

## **SENIOR REFLECTIONS + YOUTH SUNDAY + MAY 8, 2016**

### **Katelyn Caswell**

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Katelyn Caswell and I have been part of both the Junior High and Senior High youth groups here at South Church. Next year I will be attending The University of New Hampshire and majoring in Nursing. My experience in youth group has been overwhelmingly positive and enjoyable, and my dedication proven when I was elected as a leader of the Senior High Youth Group my sophomore year. When given this honor, I took it very seriously. With the help of my fellow youth leaders and advisors, we worked hard to ensure we offered a friendly and supportive environment for everyone involved. I am so thankful for the endless opportunities that youth group has provided for me, my favorite being the six mission trips I was able to participate in. I went to Boston, Massachusetts twice while in the Junior High Youth Group, then while in Senior High I went to New Orleans, Louisiana; Pipestem, West Virginia; Ottawa, Canada; and most recently Spartanburg, South Carolina. Each trip I was able to create new memories, each unique to the location and tasks we completed on the trip.

I think the most important way to show God's love for humankind is simply acting how He would want us to act, and to me this means helping each other, persevering, working hard, and being compassionate and welcoming to everyone you meet. Throughout my time in youth group, I grew a lot as a person and learned many things, including how to portray these qualities of someone who wishes to show God's love to everyone wherever I go. When I first entered Senior High Youth Group, I was a quiet and reserved individual. I first experienced God's love on the mission trip to New Orleans, where I was put in a group with almost all upperclassmen whom I didn't know well. They quickly welcomed me into the group and made me feel like I truly belonged. After the first day of the trip, I no longer was afraid, but instead felt their compassion and God's love as I was acquainted with the

group and formed strong connections with each of them. Now four years later, I am a senior, and knew I had to do the same for the new members of the group. I made a point to reach out to them and quickly form friendships to make everyone feel welcome and happy to be on the mission trip.

As I said earlier, I always return home from mission trips with great memories, and I'm excited to share my experiences with my family and friends. I'm sure many of you see the pictures we post and hear our stories, in which we share all the positive and fun moments of the week. However, behind the scenes, there are also frustrations and long, tiring days of hard work. Not to say the work isn't fun, because for the most part it is, but I'm sure any adult can relate and understand that jobs may not be exciting all the time. We don't get to build a house every year and see a clear "before and after" picture of the worksite; sometimes it's simple yard work or serving a lunch in a soup kitchen, and the place doesn't look much different than when we arrived 6 hours prior. Hearing this, you may ask me questions like, "Why do you give up your vacation every year to do this work?" "Why are you okay with accepting the consequences of missing track practice over vacation?" I realize the answer is clear, and it's because I simply love these trips, I am thankful for the opportunities to explore places and meet people I otherwise wouldn't be able to, and I'm passionate about helping others. I know we are showing God's love through all the hard work we do everyday on each trip. The hard work gets done because we persevere and are willing to put in 110% effort to help those in need. It doesn't matter if the work we did was physically demanding and impressive, like dry walling an entire house for someone in New Orleans who lost theirs to Hurricane Katrina, or putting up siding and painting a house with Habitat for Humanity in Spartanburg; or if it was a simple, mindless task, like filling containers with butter and scraping gum off the tables at The Ottawa Mission in Canada, or raking leaves and picking up brush all day at a woman's house in Pipestem. Either way, every job had to be completed. Our desire to help others and our hard work is what got these jobs done, and because of that, we changed the lives of others and spread God's love to everyone we met.

