

Total Dependence

Two Sterling students serve in “the hood”

Sterling College seniors Jessica Luera and Geoffrey Kigenyi spent twelve weeks during the summer of 2004 in the heart of drug dealing, drug abuse, random shootings and immorality while working with Hartford City Mission in the north end of Hartford, Connecticut, in an area commonly known as “the hood.”

Hartford City Mission (HCM) works among residents of Hartford’s inner city. Its mission is “to help foster the growth of Christ-dependent disciples from a diversity of economic, geographic, and racial backgrounds.” Scott Wilhite, a 1989 Sterling graduate and member of the Sterling College Board of Trustees, is the president of HCM.

Luera, a Christian Ministries major, and Kigenyi, a Behavioral Science major, both learned of the HCM internship opportunity through Sterling College Campus Chaplain, Dr. Hank Lederle. “As soon as Dr. Hank mentioned the opportunity to work in the inner city of Hartford, the Spirit stirred within me,” said Luera

While at HCM, Luera and Kigenyi worked with three other interns. They helped operate two ministries, one for kids ages 5 to 12 and the other for young adults ages 13 to 18. For the 5- to 12-year-olds, the interns helped create “Noah Sidewalk Sunday School,” a weekly program consisting of songs, a Bible lesson, skits, games, and memory verses. The 13- to 18-year-olds also had a weekly program, called TL (The Lord’s). Their program included a Bible lesson one week and a project the following week allowing them to experience what they had learned the previous week.

A large part of the interns’ ministry was visitation, which happened six days a week. During this time, they visited the homes of the children and teens, reminding them about the weekly programs, but most of all, loving them. They also conducted a weekly adult Bible study, visited an Aids Residential House every Thursday, and worked with Habitat for Humanity twice during the summer.

Both Luera and Kigenyi testified to learning what it means to truly depend on God during their summer experience. “Every part of ‘the hood’ was really scary and it took total dependence on God for survival every day,” said Kigenyi. Luera agreed, “I felt led a month before I went to Hartford to pray that God would teach me full dependence on Him. He did just that and is still teaching me each day.”

Jess

What did your summer experience involve (where were you, who were you working with, what were you doing, etc.)?

The summer of 2004 was a season in which God impacted my life in a way that will never be forgotten. God led me to the city of Hartford, CT. He not only led me to Hartford, but to the North end of Hartford, commonly known as "the hood".

I served for Hartford City Mission. Hartford City Mission's work is among residents of Hartford's inner city. HCM's mission is "to help foster the growth of Christ-dependent disciples from a diversity of economic, geographic, and racial backgrounds." One of the many reasons I love HCM is its great emphasis on building relationships with the community in which Christ is using us to minister. I ministered with four other interns to a variety of people. I was blessed by building strong relationships with children, teens, and adults.

The area in which we worked in was an area in which drug dealers, drunkards, and gang members filled the streets. The majority of the children and teens in the community did not live with both parents. One of the girls I got to know has ten other brothers and sisters all from different dads. The children and teens live daily with the fear that they could be jumped or attacked. It was common that there was a shooting every week in the neighborhood we lived in; often more than one shooting took place. I remember during one of the visitations, one other person and I were talking to some teens, and one teen lifted up his shirt and there was a gun. One of the interns I worked with actually saw a victim of a shooting before one of our children's programs.

It was amazing to see God at work in these children's and teens' lives in such conditions. It was amazing to see their faith and hunger for God grow. The interns, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, put together a weekly sidewalk Sunday school for children ages 5-12, Noah Sidewalk Sunday School. The theme this summer was "the battle belongs to the Lord". Each week we taught the children a different part of the armor of God during the Sunday School.

Every Saturday we had two sites for the Sunday School. The interns of 2004 (us) actually helped start the second site. We went around the neighborhood a week before our first program knocking on as many doors as we could to find as many children as we could. It took me out of my comfort zone to be in an unfamiliar, dangerous place trying to get to know the people in the community. It was a blessing because being out of my comfort zone allowed Christ to do all the work through me. We had a truck with a stage that was let down from its side (the Noah truck). Our two sites were in the parking lot of local elementary schools. We had tarps on which the children sat. Noah Sidewalk Sunday School consisted of songs, a Bible lesson, skits, games, and memory verses.

I also was able to work with teens ages 13-19. We had a weekly program for the teens called TL (The Lords). This summer's theme was experiencing God. We had different Bible lessons; worship, service, nature, compassion. One week the Bible lesson was taught and the following week a project was set up for the teens to experience what they had learned the week before.

