in our first reflection activity. This entailed watching a Mission Year video. Mission Year is a program similar to ours, only a bit more intense. Our City Director, Jeff, and his wife, Katie, helped run Mission Year Atlanta and Jeff will be the Mission Year Atlanta City Director next year.

Anyway, the video encouraged us to take what we learned during our year in Atlanta and apply it to our lives wherever we go. The video also encouraged us not to be angry. It was an odd statement at first, but as the Mission Year President, Leroy Barber, explained, we have seen a lot of injustice this year and it will be difficult to go back to places where people are not faced with such heartache. Leroy noted that it will be difficult to see all that is wrong in the world and not want to fix it. It will be even more difficult, he said, when the people around you just don't get it.

Sunday morning Jeff had each of us write a letter to ourselves, which he will mail to us in three months. In the letter Jeff asked us to include what the year meant to us. I did this activity before when I was in AmeriCorps and it is always a difficult task. How does one describe a year of his/her life in a letter? How does one take all that happened in one year and put it in a letter? How do you write to someone you don't know because three months from now I will not be the same person I am today, just like I am not the same person I was when I arrived in Atlanta?

After the letter writing we had free time. Some of us stuck around the condo and ate while others headed straight to the beach. There were a ton of jellyfish and every other minute it seemed like someone was getting stung. To avoid that a couple of us walked up and down the beach just along the water's edge. Not everyone likes to wear the SPF 40 sunscreen that I sport, in fact a couple of my housemates don't like to wear sunscreen at all, so there were a few sunburned folks by the day's end.

In the evening we walked down the street to Fannie's for some nice southern seafood, and by southern I mean fried. After dinner we had another reflection activity. Jeff had written the months of the year on poster board and as a group we went through and made a timeline of highlights. Had any of us brought our newsletters with us we probably could have rattled off events no problem, but trying to remember all the meaningful events that occurred since September is a tough task. I am lucky I can remember what I did last week! It was a great activity, though, because it gave us time to look back at our year and reminisce; to laugh at some of the ridiculous things that happened and pause at some of the difficult things we overcame.

Monday morning's reflection activity was great, but difficult. For each member of the house we had to write: I appreciate this about you...; Thank you for...; God used you in my life...; God used you in the life of others... Obviously there are some housemates that I am closer to than others, so for some of the people it was a no-brainer and for others it took some time. When your personality clashes with someone else's it is difficult to see that you can use your differences as a way to grow and learn. This activity would have been good to do halfway through the year as well because if we had learned to appreciate each other sooner we might have gotten to know each other better. I would definitely recommend this activity to everyone. Try doing it for the people with whom you are close and share your answers with them so they know their importance in your life. Also try doing it for the people you often butt heads with so that you can realize the important role they play in your life and how you can grow and learn from them. Once we wrote our answers we got back together and shared them as a group. Then we were off to the beach for more free time.

In the late afternoon we drove to Savannah. We walked around the shops a bit and then went to dinner at Lady and Sons, which is owned by Paula Deen and her sons. We ordered the buffet and ate until our stomachs were full, and some ate until their stomachs were more than full. After dinner we strolled back to the car, stopping to

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take a group picture along the way. I had hoped to include it in the newsletter, but I am typing on my '98 craptop (as I like to call it) and it wouldn't let me insert the picture. Sorry! When we returned to the condos we had a small reflection time during which we talked about advice we would give to next year's participants, improvements for the program, and how this year either changed or reinforced our goals for the future.

Tuesday morning we got up fairly early to clean the condo and pack up for our drive home. Before leaving we sat

and offered up any prayer requests we had. After praying together we had a group hug and then left for Atlanta. We encountered a slight delay on the way home when the van got a flat tire and we had to wait on the side of the road for an hour or so until a tow truck came. It was a fitting event, allowing us to leave the program in the same way we came in, but thankfully this time it was not quite as dramatic in that there was only one flat tire and no rolling blockade.

FINISHING OUT THE YEAR

I served as the Interim Mentoring Program Director at Moving in the Spirit this year, but when a full-time Mentoring Program Director and Volunteer Coordinator was hired, I was left with little to do at work. I spoke with our City Director, Jeff, about it and we made arrangements for me to leave my work site early and spend my last two weeks of work volunteering at different sites.

The second to last week of work I assisted Jeff with a group of middle school students from the northern Atlanta suburbs who were in town for 4 days on a mission trip. It was a great opportunity for me to see other non-profit organizations in Atlanta. One morning I went with a group to the Atlanta Community Food Bank where we sorted grocery items into various categories and then boxed them up.

