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Holy Spirit Balloons - A Story from Lay Academy

by Tisha Brown and Ross Michaels

The following is an excerpt from a reflection paper written by Ross Michaels, a Lay Academy participant in Faith Foundations Year 1 and member of Middleton Community UCC in Middleton. Ross wrote this reflection paper to fulfill a Lay Academy requirement that each participant do something each year that engages them with the wider church and reflect upon it.

Ross chose to chaperone a group of Middle School and High School youth from congregations around Madison as they engaged in service projects on January 19, 2015, in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Groups of Middle and High School students were dispatched throughout the city to do various projects. Ross' group of Middle School students went to a local nursing home to serve the residents there. His reflection highlights the value of risk-taking mission and service and how stepping out of our comfort zones for the sake of others and with God in our hearts can be a transformative experience of the Holy Spirit in our midst. It also highlights the many, tiny acts of service we all engage in regularly that make such a difference and that enable us to share the love of God with our wider community. May this reflection bless you and inspire you to acts of mission and service within your own community and congregation.

Tisha

Ross writes:

"Our service project was at a nursing home on the east side of Madison. The organizers of the day of service had asked the staff at the nursing home to come up with activities and chores for the students and chaperones at their facility. Our group was comprised of about a dozen middle school students and four adult chaperones.

Our first activity involved participation in a therapy session for the residents. When we arrived there were two groups of about six residents each in a large activity room. Each group was sitting in a circle. Some of the residents were in wheel chairs, some were in mobile beds and some were in regular chairs. The activity coordinator at the nursing home split our group about in half, with each half assigned to one of the resident circles.

Each group was given a few balloons. It was our “job” to bop the balloons to the residents so they could bop them back to us. The balloons arrived and the fun began.

The students in my group were quite shy at first. One lively resident, Patricia, a lady who appeared to be about in her late eighties, broke the ice and began asking them about their lives – how old they were, where they went to school, etc. ...

I sat down next to one of the quieter residents. I introduced myself to her and asked her name. We spoke for a few minutes. Once the kids saw her smiling, they began to include her in their balloon game. I then moved and sat next to another elderly woman who was sitting quietly. I repeated my introduction and asked her name. She attempted to answer, but could not. From some gestures she made, I could tell that she understood my question, but had somehow lost the ability to communicate with words. I could also tell that her inability to communicate with me caused her some anxiety. The kids came to the rescue with the balloons. As soon as a balloon came her way, she intently watched as it slowly descended. With perfect timing, she bopped it back. At that moment, I could see her anxiety melt away, replaced with a smile. I was amazed at her reflexes. If a balloon drifted a little out of her reach, her foot would automatically come up to kick the balloon back. I sat with her during the remainder of the activity, redirecting any stray balloons to within her reach.

The kids soon figured out that the balloons were like magic. There were two other residents in our circle who had been sitting with dour looks on their faces, not participating. I think the students were at first a little intimidated by their expressions. Like the lady sitting by me, their expressions and attitudes immediately changed once they were included in the game. When those two began participating, the other residents encouraged them when they would occasionally miss the balloon.

While this was happening, Patricia seemed to be having more and more fun, hitting the balloon back with some force, laughing every time she did. Some of the boys in the group began spiking the balloon back to her. She loved it and spiked it right back. As she began to have more and more fun, the energy level of the students and other residents grew.

It was easy to see the benefits this little game had with the residents – physically, emotionally and mentally. And it was easy to see how it helped the middle school kids relate with the residents who were probably 70 or more years their senior. Play and laughter seemed to wash away any hesitancy of either group. Before long they were talking with each other like they had known each other for some time.”

(Later in the day Ross and the other chaperones gathered with their group to reflect on the day’s activity)

“The students seemed genuinely touched by the activity, especially the balloon session. They were amazed at the agility of the residents and at the fun shared by both groups. They expressed thankfulness that some of the residents took the initiative to make them

feel more comfortable. And they all expressed a desire to do something like this again. We asked the students how this experience might relate to Dr. King's message. They understood that what they did that day was about building bridges between two groups who, at first glance, may not have much in common; but who, through joyful interaction, came to appreciate each other. We ended our discussion with prayer.

This experience showed me that even small acts of kindness can bring joy to the care giver and to the care receiver. We are all human, even if we have lost our ability to walk, to completely care for ourselves, or to communicate verbally. We need interaction with other humans. That interaction can be play, talking, holding hands, or just sitting together in silence. God's presence finds its way into those interactions if we allow that presence to enter. That day, the Holy Spirit was floating slowly around the room disguised as balloons. It was beautiful to witness and to be a part of it."