I want to end by thanking everyone who has helped me along this journey. The various ministries and individuals who supported the group both financially and with your prayers; my advisors for volunteering their time to guide us along the way and make everything possible: Spencer, Jocelyn, Carolyn (who was here my freshman and sophomore year), and especially Carlos who I've known for many years and who has been with me for all seven years of my youth group experience; all members of the group, past and present, who I've had the pleasure to work with and form longlasting friendships with; my fellow leaders, past and present, for being so cooperative and helping to plan fun meetings throughout the year; but most importantly, my brother Christopher and my Mom and Dad, who have always been and continue to be my #1 supporters in everything I do and who always encourage me to try new things and show me unconditional love. I am so blessed to have had youth group be such a huge part of my life. Between all the lessons I've learned, the people I've met, and the places I had the privilege to visit and work in, I can confidently say that I would not be who I am today without my youth group. It's still surreal to me that this chapter in my life is officially over, but I am so thankful for the memories that I will cherish forever. So again, thank you!

### **Delaney Collins**

I'm Delaney!

I'll be attending Lesley University's Art Therapy program in 2017, but next year I'm taking a Gap Year to volunteer abroad in Kenya, where I'll be working for an AIDS/HIV clinic and in Nepal, where I'll teach English in a monastery.

So, I guess I should start with my senior reflection. Which is the hard part. Isn't it peculiar, how it's so easy to describe a future you've never lived, but the past that you've experienced moment by moment; can't be grasped by even the slightest exhaustion of words? So I'm not going to talk about the past. I'm going to talk about youth group in the future- when I'm gone.

When I'm gone, they will continue to meet almost every Sunday at 7:00 pm. They will continue to say individually, what the highs and lows of their week were. Sometimes these will take the longest, and sometimes there will be too much laughter, or someone will lose their train of thought and add about 5 extra minutes onto the activity, just because they were trying to remember what day their AP Stats test was. But when someone begins to choke up about how their life isn't going the way they want it to, and they just have to be positive about it; or announce through tearful sobs that their uncle, brother, sister, mother, best friends cousin, or step-father is dying- they will listen. And through the warming embrace of empathetic murmurs, at least one person in that circle will go home feeling more loved than they did on the car drive to the youth space.

When I'm gone, the nights will get dark earlier. And it will get harder and harder to make time to go to youth group. Some people will stay home to finish homework, miserable. And some people won't go so they can hang out with their friends or significant other, distractedly captivated by their love. But those who go- won't regret it.

When I'm gone, there will still be poetry. And it will be beautiful.

When I'm gone, they will still find time to laugh so hard their abdomen screams for more, and hiccups bubble out in between humiliating snorts and a symphony of chortles, chuckles, giggles. They will continue to make spam sculptures, blow bubble gum, and tie themselves into 9 person human knots.

When I'm gone, they will go on mission trips. The van rides will be a bittersweet mixture of misery and comradery. Each day they will wake up too early, and often a little bit dirtier than when they left. They will continue to encompass themselves with insurmountable beauty and crippling pain. They will get carsick on the way to work sights, and fall asleep in sweaty heaps on the way back. By the end of the week they will be tired of peanut butter and jelly, but will have a head full of

change. Changing themselves, each other, their world, their perception, their misconceptions. They will potentially prevent thousands of cases of HIV by picking needles up off of city streets. They will learn how to dance- whether it be from an amputee or from the joy that fills them like sunlight does an empty window.

When I'm gone, they will return with full hearts, partially empty stomachs, and at least 6 new friends. A few of them, might even be special enough to put up with each other outside of youth group, and over lattes and wicker benches, they will help one another more than they will ever know.

When I'm gone, Carlos will save people's lives by making those who feel unlovable, loved. Spencer will inform us to the brink of exhaustion, and then make us laugh enough to persevere through the rest of the day. Jocelyn, well Jocelyn will be gone too, providing patient realism in every realm within she steps, and still with every other step- finding time to laugh.