I was blessed with the opportunity to speak to the teens about compassion at a TL meeting. I prayed consistently about speaking to the teens about compassion. I thought, 'how am I suppose to tell these teens to love others and show compassion when almost

all of them have never even been shown love?' When I spoke the Holy Spirit poured out of me; they were not my words but God's. It was amazing to see the teens get passionate about compassion. The hunger in their eyes when I was speaking put me in awe. The following week I was able to set up a compassion experience including games and arts and crafts with residents in a home for neglected and abandoned children called "The Village." It was one of the best evenings of my life. The Lord's joy was so evident in our teens as they loved on the children, forgetting about their own struggles.

The most wonderful part of my job this summer was something we called "visitation". Visitation happened six days a week. I loved it! During visitation we went to all the children's and teen's homes to just hang out with them. We reminded them about the weekly programs, but more than anything we loved on them. It was a rich blessing to see the children's and teens' excitement flow through their beings as they would see us at their doors. We also had a weekly adult Bible study in which our goal was to minister to the adults in the hood. We went through the book of Mark. Every Thursday the interns went to an Aids Residential House. We did service for the house, yard work and cleaning. We were able to eat lunch with the residents, which provided opportunities to build relationships with them. We also were blessed by working for Habitat for Humanity twice this summer in the area in which we lived.

How did you find out about this opportunity? What steps did you go through to get the job?

God amazes me in the way that if He wants you somewhere He is going to get you there. During one of the chaplain meetings before the summer, Dr. Hank mentioned that he got an e-mail about an opportunity to work in the inner city of Hartford, CT. As soon as he said that the Spirit stirred within me. I have always known that God was going to take me back East sometime.

For the last two years of college, God has given me a passion for the people in the inner city. Last year I had to set up a curriculum for a ministry in my Curriculum Design class. For some reason, I picked to do my 50-page curriculum for inner city children. Little did I know God would lead me to work with inner city children in the following months; God is so good. I filled out the application for HCM over the internet. I had been praying about it a great amount because God had placed HCM on my heart strongly. At this point I been accepted and planned on working for Kanakuk for the summer. But I felt God telling me to fill out the application for HCM, so I did.

I received a call from the president of HCM, Scott Wilhite, and he told me he wanted to have a phone interview with me. Scott and I had trouble getting in touch with one another for my interview, because I was at an FCA conference at the time. I prayed constantly that God would provide a way if He wanted me in Hartford and if He didn't want me there, that He would close the door. I got back from the FCA conference before talking to Scott and was praying to God telling him that I believed He was leading me to Hartford, but if He wanted to make it crystal clear, Geoffrey would get the job also. I called Scott, he offered me the job, I accepted it, and then he told me Geoffrey got the job also. It was crystal clear God wanted me in Hartford for the summer of 2004.

How do you feel God used you in this particular setting?

I believe God has given me a burden and passion for people who are in need. I am passionate about sharing the love of God with people who have no concept of love and with people who are lonely, hurting, and afraid. I believe Jesus Christ showed compassion to the community of the North end through me this summer. It was not only the words I said to the people but the way I lived my life.

God designed me to be a very affectionate person. Affection is foreign to the vast majority of children, teens, and even adults in the inner city. From the first day I was in the hood I gave out hugs and just let people know I cared about them by my actions. It was amazing to see God soften hearts throughout the summer. Some of the people who did not really hug me during the first part of summer were giving me bigger hugs than I have ever gotten before by the end of the summer.

God has given me the gift of persistence, which He used this summer. At the end of the summer our teens got to go to a Kids Across America Camp. One of my duties was to get all the camp paperwork in for three teens in the same family. I was able to get all of the paperwork in for two of the teens, but the other girl was a different story. Every day I would go and try and get the paperwork, but her parents did not speak any English. One day they would say she could go, and the next day she couldn't, and on and on. Finally, the last day I went to her house, her parents said she could go. I knew God had such an amazing plan for those teens at camp. They went to camp the week I left to come back to Sterling College. I talked to the teens on the phone after they went to camp, and all three of them received Christ as their personal Savior and were baptized! I cried when they told me this news. Wow, God is so good and faithful.

I talk to the teens once a month to see how they are doing. The last time I talked to them, one of the girls, Almalee (an 8th grader), told me that her teacher was having them make time capsules that they would dig up when they were seniors. She said they had to put things in the capsule that represented their family, best friends, hobbies and then she said that they have to put something in it that represents the person they admire and look up to the most – and she asked me to send her a picture of myself. Wow! I cried. That family has touched my life in such a deep way. God-willing, they will always be a part of my life.

