

Mississippi Moves the Heart

Right out of college, I entered the Peace Corp, my heart has always gone out to the third world countries where there is so much need. A recent experience however brought me to a halt. As a part of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Volunteer Program, I was offered the opportunity to travel to Holly Springs, Mississippi on a pilot mission program for the PHJC's and the Catholic Volunteer Network in conjunction with the Southern Sacred Heart Ministries. The real beauty of this mission was that those we worked along side, those we worked with, all became community...there was no notice of age, race, religion, sex...but a sharing in one mission to serve and be served without question. While I participated in a short program last spring in helping clean-up from the tornado damage of late 2015, we were not afforded the opportunity to be as actively involved in the victims of the disaster since they were unable to live at the sight. This time, would be a totally different experience as we plunged into the lives of the people.

I traveled and worked along side Sr. Bernadine Gutowski, OSF; Sr. Sharon Glumb, SLW; and Sr. Marykay Brooks, SSND. We began by arriving at the humble volunteer house where we would spend our nights and evenings when not working. The Southern Sacred Heart Ministry team that lead us in our ministry work included Miss Kelly Tartt, Mr. Lee, and Mr. Paul. Miss Kelly met us on Monday morning about the plan for the week, what the mission of the Sacred Heart Ministries is, and about the poverty of the area. However, her fun loving spirit, compassion, and dedication gave witness about the glimpses of hope in how so many cases were helped with the gifts of donations of time, money, home supplies, and hours of work. Her bubbly personality and upbeat spirit only added to the awe inspiring and sometimes scary stories. She set the stage for a week of knowing how much our time and efforts are needed and appreciated in this area where poverty is all around.

On Monday, we arrived at Miss Wilkin's home. We assisted the team in clearing out furniture and possessions from a room in the house that had been used as a beauty parlor, which now due to age and physical limitations she is no longer able to do. As with construction, that day did not go according to plan. It seemed there was more mudding and dry walling to be done to completely correct the water leaks and damage. We stayed on sight and in reflecting back, while some of us stayed right with the construction crew as an extra set of hands and arms while listening to the vast array of experiences they have encountered, others would spend time with Ms. Wilkins and her daughter, listening to their story and allowing them to share and be heard. All agreed it was not a day wasted but a true day of ministering in a way we had not expected – sometimes, God has other plans. By the end of the first day, after the experience and listening to the encounters of the Southern Sacred Heart Ministries, all I could think to myself was, "Am I really in the United States?, is this really 2016?, how do we legally allow some of the acts of our politicians to continue to cut out the people in need? Where have my eyes, my hands been....there is no real need to leave the country when our own brothers and sisters are living in poverty and oppression. I am but a drop in the bucket!" Later as Miss Kelly explained, Ms. Wilkins insurance had threatened to cancel her insurance (as is often the case) due to the water leaks if not fixed; this would have lead to the loss of her loan for the house; and ultimately the loss of her owning the home; leaving her and her daughter (who is medically unable to work), virtually homeless. Being unemployed, she could not afford to fix her home. Suddenly, it was not just a coat of paint, but the saving grace to

this woman and her daughter. The gratitude of Ms. Wilkins, her bear hugs, and laughter were rewards of the heart.

We spent the mornings each day visiting the school, some of us tutored individuals, and others worked with an entire math class – thankfully God knew our gifts and where to place us, mine was not the entire math class! I keep getting glimpses of shadows behind me, I think I might've snuck a couple in my bag to bring back, as I fell in love with those sweet faces. I am not a teacher, my background is in social work or administration, so I was very surprised at how at ease I felt in settling in as a tutor. Kids are so open and accepting. I was lucky to be assigned to little Sam, a pre-k student, for several sessions whom I've kept close to my heart. I also tutored a student in reading who had a stuttering problem. I couldn't hold back his excitement as he kept trying to tell me how the story ended since he had watched the movie the night before. It was the story of the dolphin who loses its tale, and a young boy helps get him to an aquarium where he is given a new tale. When we talked about the book, I asked if he could swim, and we discussed how wonderful it could be to go to school and one day work in such a place...the glow on his face again was a reward of the heart, something never expected but freely accepted. Holy Family School, while a catholic school, consists of a population of 98% non-catholic students. Once again, it was of little importance as you could see, feel, witness that the building was full of support, love, and care provided by the beautiful teachers under the supervision of Miss Isom, the principal. Ms. Isom also shared how she had grown up there, gone to school in this same school, raised her children in this school, and so her heart and soul came with her when she came back to teach many years ago and then eventually became the principal. Her enthusiasm for what she does with the student body overflows. I fell so in love with the school, the teachers, the children, that I made contacts with the catholic school back in Olney, Illinois where my own children attended school and found that the 4th and 5th grade teachers at both schools are interested in setting up pen pals – I am so excited for the cultural exchange that is possible, the broadening of the world vision for all of these children. We are but one!!