In the afternoon I went with that same group to Project Open Hand. Project Open Hand is similar to Meals on Wheels and delivers 4,000 meals a day. The group's task was to put together meals and my particular job was to put bread and butter in baggies. Do you know that someone actually designed a machine that you can hook baggies up to and a small fan blows down on the mouth of the baggies to open them up? Genius!

The next morning I went with a group to The Edge which helps provide job training to individuals. Our first task in the morning was to help people in the computer room. Afterwards we attended the Empowerment Seminar with a group of the clients. The speaker had been a nurse, but became a minister while in her 50s. She talked about the importance of having a support network, but emphasized that God should be number one on your support list. She was very open to all religions, however, and noted that we all have different names for God and that whether we refer to God as Allah, Jehovah, Elijah, or whomever, we

should always lay our troubles out before God. As she was speaking a woman attending the seminar talked about the fear of interviewing for a job. The speaker told the woman that fear is False Evidence Appearing Real. She then told the woman to bring that fear before her God, Jehovah. The speaker asked the woman if she prayed to Jehovah, and the woman said yes. The speaker then asked the woman if Jehovah was always with her, and the woman said yes. The speaker also asked the woman if Jehovah always took care of her, and the woman said yes. The speaker then told the woman that before she goes in for an interview she should pray for Jehovah to take away her fear and to be with her during the interview. As the speaker was asking the woman all of these questions and the woman was answering, tears streamed down the woman's face. It was an amazing moment to witness and I feel blessed to have been there.

That Sunday was my last official event with Moving in the Spirit. I had set up a Mentor-Mentee Family Picnic so that the mentees and their families and the mentors and their families could interact and also meet the new Mentoring Program Director. We had a good turnout and it was a great opportunity for me to say good-bye to the mentors. We were even lucky enough to have the rainstorms hold off until we had cleaned everything up.

The last week of work I alternated between working with my housemate Kelsey and my housemate Alicia. On Tuesday and Thursday I worked at Kelsey's site, Café 458. Café 458 is a soup kitchen Monday through Friday and a restaurant on the weekends. The money that comes in on the weekends goes towards the soup kitchen and all the cooks and wait staff are volunteers. The soup kitchen is run like a restaurant in that the clients are given a daily menu and can choose their main dish, two sides, and dessert. Both days that I worked at the café a youth group from Pennsylvania and New York was there as well, so I

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did not get interact with the patrons too much. I worked mostly in preparing part of the meal, dishing out dessert, and helping clean off dishes and wash them. It was a nice change of pace, though, and I enjoyed working with Miss Raquelle, the chef both days.

On Wednesday and Friday I went to work at Alicia's site, Central Outreach and Advocacy Center. The Center provides case management, snack bags, groceries, transportation, assistance in obtaining IDs, and much more. On Wednesday I worked in the Food Pantry, handing out coffee/tea and sandwiches to the guests. Many of the guests were extremely thankful and others

did not respond well when I told them that they could only have one sandwich. They were also less than pleased when we ran out of coffee, then tea, and finally sandwiches. On Friday I worked with the two daughters of the Program Director and another volunteer. The four of us put together snack bags. Afterwards the conference room was opened up to guests for game time. Only one gentleman joined us, but he was more than happy to play Uno, Bingo, and Blackjack with us.

Visiting the different sites and having a little bit more variety in my work day was a great way to finish out my year of service.

GENE

I met Gene on my last day of work while volunteering at the Outreach and Advocacy Center. Gene was the only client to play games with us. As volunteers slowly left the room Gene began to talk with me about his life. Originally from the Pittsburgh area, Gene has a 27 year old son who lives in Texas and a 23 year old daughter who lives in Atlanta. He also has two grandsons. Gene told me about his brother and sister and a family reunion they had a few years back.

Gene talked about the athletic scholarship he had for college and then lost when he blew out his knee. He told me how proud he was of his son for taking his advice and getting a scholastic scholarship for school and eventually graduating college. Gene told me about the time he spent in prison and how he had come to know God there.

Gene has a unique approach to faith in that he feels that religion killed Jesus. He believes that people get so wrapped up in the rules and laws of religion that they end up losing their spirituality and ultimately their relationship with God. Gene also talked about his calling in life and

how it came to him while he was in prison. He told me how he tried to deny it several times, but that God kept speaking to him. Within a year or so Gene hopes to start his own non-profit that provides job training to the homeless. He feels that a lot of places only provide short-term assistance to people and he would like to serve people in a way that provides for their future.

