

My Mission Trip Reflection Mon Valley 2009

I know I am one of the last to write the reflection but I took my time not because I did not know what to write but because so much happened I did not know where to start or what to share. Every one who knows me would agree with the fact that I love traveling, going to new places, meeting new people and learning not just from theory but from life experience. Therefore, every year I am very excited about the Mission Trip and this year was no different. Pennsylvania, Mon Valley sounded very interesting – I simply knew that as a participant as well as a chaperon I would experience something special.

As a one of the participants I was able to spend some time and get to know people of Mon Valley. I was able to help them at least a little bit through “kids club” and work projects. I was able to do something good for others without expecting anything in return – no calculation – just out of pure love and it felt so good – it felt so right – if only I could live that way for the remaining 51 weeks of the year.

As a chaperon I was able to get to know and spend more time with our teens from TNT. Caring and making sure they are safe I was able to observe and learn a lot from them. It was so nice to see people just wanting to do something good for others – playing with children for hours in 90 degree heat, or working physically for no pay - out of good heart, just to help those who are less fortunate. It was so uplifting and inspiring.

There are day when I ask myself – as a Christian what does it really mean to follow the example of Jesus? – What does it mean to truly love one another? – What does it mean to live according to the gospel? - And than, I think about the times like mission trip to find my answer and recall the theme of this year from St. Paul’s letter to Galatians 6:9-10: *“Let us not grow tired of doing good, so then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all.”*

This was my third trip – they are all so similar, yet at the same time so different from each other. Those trips are often more life changing and impacting for participants than those you go to serve; I knew that I was not going there just to help others but more immortally to help myself, I was not going there to change others but to be changed, and it really happened. I am thankful to God for this opportunity and experience.

I don’t know were we are going next year but I am already excited – sign me up Mr. P.

The mision trip '09 was so spiritual. It helped me grow in my faith. Going to Mon Valley, PA, was a bit frightening for me. Because of all the crime and drugs. The prayer walk really devastated me. When we were at the first stop behind the wall, it made me realize that the kids that were going to kids club see this crime everyday. Then, going to see highland manor and to play with the kids just sadden me. And made my heart cry. They go to kids club to get away from all the hatred and evil. But even getting away for 2 hours is not enough. The kids always wanted to be held or played with. They wanted to be loved. When it was work day, my group went to Park manor.

We did not know what to expect or what we were going to do, We ended up putting 500 yards of mulch down at the park both days. It was very hard labor. But the kids came out and wanted to help us. It was so sweet seeing the kids actually want to help and pull weeds. At the end of the day the park looked amazing at the kids loved it! The last day was hard because I didn't want to leave the kids. I wanted to take them home with me. But I know that I helped some kid love Jesus more while I was in Mon Valley. Mon Valley was a great trip. I am so glad that I can touch a kid's heart because of the trip and the good deeds we did together!

Mary Kate Enright

Scott Resman

As I'm writing this, I find myself alone at my dinner table, parents out to dinner, brothers downstairs playing games; home sweet home. I miss the noise of the youth works center and the crazy singing of the meeting room. Now that I'm back at my house I'm thankful for my queen-sized bed, but my heart hurts for Mon Valley and the community we built. I have been lucky enough to do a lot of traveling in my life, but I have never had the privilege to experience what I have just returned from. It seems as if TNT has unlimited love to give that spills over to touch every person we meet or encounter. Like a kid is addicted to candy, I think TNT is addicted to service. It's like we can't get enough, and I think it is that attitude that makes it possible for such an amazing community to form in the face of such devastation. When you ask someone to grab a soda for you, they actually say, "Yeah, sure." instead of the usual, "Get it yourself!" When you ask someone to listen, you know that they'll put everything else down until you finish what you have to say. These wonderful people encourage me to do my work with much more enthusiasm and give me a little hope for this crazy world we are about to face. I hope that we can be an example for a better, more loving world in the future. Thanks for everything guys; keep up the good work!

Reflection

How has thing reflection changed.....

Your understanding of God?

On the mission trip I learned that God works through other people, and that he keeps us all on a leash so that we don't stray to far from him and his love.

Your understanding of yourself and others?

On the trip many kids went that I had never talked to or met, but after the first day I was there, I learned that these kids, unlike ones in my school, will talk to you freely like they've been your friends for years, and are compassionate and share my same interests.

Your view of the world?