I can't finish the story of the school without sharing the story of Ms. Rayburn, the preschool teacher who was so welcoming and friendly and warm to me as I worked with her little Sam. As I prepared to leave, she began to tell me *her* story. Once again, I felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit to take the time to listen to her, to fulfill her need to be heard, that I kept my ride waiting. Ms. Rayburn had completed a complete renovation of her home approximately 18-24 months earlier, had even taken out a mortgage to do so. It was beautiful and all they had wanted....then the tornado of latter 2015 hit, destroying the home. When they attempted to make insurance claims, they were denied any coverage. They were told by the insurance company that the rafters had not been set correctly – yet as she reminded them, it was approved when we did the renovations, why would they change their minds now? In the end, she is now living with a mortgage for a home that no longer exists AND renting. Her love, tenderness, and care for the children masked the hurt and pain of what she personally had suffered and is suffering through.

On Thursday night we were honored to serve at the Garden Café, a soup kitchen that provides a free evening meal on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I had hopes of the possibility of some of the little children from school drifting in, but as one of the sisters said, "wouldn't they be embarrassed to see us there?" – I told her she would feel differently when she experienced the atmosphere of the Café as I had

experienced it earlier this year. It is such a warm and inviting place, it really feels just like a church gathering, there is laughter, joy, and conversation filling the air. Old friendships strengthened and new friendships forged. The food is so deliciously prepared by the wonderful chef who has a background in restaurant management and serves everything with a warm smile. We were astonished again to hear that in Mississippi it is illegal to open any new soup kitchens, therefore, this is how they work around the rules to fulfill people's hunger. Sacred Heart Missions finds a way – that is what is so wonderful about all of those working with them. I should also note that it is also illegal to build any new homeless shelters or low income housing – but as you can guess, the Sacred Heart Mission team was throwing ideas around and if I know them, they will find a way to work within the rules and yet meet the many needs – God provides.

On our final day – again, God sometimes makes the plans, we were unaware that school was not in session due to parent- teacher conferences and we had finished our painting. So we were offered the opportunity to go along on home visits. Once again, God knew best in what we were about to experience. They have approximately 190 applicants who need some type of assistance on home repairs and they want to try to get some completed before accepting new ones. I was the photographer, Sr. Mary Kay took notes as we arrived at the residences. Some were notified we were coming and yet others for varying reasons, could not be reached by phone which meant we had to drive out to the home and hope to find them. In Mississippi, this in itself is a challenge as there are not always house numbers or street signs, we relied heavily on the GPS and lots of educated guesses. There were yards with large dogs and 'beware of dog' signs – but Miss Kelly and Mr. Paul didn't seem to let fear get in their way as they pushed forward at each stop. Our first stop was at an elderly woman's home who had requested roof repairs due to leaks. It was obvious she had additional needs as we looked around. Again, that is the beauty of the Southern Sacred Heart Missions team, they do not simply look at the request, but take a look at the whole picture in case there are other more important needs that also need addressed while at the home that a homeowner may not know about or understand. It was apparent that this first home had some structural problems as the floor waned up and down as we headed to the kitchen area to look at the leak, it could also use some new kitchen cabinets, but all in all, the roof was the major repair. As we drove many miles to the second home, we found no one home. Kelly called and it failed. However, before we drove away, the owner called back stating her water heater had gone out that morning and she was late for work, could we come another day, Kelly happily agreed. However in the meantime, her neighbor came up to our car and started talking. He stated that she had needed a roof replacement but that someone else had completed it. He went on to explain that this company did a horrible job – not completing the seams well, and even noted that at one point where a tree had grown against the house, rather than cutting the tree away, they cut the roof around the tree...basically leaving her roof in less than good condition – and yet charging her \$4000. By the time the neighbor finished the story, the home owner, came out of her home and we offered to move so she could get to work, but rather she told us to come in. As we approached the house, a dog had stuck it's head through the screen beside a window AC unit. When we walked into the house, I was overwhelmed by the smell and thought I would vomit. She must have had 20 dogs between those inside and outside the house. It appeared that she might be the animal control agent for the county as she had stated she worked for the police department and then later apologized for the number of dogs

