

A weekend retreat at the Tonto Rim Christian Camp in Payson, AZ, was an experience the Arizona Karen Baptist youth and I will remember for a lifetime.

THE BEGINNING

Matthew 7:7 – Ask, and it shall be given you!

It started with a short visit to the camp with Paul and Jan Meeden and Dick Miles of Bellevue Heights Church, along with three of my Karen friends. I thought we were just checking out the camp. When Pastor Larry Fultz asked when we could come for a weekend, I hesitated to say anything. I knew we did not even have cars to drive the kids there, let alone pay for the expenses. My mind wandered and I started to sweat a little. I was unsure if it would be appropriate to ask Paul, Jan, and Dick if their church would help pay our expenses. I knew their church would like to help us, but I was uncertain about the extent of that help. I said to myself, “Well, this is not the first time you asked for help, you have previously done this frequently. Come on, you are a super supplicant!” At the same time, I was complaining to God for I felt that I was often put in this humbling situation of beseeching in behalf of others. Now, remember! We were not talking about a hundred dollars or even a thousand dollars. Whoever decided to help us would have to be involved extensively in every single way: camp fees, food, transportation, bed sheets, towels, soap or toothbrushes...you name it! Then, I mustered the little courage I had and ventured to ask with an uneasy calm, “Do you think Bellevue Heights church will help us with the expenses?” Right after asking that question, I immediately avoided the eye contact as I felt extremely uncomfortable. I then added, “You know you don’t have to pay for my family.” I guess I made that additional comment to raise myself out of what I felt was a bit of an abasing situation for me. Paul and Jan immediately assured me that their church would do everything they could to help and that I was not to worry. Well, the rest is history!

THE PREPARATION

Mark 8:21 – And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?

When we talked about the exciting opportunity for our youth to go to the Christian camp, the Karen parents showed little or no enthusiasm. One replied, “We were in the refugee camp for nearly a decade, why would we send our kids to the camp?” Another responded, “Why would you spend that much money to take the kids for a fun trip? It would be more beneficial for the sponsors to give that money directly to the church.” I tried telling them that the retreat was not a mere field trip but that their kids would learn more about God. I did not think I gave them a satisfactory answer, as I myself had not been to a Christian camp in the United States.

THE MESS

Corinthians 3:2 – I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready..

My friends, Paul and Jan Meeden of Bellevue Heights Church, were exceptionally supportive and encouraging. Pastor Stan Crews of Monte Vista also provided necessary paper work, which was essential in getting us to the camp. Yet, the preparation for the retreat was grueling at times. My

husband, Adam, walked through the rules of the camp, the registration form, and the medical release form step by step twice. Paul, Jan, and I sat down and came up with a whole host of “what-ifs?” What if the kids do not have extra bed sheets, soap, toothbrushes? What if they do not have warm clothes? Remembering that I was hungry all the time when I was a teenager, I added, “What if they get hungry Friday night or between meals and do not have money to purchase food at the store?” Paul and Jan began supplicating at Bellevue Heights church and rapidly joined the supreme society of super supplicants. The Red Hatters agreed to provide snacks. Many church members brought blankets, bed sheets, towels, soap, shampoo, lotion, toothbrushes, tooth paste, etc... Pretty soon, Paul and Jan had boxes everywhere in their house.

Two days before the trip, I checked the registration and medical release forms and found that much of the required information was missing. Many consent forms were not signed by parents. So I called my friends Jim and Dah Dah at 9 p.m. and went to house after house to complete the forms. By the time I returned home, it was 1 a.m. To my dismay, I found my son Zachary running a fever of 103 degrees. The next day, I took Zachary to the doctor and she said that it was a viral attack. The question of our family making it to the camp was up in the air. Then, I received an email from Pastor Larry asking us to bring as many flashlights as possible. I called Neil Sowards, founder of Friends of Burma, with a request and he agreed to pay for flashlights for all of our kids. However, I could not find time for the purchase. Paul and Jan had to take over this task. At night, when Adam and I went to the store to buy flashlights for our own, we found that they had already purchased all of the one-dollar flashlights.

The next night, Zachary had a fever of 105 degrees and Adam took him to the emergency room. We then had to decide who would go to the camp. Adam graciously agreed to stay home with Zachary. We tried telling Zoe to also stay home with her Dad and she said, “No way, Hosea! I can’t wait to go to the camp!”

THE EXPEDITION

Proverbs 30:1 – The man declares, I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out.

