

A testimony of generosity from a grateful heart:

I was working on summer staff at Mountain T.O.P. (Tennessee Outreach Project) a nonprofit service organization in rural Appalachia. I was a counselor with youth campers, leading service projects in impoverished communities, some of the poorest in the nation.

One of my groups was replacing porch decking on a dilapidated trailer. Now, this trailer was in an area of the county known to staff as being the worst of the worst. The entire property was down a steep hill surrounded by an already breeze-less valley so it was always sweltering. The smell of decay was everywhere, inside and out. Trash was strewn about the dirt yard. The trailer, at least 40 years old, was literally falling apart. Carpet and linoleum were worn through, exposing a sagging plywood floor that had been replaced multiple times in patchwork fashion. Ragged furniture was pushed against every peeling wall. There was no air conditioning and no washing machine. One day my truck got stuck in mud in the steep driveway. There was substance abuse among their relatives, though my volunteer group was safe with the immediate family.

Despite all of this, the family, the Cannons, were a joy to work with. My campers loved playing with their two adorable little girls, and the parents, Bill and Faye were easy to talk to. They had been unable to use their front door after the porch boards rotted away. It wasn't a priority since they still technically had access to their house via dangerously high, narrow, rickety steps to the back door. However, the lack of an easy-to-access front porch had become a problem when Mr. Cannon ended up out of work due to an accident. The scraps of wood they had used to forge a makeshift bridge (which Mrs. Cannon called her husband's "red carpet") were rotting away already, creating a dangerous situation. With donated lumber and labor, we fixed it for them.

The project was so rewarding, the need so obvious, the family so kind and thankful, and the campers and their adult chaperones so great, that I fondly remember it as one of my greatest successes on the mountain. But that's not the reason the project will be with me forever.

One of the things that Mountain T.O.P. prides itself on is being a partnership ministry, not a charity. Mountain T.O.P. is established in the community as a local partner for change, connected with and listening to the community, rather than being an outside entity telling people what they need and giving things away. The organization seeks to empower the local community and inspire hope, as a way of creating lasting transformation instead of just temporary relief.

In practice, what this usually means is that the families are asked to contribute to the project in some way, so that they have ownership in improving their circumstances, and feel empowered. This can be as simple as providing lunch or a pitcher of lemonade, doing the work alongside us, donating items for our yearly yard sale, or purchasing the raw materials so we can provide the labor. The classic example is a little old lady who is financially stable might donate more than enough to cover her project's supplies; she mostly needs the companionship of cheerful young people to brighten her week. That money then goes directly into the field budget to help cover costs for others who are poorer and unable to contribute monetarily. The complexity of a project is never dependent on a family's ability to contribute and lots of materials are donated.

So, as my group finished at the Cannon's house and headed back to camp I stayed behind visiting for a few more minutes. Supposedly they had a monetary donation to give but I felt so awkward asking them for money. I had decided I was just going to leave without asking. These folks were surely the ones that deserved something truly for free. We admired the new porch floor one last time and as I headed to the car Mrs. Cannon, said "Now wait a minute, I have something for you."

She went inside and returned with a small ziploc bag. Inside was about \$12 worth of coins.

She proudly boasted that she had been putting all her spare change for the last few months in that bag in anticipation of "The Mountain Toppers coming to help us." She sheepishly said it was all they could afford to part with, but that she was happy to know that her donation would help someone else in her community. It wasn't much. It was certainly less than the value of the donated deck boards. I wanted to refuse this gift, but I could see in her eyes that the act of giving back meant so much to her. I couldn't take away her moment.

Clearly this sacrifice meant so much more than giving from abundance or giving nothing at all. Where anxiety and hopelessness had existed, we had empowered her, and created a chance to be a catalyst for change in her own community. By giving of ourselves we gave the family and each other a newfound sense of purpose, peace, and hope.

The staff gave \$12 out of our own wallets to the field budget that month, and pinned that beautiful, simple bag of change to the bulletin board to remember her generosity the rest of the summer.

Alex Sloan