We talked about faith, about grace and forgiveness, about making peace with God and amends with your family, about his struggles and his dreams. It is amazing what you can learn about a person in such a short amount of time. It is incredible the number of stories that are out there waiting to be told if we only take the time to listen. I don't know if Gene will ever start his non-profit, but I pray that he does. I do know that God was with us as we talked and God brought Gene and I together so that he could share his story with me and I could be reminded of the reason I came to Atlanta. As DOOR notes, we don't bring God to the people we serve, God is already here, it is our job to see where God is working... to see the face of God in the city.

THE OPEN DOOR COMMUNITY

One of the best learning experiences for me this year has come through our volunteer work at the Open Door Community. The members of the Open Door have taught me the true meaning of community and service because they live it every day. They welcomed the members of our house with open arms and always had a smiling face when we arrived at 5:45am to help serve breakfast.

They taught me the importance of reading the newspaper, no matter how depressing it is, in order to become more

aware of the issues in the community. One of the pressing issues for the Open Door is the death penalty and a particular case has been at the forefront of this issue. A man by the name of Troy Anthony Davis is on death row in a Georgia prison after being convicted of killing an off-duty police officer during a scuffle. Due to the federal government's desire to speed up the appeals process and cut down on costs Troy Davis had exhausted all of his appeals despite new evidence. Despite the fact that 7 of the 9 eyewitnesses had recanted their testimony because

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they were previously coerced by the police, Troy Davis had run out of options. Despite the fact that of the two remaining eyewitnesses one was unable to be reached because he had moved out of state and the other was a man that many now claim to be the real killer and cannot recant without incriminating himself, Troy Davis was going to be executed by lethal injection. Perhaps by an act of God Troy Davis was given a 90 day stay while the Parole Board reviewed the new evidence. His case is now before the Supreme Court and he may be granted a new trial.

We volunteered at the Open Door the morning before Troy Davis was to be executed. I spent most of that day scouring internet articles to learn if Troy Davis would be executed or not. I had never been so concerned about or consumed by a stranger's fate. It was a strange feeling. From this experience, though, I learned about New Jersey's role in executions. While there are inmates on death row, New Jersey has not executed anyone since the Supreme Court lifted the ban on executions. In fact, a year

or so ago Governor Codey put together a commission to investigate the effectiveness of the death penalty and during that time issued a moratorium on executions. The commission found that there was no advantage to the death penalty either in cost or deterrence and suggested doing away with the death penalty. Unfortunately, no law has been passed yet.

I am so grateful for the people at the Open Door Community for further opening my eyes to the world around me. I am equally grateful for the friends that I was able to serve during my time at the Open Door.; for their smiling faces and words of thanks. I am also grateful to all the people who accepted my challenge and donated items to the Open Door. Keith has not yet arrived with the goodies, but I understand that there are several boxes full of items. Thank you so much for your generosity and for helping me bring smiles to friends and a community I treasure dearly!

MONTHLY HIGHLIGHTS

- * Volunteering at the Open Door for Monday breakfasts and Wednesday and Thursday lunch
- * Two mentor interviews
- * Spending Fourth of July with some of Keith's family
- * Weeknight league mid-season and end of season tournament; Saturday league end of season tournament
- * Speaking at the DOOR celebration service
- * Going to the Brick Store with Brian and Julie
- * Surprising my dad for his birthday
- * Celebrating one year with Keith
- * The Cradle of Christianity exhibit at Emory
- * Going out for lunch with Moving in the Spirit staff
- * Exchanging gifts with April and Shalanda
- * My last potluck dinner at Georgia Avenue
- * Mentor-mentee family picnic for Moving in the Spirit
- * Attending the Travis concert at the Tabernacle
- * Malibu Grand Prix, especially the bumper boats
- * Closing retreat
- * Completing another year of service

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

I depart for New Jersey on August 13th. Keith and I are taking about 10 days to meander home. If you live somewhere between Atlanta and New Jersey and would like 2 visitors, then please let me know. Otherwise I hope to see you when I am back in New Jersey.

What's next you ask? Well, I have a job with the Montclair YMCA as the Communication and Curriculum Developer. Contact me if you would like details.

Thank you for pledging to sponsor me on my journey, both financially and spiritually.

Thank you for your notes, e-mails, and words of encouragement. It means a great deal to know my family and friends supported my work here in Atlanta.

This is my final newsletter. I hope you have enjoyed reading them as much as I have enjoyed writing them!