The time has come. Zachary was crying before we left. I was sad. I felt exhausted from sleepless nights. I began to feel ill. My head was pounding and my sinuses were throbbing. The worst was this question that I kept asking myself, “Am I a bad and irresponsible mother?” While driving, I called my most favorite pastor, Pastor Ramey, to pray for me. As always, he was there for me. As Paul and Jan Meeden, John and Shirley Davies, Jean and Ed Updike, and Dick Miles entered the parking lot with the buses and vans, the kids gathered and the excitement mounted. Then, a predicament arose. The girl who said she would not be going to the camp because she broke her arm showed up. When she found out someone took her spot, she was in tears. We were able to take her to the camp but I was concerned constantly that a game or an activity would exacerbate her broken arm.

After Pastor Tha Hser prayed and we sang “He Leadeth Me,” we were on our way. A phone call came in and said someone refused to wear a seatbelt. Another call came in and said someone wanted to throw up. I screamed out loud in my head, “Just leave me alone!” I was thinking about my son all the way. In any event, it is unnecessary to talk about my getting Cactus and Shea mixed

up and making the wrong turn once again for this would make another deposit in the bank of fun factors to tease Tansy for Paul, Jan, and Dick. No one really needs to know about this!

THE ORDINARY TO THE EXTRAORDINARY

Hebrews 4:12 – For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Friday Night

Upon arriving at the camp, I was glad to see Pat Sheridan! What an awesome lady, sent from God to our rescue and so she did! She was supposed to arrive at the camp later than I was because of her work schedule but she was ahead of me. God was merciful! Without any prior arrangement, I was put in the Graziano cabin with other adults. Pat, on the other hand, ended up staying at Paula's Place with a couple dozen teenage girls.

After registering everyone, getting our pictures taken, and picking up sheets, warm clothes (kindly brought by Dick and our friends from Monte Vista), and bathroom items, we went to the Memorial Hall. We learned that the theme for the retreat was "**From the Ordinary to the Extraordinary.**" We learned about Moses and his struggles with the Pharaoh. God protected the first-born of the Israelites and their flocks by the blood on the doorpost. Years later, Jesus shed his blood for our salvation. God created us not to be mere ordinary people; we are to be extraordinary in God's ways.

After we got back to the cabin, my friend, Nwe Nwe Win, asked if I had communicated with my team leaders about their specific responsibilities. I did back in Phoenix but I just did not feel like I was up to it for I was not feeling well. I prayed that night to God to make me feel well for the weekend.

Saturday

MOVING FROM THE ORDINARY TO THE EXTRAORDINARY IS A DECISION.

Before breakfast, our leadership team gathered at the Graziano. Nwe Nwe led the devotion and spelled out expectations. Her contribution was pivotal in making this retreat a success. After breakfast, we headed to the Memorial Hall. We saw six bags on the table. Pastor Larry later explained that we were to play the "Take it or Leave it" game show. Each of those bags held one dollar, two dollars, five dollars, 10 dollars, 20 dollars, or nothing. Six youths were chosen to go to the front. They were given a choice of picking the bag which they could not see the inside, or shirts or hat that they could see. When asked which choice the contestant should make, all of us shouted what they should pick. It was tough for the contestants to make decisions because they were hearing all kinds of voices. All but one picked the bag. While not picking the bag was a good choice when the bag had nothing in it, picking the shirt was not the best choice when the bag had \$20 that exceeded the value of the shirt. Pastor Larry explained that we hear all kinds of voices in this world inviting us to follow them just like we were shouting to the contestants to follow our suggestions. Many voices call us to fall in the trap of drugs, alcohol, smoking, consumerism, etc...

We must be careful with the choice we make, for always picking what is visually appealing may not always turn out to be a good choice.

Then, we learned about Josiah and the choices he made to be extraordinary. He became a king when he was eight years old and reigned for 31 years. King Josiah undertook reforms to stop idol worship and the evils associated with it. There were 15 kings before him and they did not do much about the pagan practices. What a difficult and unpopular choice Josiah made but what a right choice! King Josiah was “the greatest king that ever lived.” (II Kings 23:25). The youth learned that we need to make difficult choices in life to let God move us from the ordinary to extraordinary.

The only glitch during the Bible study was that three girls were looking at pictures on their digital camera when Pastor Larry was talking. I am not one with a load of patience. Before coming to the camp, I prayed so hard to God to give me patience for I did not want to hurt young people’s feelings with my yelling. But at that moment, I got up and smacked lightly on the heads of the three girls. Pat said, “What were you doing?” I felt bad after doing that for I could have handled it in a different way. I guess that answered Pastor Larry’s question, “How do you feel after making a bad decision?”

Then, we broke into two groups (blue team and green team) and read in English and Karen II Kings 22:1 – 23:25. Discussions followed with regards to what choices our kids are facing every day, how they learned from the consequences, and what kind of choices they want to make when they go home. The kids opened up in ways that I had never seen before. These are some of the comments:

“I often struggle with the choices of doing homework or hanging out at the park with my friends. When I don’t do homework, my grade suffers and I also suffer. When I go home, I will make a choice to always do homework first.”