stating they are to be shipped up north. There were so many needs, from the still leaking roof, to no furniture, no flooring, and now no running water. She had had problems with her pump and now the water heater was out so she was bathing at her friends and washing dishes at her dad's. As we explained our purpose, and the team told her they would make her a priority to get her running water, she began to cry. As the tears flowed down her face, she thanked us repeatedly and told us that she felt that God had just come through her front door. The same house I walked into was not the house I left, nor was my heart. As I type this story, I am again moved to tears of having witnessed God's love and joy. As we drove away, Miss Kelly explained how this was an example of how they would fix the major needs, but not pour money into flooring, etc. given she would be continuing to house the dogs – and the woman was not asking for such, but simply grateful for running water. After lunch, we moved on to our 3rd home. This time, the home had been destroyed completely by fire but the family and the 97 year old grandmother had escaped injury. They were able to afford the beautiful repossessed double wide trailer, but they were unable to afford a ramp that would allow the grandmother to return to the home. The beauty of this story lies in that they insisted we tour the new home, showing us everything from the dishes, to the beautiful décor to the huge queen size bed with beautiful headboard...all of which had been donated by others. God is so good, and they were truly rejoicing and sharing the good news. Our final stop for the day was an elderly woman who had been hospitalized during the past year, when ready for discharge, they refused to discharge her to her home due to the condition it was in. As we approached from the outside, the railing on the steps had fallen to the way side, soffits had rotted, and the support post on the front porch no longer touched the ground. As we entered the dark and dreary house that no longer has power, there was no ceiling left in half the living room...only a few boards across. As you peered between the mere boards, the roof could be seen, and through it, light coming into the house. The kitchen was dark, and walls were pieced together out of pieces of old paneling, wood, and other miscellaneous pieces. The kitchen counter top was all but peeled away. There were roaches and termites. The bathroom and bedrooms fared no better. This woman was displaced and living with a family member. As the team continued investigating the inside and outside, the woman asked me what we could do. I knew that the team had told each home owner that we take the pictures and information back and discuss it and see what they can do and call them back the following week, which I did tell her....but I didn't have the heart (nor was it my job) to mention that I knew the house was beyond the help of our team. The team had warned us about cases such as this. They left her with a glimpse of hope but nothing concrete – this amazing team, had already something in their mind. When the woman had left, the ideas started flowing like water...what if we tore it down....what if we had an oversized shed or several small ones donated and we insulated it and piped it and wired it and....the inspiration, the ideas, the hope from Miss Kelly, Mr. Paul, and Mr. Lee poured out like a running well. While I might not learn of the final outcome, the witness of God in action will live forever in my heart.

I want to touch on the awesome TRIO that we worked under the supervision of, as it too is one of hope. Mr. Lee has worked for several years with Sacred Heart Ministries since he retired as a fireman. He had done construction work as a side job when he was a fireman. He is full of humor, hard work, and dedication and although he often complained of being 40, I think he was in his 70's. He had a son who was working as a property manager in Chicago when the Sacred Heart Ministries was looking for a

janitor. He told them he thought he “knew someone” and talked his son into returning and before long, he was needed alongside Mr. Lee on the construction projects – this is Mr. Paul, full of humor and happiness, just as his father. Then there’s that rambunctious, full of life, full of laughter, full of compassion, full of energy and promise woman, Miss Kelly. Together, there was such a compassion, dedication, and energy with the work that they do everyday – they don’t seem to lose hope. The part that gives me hope for our future and really excites me, is that both Mr. Paul and Miss Kelly – are a young 28 years old!! God has certainly led them to where they are together and with what they do. They are awe inspiring.

I cannot stop sharing the story, in fact, I know I left a piece of my heart in Mississippi. The Southern Missions of Sacred Heart has volunteers of all kinds that go there to serve. They have sororities, fraternities, colleges, churches, families, retired contractors who come to “vacation”....who show up with little knowledge and great knowledge, little skills and great skills, but they seem to accommodate and teach as they go, never missing an opportunity. Perhaps this is the trip you need to jump start your spirituality, your heart, or just to experience the diversity of our own country....for whatever reason you feel called to it – you will be moved and changed by the love and hope of Mississippi and the works of the Southern Sacred Heart Missions.