And when I'm gone, the rest of the youth group will survive. But they will not need to say goodbye. We have a connection that transcends goodbyes and prejudices and electrodes and galaxies and oceans and horizons. Whether they've been to one meeting or 112. Whether they've been on 9 mission trips or 1/2 of one. Whether they're okay or not. I know them. And when I'm gone Youth group will still be a space in which every person is valued for their own obvious or discreet cause. And hopefully, they'll be convinced that they have one. When I'm gone, I will thank the youth group everyday. For inspiring me to grow, and overcome, and love, and value myself enough to keep living, and volunteering, and leading, and learning. And as far as God's place in this, no matter who or what you believe God to be, or if you believe there even is a God, their love is embezzled deep within the roots of this group. And when I'm gone, that presence of unrelenting love, and it's irrefutable effects will stay the same.

So South Congregational Senior High Youth Group, when I'm gone you will survive, and I can only hope, that those of you which I had the pleasure to meet, will miss me half as much as I will miss you.

## **Tom Gullage**

Hello I am Tom Gullage

Throughout my four years in high school, I have had the privilege of going on three youth group mission trips, over the course of those three trips and even here at home, I have come to realize that God's love can be shown in many different ways, whether it's giving someone a place to stay; like the homeless shelter. or even just having a conversation with someone who might need to talk, we can show God's love.

When thinking about this, one trip that stood out to me was my freshman year trip to New Orleans, we were split into two groups and worked on two separate houses. The house I was working on was moving right along, and we got the privilege of hanging sheetrock. Now this isn't necessarily a "fun" task, when Mr. Glen the homeowner showed up late the first day, or maybe it was early the second day. anyways, we were still hard at work with the sheetrock, and he wanted it to be known how much the work we were doing really meant to him. This really stood out to me because I realized that God's love could be showed in ways that I had never even thought of before, like hanging sheetrock.

This year's trip stood out to me as well, the first two mission trips I went on, we were at the same place the whole week, this year it was very different and We went to a few. The first day was spent at the Spartanburg soup kitchen, now when someone says they're going volunteer at a soup kitchen you think, oh they're going to serve food, well

That's what I thought too, I COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE WRONG, I'm just kidding, but I didn't spend the day serving food, I was washing dishes and taking out

the trash, but in doing so, I once again saw how we can show God's love in many ways, even taking out the trash. We also spent a couple days at Mobile Meals, and what they do is have volunteers deliver meals around the county. Now, they give you pretty easy to follow directions to get to each house, and as easy as they were to follow, We somehow managed to drive about 2 miles past a few of these houses, a lot of people complained that this was navigator error but I would beg to differ, as I was the navigator. That aside this was very different because you get to see a lot of people and how it makes each person feel when you deliver them a meal that they may otherwise not have had, due to any number of reasons. health, ability to cook etc. so once again, we see God's love in different ways, even getting lost.

So, that said, I would like to thank Carlos, Spencer, Jocelyn, and Carolyn wherever she is for these four great years of youth group, I appreciate everything you've done for me as well as the rest of the group. So, wherever you are, whatever you're doing. Hang some Sheetrock, Take out the trash, Get lost. However you want to do it, show God's love. \*mic drop

## **Jonathan Osborne**

What does it look like when we show God's love?

Four years ago in the fall, I went to my first Confirmation meeting because my mom asked me to do it. At the time I had serious doubts in my belief in God and my willingness to sacrifice my Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings, so I was seriously considering just having nothing to do with the whole thing, but my mom convinced me otherwise. So I went to my first confirmation meeting a little skeptical, not entirely sure if I hadn't just made a mistake. But by the end of that meeting, I was just wishing for the next one. And by this time four years ago, I was waist deep in Turkey Pond at the Arndt's house at the ungodly hour of 6:30am

being dunked by Jed and Bruce.