“I have to stay in a dorm during the week to attend the job school. I hate the food and environment. I asked my parents to buy me a car to drive to school every day. But I think this is the route I will not choose because my parents do not have much and there are a great deal of expenses associated with owning and driving a car.”

“Sometimes, I feel that God wants to work within me and I kept saying no. I will say yes from now on.”

“I see drugs at school. I will stay away from it.”

“I will not get pregnant at a young age because my parents work so hard to make a living and I want to succeed in life to help others.”

We responded that these good choices are what make us extraordinary. But these are hard choices and it would be extremely difficult to stick to them. How could we do this on our own?

MOVING FROM THE ORDINARY TO THE EXTRAORDINARY IS A BALANCING ACT

Before lunch, we were told to meet at the “Low Ropes” area. The blue team and green team competed in four different activities.

1. The entire team had to stand on a log and the person at one end had to walk to the other end of the log and the same movement was to repeat for the entire group. The young people kept falling off the log. In the end, they held on to each other tight and made it.
2. The entire team had to stand on four squares without any foot touching the ground. The first square was the largest and the subsequent ones decreased in size. The youth had to hold onto one another tight. Some had to climb on top of others to fit in the small squares.
3. Each team member had to get through holes of woven ropes without touching the rope. The hole used cannot be used again. The team had to work hard to get the member through the holes.
4. The team had to catch the member that fell backward with their arms intertwined. It was scary although they knew their friends had their back.

Pastor Larry explained that moving from the ordinary to the extraordinary cannot be done alone. We as human beings look to heaven while having to live in a filthy world. This requires a balancing act. We as Christians have to work together, love one another, and help keep our paths straight. What fun activities, that taught us so much!

After lunch, here came the paint ball fight followed by the zip line! The kids had such fun fighting. One said, "This reminded me of the time when we were running from the Burmese soldiers in the jungle but the only difference is I have a weapon in my hand." Pastor Diamond Han drew some lessons from the game and shared with us. In life, you hear voices calling you to engage in unhealthy habits. Sometimes you need to run, hide, or shoot back. Sometimes you get hurt and have to start all over again. Do whatever necessary to flee from evils!

The zip line was a long-lasting, physically-taxing task for the Tonto Rim staff. For our pastor Tha Hser, a great man of God, it was too much. He could not stand the sight of kids zipping in the air and had to retreat to his cabin. For young people, it was a total blast!

MOVING FROM THE ORDINARY TO THE EXTRAORDINARY IS PERSONAL.

The evening session with Pastor Larry started with the treasure hunt. We ended up back in the memorial hall getting pictures of ourselves. We are treasures to God! To become extraordinary though, we must come to God with an honest heart. Jacob had to admit he was a deceiver. Jacob had to wrestle with God and his hip socket was put out of joint. But that was the beginning of the extraordinary, for Jacob became Israel.

Pastor Larry asked if we were wrestling like Jacob was and that we were to come to the front for him to pray for us. All of the Karen people came to the front. We knelt down and Pastor Larry prayed for each of us. Pastor Larry reminded us that we need to be honest with God. We know who we are although we do not always reveal our true selves to others. We must give our own account to God and let Him do His work within us. God would turn around whatever bad things in our lives to good things for us.

Pastor Larry then asked if anyone would like to invite Jesus into their heart. Eight young people went to the front. One said, "I already invited Jesus, but I want to invite Him again." Among the eight was this young lady whose parents are non-Christians. She was one of those that I had to wait

for the longest to find her misplaced immunization record to help complete her medical form in the middle of the night. She uttered less than three words to me that night. I was amazed! Pastor Larry gave each of them a Bible.

The camp fire followed and the Karen kids had S'mores for the first time ever. My 4-year-old daughter Zoe had to explain to them how to make S'mores because she had them earlier this year. We sang our hearts out. Pastor Larry said we could stay up as long as we wanted but had to keep the noise down after 10 p.m. I almost wish he hadn't said that. After Pastor Larry left, I suggested we sing three more songs and go to bed. It was not a very popular suggestion among the young ones, but those who were in my rank chronologically gave me a look of appreciation.

All day long, I was only able to call home once. Zachary told me how much he missed me and that he wish I was right there with him. He was better but still not well.

Sunday

I felt better Sunday morning. In fact, I was on cloud nine. A few Tonto Rim staff told me that our Karen kids were the best. They were on time. They stayed together. They helped out. Jeremy, Pastor Larry's son, said that the zip line work was easy for them because our kids helped in big ways. I could not help but felt extremely proud of our leadership team and our kids.

