Sticky Hands and Contagious Smiles

Summer was fast approaching—the time of year when I finally feel free, able to explore. It was also time to finalize what I wanted to do. Even though I was blessed to have the opportunity to go on a fun and exciting summer adventure, I felt a little pressure deciding how to spend the time. I looked at all the camps available—science camps, coding camps, and the cool astronomy camp. I love these subjects in school, and summer camps make them so much more fun! It was difficult to choose; all my friends were talking about which ones they were going to go to, and I was stuck. As the deadlines to apply were coming closer, I knew I had to make a decision. Deciding between the coding and the STEM camp, something new came up: a trip to Memphis, Tennessee, to work with the kids in a high-risk area in the community. In spite of the excitement my friends shared about attending the "fun" camps, I somehow knew this trip was the one I wanted to go on. Little did I know how impactful this trip would be.

Weeks flew by, and soon the time arrived to turn in the form that would commit me to the Memphis trip. Voices began to speak to me: "why are you going to a camp where all you do is work?" Trying to quiet the voices in my head, I handed my signed registration form in, along with my money to the leader. I knew there was no turning back, telling myself I was going on this trip and that was final.

July arrived, and so did my departure date. My bag was packed - one backpack was all each participant was allowed to take. The night before leaving, I was lying in bed, and my mind raced through expectations. I was nervous! Not only had I passed on other exciting opportunities,
but I didn't know what to expect for this. The next morning, I hugged my parents goodbye and stepped on the bus that was taking me and the rest of the team to our big adventure. Settling in my seat, I couldn't stop wondering what this trip would be like. Several of the kids were complaining about having to go on this "forced labor" trip. Others, who had been involved in this event before, were more positive, telling me how fun it would be. They said I would make a connection with the kids we would be working with and would want to come back every year. I wondered if they meant what they said. Would I really meet that special kid and make a strong impact on his or her life? Would I be eager to come back? Or would I regret this decision? I sank into my seat, trying to contain the bubbling feeling of excitement, which was mixed with a tinge of dread. There were so many emotions all at once; it made me shiver in my seat.

Arriving late in the evening, we were escorted to our rooms. The place we were staying in was this little, old church, with rows of bunk beds and mattresses that looked like thin, yoga mats. I was a bit disappointed but immediately tried to fix my attitude. After all, we were helping the community. It wasn't about me. Once settled, I went exploring and met some new kids my age. That night as I laid in bed, I couldn't fall asleep. Between trying to hide under my sheet from the pesky mosquitoes and drowning out the snores of the girl next to me—it was hard. Also, I was excited to meet and help the kids the next day, though, as my back started to get sore from the flimsy mattress, my mind raced to the thought of my friends who were staying in nice accommodations at the other camps. After what seemed like hours, I finally slipped into sleep-land.

Waking up with enthusiasm for what the day would bring, I grabbed a quick breakfast and headed off with the group to start work. We were to gather kids that lived in the area and
bring them to the community center where we would spend the day playing, teaching, and
encouraging the participants. Our responsibilities included going door-to-door, getting the
parents' permission to bring the kids to the day camp. I wasn't prepared for what I encountered.
Many of the homes were run-down and in need of a paint job, the sidewalks and steps were
cracked or had large chunks missing, and a lot of the homes even had bullets through the
windows, doors, and outside walls. The kids' parents were all different - some of them were rude,
drank, or gone. Some of the kids were left alone, even children that were very young. Some
parents said no in a cold way, causing their children to run back into the house crying. Others
said yes, as long as we promised to bring them back safely.

As we walked along the street going door-to-door, I felt like the Pied Piper. The kids that
were allowed to attend the day camp were following me and the other leaders like mice. More
kept coming. We got to the site where we had set up all the activities for the day. Glancing
around at all the kids - about fifty of them - my heart suddenly sank. Up to this point I had not
really taken a close look at the children individually. Some were wearing torn clothes, and others
were barefoot. Some of those lucky enough to have shoes had mismatched socks. Many were
dirty and unkept, and several had thick, green goo coming out their noses. Ugh! Quickly, my
thoughts raced to the camps I had turned down: the one that included a day at a theme park, the
other with access to a pool complete with a diving board, and the other where I would learn
about robotics (which I find cool). I asked myself, "What did I commit to?" Before I could regret
my decision further, I felt a warm, sticky hand grab mine. "Will you blow bubbles with me?"
asked a soft, high-pitched voice. Standing next to me was a small girl with black hair, brown
eyes, and the cutest little smile. Trying not to show my hesitation, I quickly responded, "Of course!"

I wasn't prepared for what happened to me as the day quickly flew by. This little girl, by
the name of Ellie, stole my heart. For the next week I danced, played games, and shared stories
with this little girl and the others assigned to my group. Each day started the same way. I would
glance around at all the kids, my heart melting to see how joyful they all were, even in the
circumstances they were living in. Each afternoon ended the same way, as we were walking the
kids home, they would jump on our backs and tell us how much fun they had. It made me so
happy to know that they were happy. When we dropped them off, they were so sad because they
didn't want us to leave. I told them I would see them every day for the next week, and that
seemed to give them a glimmer of hope.

When the last day arrived, I was surprised how difficult it was to hold back the tears,
knowing I wouldn't see the kids for a year, or possibly ever again. I had become attached to the
kids of Memphis, especially little Ellie, whose bright smile and strong pull for my attention had
won my affection. As we walked the kids home and said our goodbyes, these little lives of hope
clung to us, not wanting the week to end, not wanting us to leave. Rather than looking forward to
my comfortable bed, long, hot showers, and any meal other than peanut butter and jelly
sandwiches, I realized something - this trip was supposed to change the lives of the kids we were
working with. Instead, it changed mine.