What I find truly special about that moment is not that I had gone from not wanting to be a part of Confirmation to being baptized in less than 9 months or even that I was up that early. What I find special is that my confirmation class and several members of the church were there with me. They were out there at one of the most inconvenient times of the day to support me just like my mother and father, except that unlike my parents they didn't have any familial obligation. Quite frankly, I don't know why they were there, but it didn't matter to me then and it still doesn't matter to me now. Seeing my friends and the members of the congregation smiling and clapping as I emerged from the frigid water for the last time gave me a feeling of warmth when literally all I felt was cold. It was for moments like that that I decided to be baptized, and not because I felt at all certain about my belief in God. My beliefs are something I still wrestle with today, and I suspect I will continue to do so for some time. I became baptized to be more a part of this community, a community that supports unconditionally. Since my freshman year, this community has given me a lot. It's given me guidance in the form of Jed and Carlos, who have provided me with advice whenever I have asked. It's allowed me to connect with people and foster relationships where I would not have been able to otherwise. It has given me a stress free environment to relax on Sunday nights when I'm often at my most stressed. It has given me a mission trip's worth of memories that I will never forget. And it has given me a viola, which will accompany me to college next year. These are all valuable gifts that I am very thankful for, and that no amount of leaf

raking in the fall could possibly pay for.

I can't answer the question that I was given to write this essay, because in my eighteen years I don't think I've had the time or the emotional capacity to do something which truly exhibits God's love. But while I may not know what it looks like to show God's love, I do know what it looks like to receive it because I've seen it in everything this community has given me. God's love looks like all of you.

### **Marta Austin Rardin**

Over the past couple of years, I have been taking yoga on and off at the Audubon. We begin and end each class the same way: by saying, "*Namaste*." *Namaste* is much deeper than a greeting; as my teacher Karen Kenney would say, "The light, the love, the divinity in me greets, acknowledges, bows to, the light, the love, the divinity in you." By saying *Namaste*, we learn to acknowledge and recognize the divinity, the powerful piece of God, in every single one of us.

We show God's love when we finally recognize each other for fellow creatures of God. We show our love when we see past all of the political, social, and economic barriers that mask us, that shroud us, and turn us into things we are not. Just last week on our mission trip in South Carolina, a stranger recognized the love in me, though he had never met me in his life.

A few of us had the privilege of working at a soup kitchen, helping a woman named Miss Ruth organize boxes of frozen meat to be repacked into their freezer. To say the least, this was not a well organized task, but we got it done in the end, thanks to Julianna's terrific help, as well as Katelyn, Izzy, and Spencer's. There was a man helping to load the organized boxes into the freezer, and he was incredibly impressed by the fact that I could lift the heavy boxes. He eventually became so impressed he said "Girl, you're so strong I'm going to call you Hercules!" I was very flattered of course, but also extremely touched and grateful. This man, who I'd

known for all of 20 minutes, picked up on a very key characteristic of who I am: I am strong, both physically and mentally, and am always determined to jump into work and get the task done. There in that soup kitchen, I was showing my bit of God's love by just being me. There was nothing to mask me—not my white skin, not my “educated sounding” New England dialect, not my affluence—I was showing them God's love by meeting their task wholeheartedly and doing my best to complete it. The man had enough insight to recognize *me* in my love, and therefore I could recognize him. Thereafter I felt comfortable, like we had built some strong connection, even though I am not sure I ever even learned his name.

When we show God's love, we break down those walls and barriers that divide us. When we recognize the divinity in strangers, it makes them seem much less strange. Often times as Northerners, we think we don't have the accent—the Southerners do, and therefore we will be the ones who won't understand them, as if our dialect is much clearer than theirs. *But it goes both ways.* I was struck to find out that sometimes, they can't understand *us*. Showing God's love helps us learn; don't let those barriers keep you from knowing each other; don't let the color of their skin or their accent or their occupation shroud them; don't let those things blind you. For, as Shakespeare very eloquently wrote, “Through tattered clothes small vices do appear. / Robes and furred gowns hide all.” God's love breaks through everything. So don't hide your love, because when you show it, you'll be surprised to find how quickly strangers can become friends.

So now, Congregation, I say “*Namaste*” to you. I acknowledge and bow to the goodness, the divinity in each one of you, and thank you all for enhancing, cherishing, and supporting the love in me all of these years. When I say that this church has been my family, I mean it. So, ***Namaste.***