Nwe Nwe's daughter thought it would be a great idea to thank the Tonto Rim kitchen crew for feeding us with such good food. She drew a thank-you note and we signed it. Then, the youth said they wanted to sing for the kitchen crew. As I was watching them sing, I could not help but shed a few tears. They are so special to me!

Afterwards, we did a little hiking to the sliding rock place. As I breathed in fresh air and looked around, I found it amusing how these young people could not stop taking pictures of themselves. I noticed how much fun they were having!

In the last session with Pastor Larry, he shared with us his experience in El Salvador. He went there to deliver medical supplies to a little clinic that only had a doctor once a month and a nurse once a week in a remote village with no electricity and running water. On his way to tour the volcanic mountain, he was robbed. The robbers planned to take him for ransom. By the Grace of God, he escaped only with underwear and socks. He was in the news. That created the opportunity for him to reunite with the lady whom his church sponsored to go to school in the US in the 70's. She invited him to her school where he met the president of El Salvador. He revisited the country later and found that the village had electricity, running water, a new clinic with the doctor available at all time, and a nice new school. All the good things happened simply because the president was there. In actuality, God simply turned Pastor Larry's misery into miracles. The lesson learned is that if we are to become extraordinary for God, we must trust that He would always work things out for the best, even turning our worst nightmare into the best things we could never imagine.

Pastor Tha Hser thanked everyone. He said that Pastor Larry and the staff made him feel welcome and that there was neither language barrier nor any boundary between us. Everyone nodded with absolute agreement. We sang a well-wishing song for the hosts. Here, I want to mention the band "Fishers of Men" that led the worship. Those kids are awesome, talented, and friendly. They even

hung out with our kids. As Pastor Ramey would say it, the language of God is love and it was spoken at the Tonto Rim camp.

The last segment of the service was perhaps the most moving for me. Pastor Larry gave everyone Bibles and asked if anyone would like to share their experience at the camp and what decisions they would make once they got home. I told them to speak in Karen as it usually is more meaningful to express oneself in one's own tongue. These are the testimonies:

“I learned about becoming extraordinary for God by making the right decision, helping each other keep a balance, and building a personal relationship with God. All of us can be extraordinary for God. There are no excuses. When I go home, I will try to be more fruitful and encourage others to become extraordinary as well.”

“What a deal we get considering it only costs us \$10! I want to live a better life and create this kind of opportunities for other kids.”

“Here is how this camp changed me. I often got bored in church and started chit-chatting or taking naps in the back row. When I go home, I won't do that anymore.”

“When I was in the camp, we were poor but I felt close to God. Since I have been in the US, I have been struggling in every single way. Making a living is hard. Learning the language and culture and even adapting to the weather has been challenging. I felt like I was drifted away from God. This retreat experience brings me closer to God.”

“I am grateful to God for touching the hearts of all these people to get us here. I thank Pastor Larry and the Tonto Rim staff. They are so friendly and loving. I am thankful for this wonderful experience.”

“I won't nag my parents to buy me a car anymore.”

“I am an American and I have been in camps many times. Coming to the camp with the Karen youth at the Tonto Rim has been the most rewarding”

“I will be honest. I feel very close to God here at the Tonto Rim camp. But I am not sure if I will continue feeling this way when I go home.”

Well, the last comment hit the cord. There is so much work to carry on at our church. Afterwards, the kids volunteered to rake leaves on campus. At 3 p.m., the buses returned and we went home.

THE EXHAUSTION

I don't remember being this tired before and I am not alone.

[Isaiah 40:30](#) – Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted.

THE LESSONS

Roman 8:28 – And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

Isaiah 40:31 – but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

I must admit the task of keeping the momentum for our youth seems daunting. But God always knows what we need and never fails to provide. My camp experience was a testament. When I felt sick and downcast, Nwe Nwe was there. Pat was there. Our leadership team was brilliant. They helped make this retreat a resounding success. I came home and saw Zachary already recovered. My husband cleaned the house and yard. Even my doctor agreed to order antibiotics for my sinus infection without seeing me.

Guess what? Pastor Larry invited us to come on the weekend of May 1 – 3 in 2009 for the Willing Workers Weekend. We can bring as many kids as we want and it will be free. We will volunteer for six hours. He also invited us to sing at the dedication ceremony of the Kerr Recreation Center. Pastor Larry is even willing to hire our young people for summer work. How awesome is that?

Sure! I cannot guarantee I will not groan, moan, yell, or tap someone on the head again. But I will try my best to change. I came home with a renewed spirit. My Karen people, especially my young Karen people, are more special to me than ever. There is much work to continue. Things will be hard. But God always works things out in the best possible ways for those who are obedient and faithful. It was the right decision to leave my sick son and come to the camp. God turned my doldrums into a delightful heart and much more.

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