I also believe that God used me and is still using me as an intercessor for the North end. I have a broken heart for the community and I take that hurt in prayer before God. I remember one particular morning, I had driven to a safer part of the city to run, and on my way back to the hood I stopped at one of the schools where we had Noah Sidewalk Sunday School. I was praying for the neighborhood in the parking lot of the school (Waverly Elementary). When I looked up after my prayer I saw this filthy, dirty window beside me. It was a window of the school. The word "love" had been written amongst all the filth and dirt. When I saw this, the Holy Spirit spoke to me, telling me that even though the North end is an area of filth and dirt, God's love is there and God's love will rule the area someday. I am so thankful for the way God spoke to me, and I was able to share it with the other interns that morning and God ignited us even more.

Do you hope to go back again?

I would love to go back again. God blessed me with some amazing relationships this summer. It was hard to leave the children and teens. It is so obvious that God ordained certain relationships I have with people in the hood. I was also blessed by

meeting one of the most amazing women of God, Lori. God gave me a sister in Christ who pours Truth into my life on a consistent basis. I have been strengthened and am strengthened daily by Lori's wisdom from God. I worked with some amazing brothers and sisters in Christ this summer. The HCM staff is completely amazing and they have such hearts for God. I dearly love them. I know that wherever God leads me after graduation it will be a priority of mine to go and see my children, teens, Lori, and HCM staff once or twice a year.

What is your major?

My major is Christian Ministries with an emphasis in Educational Leadership and Youth.

What are your goals following graduation?

God is opening different opportunities for me following graduation with different ministries. I will follow wherever He leads me. One of my desires is to work with an outreach ministry with which I can go out and meet people where they are rather than have people come to me. I desire to work with needy people (the poor, orphans, and the sick). My goal is to live a life radically sold out for God, transforming this world through the strength of Jesus Christ who lives within me and through God's living Word.

Additional comments...

God taught me so much this summer. I felt led a month before I went to Hartford to pray that God would teach me full dependence on Him. He did just that and is still teaching me each day. I saw and experienced things that break the human heart. I often meditate on the verse that God gave me this summer, "I will trust in the Lord with all my heart, and when things may be confusing I will lean not on my own understanding, but I will praise and acknowledge God is everything, and He will make my path straight."

Geofrey

What did your summer experience involve (where were you, who were you working with, what were you doing, etc.)?

We were 5 interns hired to work for Hartford City Mission in Hartford, CT. Besides Jessica and me from Sterling College, we had three others: Russell from North Carolina, and Adam and Jen from Connecticut. We worked under minimum supervision. Hartford City Mission operates two ministries to inner city kids ages 5-12 and 13-18.

For the 5-12, we did a side walk Sunday School program off a decorated truck that we drove into a school parking lot every Saturday. And for the 13-18 age group, we had more of a discipleship program though many of the kids were really still looking to know the Lord. We did visitations to the homes of the kids that came to our programs. This was the challenging part because it involved walking through some of the worst parts of the "hood" infested with drugs and gangs. But it was good because we met many people and built relationships with them.

How did you find out about this opportunity? What steps did you go through to get the job?

Hartford City Mission sent an e-mail to Dr. Hank about the opportunity for Sterling College students interested in inner city ministry. I went ahead and applied for the job and waited. Meanwhile, I was scheduled to do a devotion at the Spring Board of Trustees meeting and coincidentally one of the Board members, Scott Wilhite, also president of the Hartford City Mission Board, was at this board meeting. I did the devotion and the board members were impressed. So when Scott went back to Connecticut, he found out that I was one of the applicants to come to Hartford. He scheduled an interview with me and offered me the job. It was after I had accepted the job that Scott introduced himself to me saying he was at the board meeting when I gave the devotion. Hearing that was a confirmation that God had already planned this for me.

How do you feel God used you in this particular setting?

I have had a lot of ministry experiences ranging from evangelistic missions in East Africa where I come from to pastoring a church in Arlington, Kansas. But this summer was a different experience altogether. I had no expectation when I went to Connecticut because it was venturing in a field I had never been before. Life in inner city Hartford is completely different from Sterling, Kansas. We worked and lived in the very heart of drug dealing and drug abuse, random shootings and immorality, etc. Every part of the "hood" was really scary and it took total dependence on God for survival every day.

Nevertheless there were amazing kids ages 5 to 18 years that were waiting to hear the gospel and be with people who loved and cared about them. We did a sidewalk Sunday School program which attracted about 200 kids every week. Through it all, I saw what happens when we selflessly give ourselves to the Lord's service. He draws many to himself - even those who are difficult to love.

Do you hope to go back again?

I would love to go back this summer. In fact, I am considering going back to Hartford.

What is your major?

I am a Behavioral Science major with minors in Social Entrepreneurship and Christian Education.

What are your goals following graduation?

Since I am a Habitat Fellow on campus, I will be doing a one year internship with Habitat for Humanity following my graduation. I am hoping to do my internship at the Hartford area Habitat Affiliate so I can stay involved with Hartford City Mission.