As I said before, I learned that God works through other people. I believe God wanted our church, as well as myself, to go to a place like Mon Valley, to help the community become a safer place by interacting with its residents and saying prayers.

What have you learned about responding to the needs of others?

That God wants us to help everybody, no matter what they look like or how they act. God gave them life and gave it to them for a reason and so we, as children of God, need to lend a helping hand at times.

What are some small things that you can do to keep what you've learned fresh in your mind?

Think about the people at Mon Valley, and how they lent us a hand when we didn't even ask them too, and think about the friends and people I've met there, seeing how they were always willing to help everyone.

What or who made the biggest impact on you?

A lot of people and things made impacts on me and the way I think/look at things. The counselors who worked there for sure, especially Ashley, with her speeches and how she said them so openly, so that we could all find the meaning on what she was saying. Also the church, were everyone was so spiritual and open to loving God.

What surprised you about Mon Valley?

That there were a lot of kids, and how there had been shootings and other stuff like that, and how when we went on our prayer walk we learned that some famous people had once lived there. Also, most of the people were willing to help us when we did stuff like mulch the playground to make it safe for the kids, and some of the kids even helped us.

How do you think God will use this trip to shape your future?

I think that now I've been on this trip, I'll probably make a lot of decisions differently than I would have if I didn't go on this trip, or any other mission trip to help me understand how God works. I'll always be open to helping people, whether I like the

person or not, if they really need it. I also saw how people like the ones in Mon Valley live, so I will try not to waste food, water, and money on stuff I don't need.

What did you enjoy the most?

Being able to go somewhere where I could make an impact on people, and help make their lives happier and safer. Plus meeting new people is always a good thing.

What did you learn about the people in the community?

That some appreciate what we do for them, and that they will openly come out and give us a hand.

Who/what do you specifically want to pray for after you return home?

I prayed for all the people who live there, especially the kids; that they'd be able to live there safe and happy, and maybe one day move out to a safer neighborhood and get a good job and live their lives to the fullest.

What did you learn about yourself this week?

That when I'm out there working to help make other peoples lives safer I don't think about myself as selfishly and I'm open to lend a hand when needed.

What new things did you learn about God?

That he wants us to be happy and love our lives and how he made us, and that he keeps us all on a leash so we don't stray to far and begin to resent him and his teachings, so he can always call us back when he needs to.

Are you a different person?

I'd say so, because I think about things differently and see people differently.

How will you continue on this journey?

Stay close to God and thank him, for even the little things, and help people whenever I get the chance to.

Colin Nolan

Mon Valley Reflection

Going into the Mon Valley trip, I was somewhat skeptical of how the experience would be for me. I had always enjoyed and was deeply rewarded from these trips when I did them back in high school. But this would be a whole new book. I did not know what to expect of being a chaperone so I set out to be a role model for the teens of the group. What I got from the trip far surpasses what I set out for.

From the first day, I was really able to see how the teens of the group were never afraid or complacent when it came to serving our father and his people. The teens worked with elderly residents, children who had nothing more than the clothes on their body, shoveled 100,000 tons* of mulch, and painted room after room at their sites. Their passion and desire to serve and get the most out of the mission experience always shined like a beacon for those around.

Outside of the interactive part of the mission experience, the teens really seemed to get involved in the devotions, activities, and prayer. The culminating event for the week was a service in a local church. It took no more than a minute for the teens to get into the service, rejoicing, singing, and praising God with a dozen members of the community. It was clear to me that these teens really are the hope of our world.

Upon returning home everyone went their separate ways. Chaperones returned to work, teens returned to their summer lives. But one thing is certain, not one of them will ever forget what they saw, experienced, or partook in at Mon Valley this year.

Mission Trip Reflection

The mission trip to Mon Valley, Pennsylvania is an experience I will never forget. The things I saw and the people I met made a great impact on the way I now look at the world. While in Mon Valley, I did many things that helped me to understand God. I realized that God is always there, even when you think that the world is falling apart. He is there with you, to guide you through rough times and to help you understand why things might not be playing out the way you would like them to. I think that this has made me have a stronger relationship with God and all of the amazing things He can do.

The people within the community of Mon Valley are wonderful people who I will always remember. They are some of the nicest people I will ever know, like Captain Amanda from the Salvation Army. Their positive attitudes made me want to do more to help anyone who needed it. I could tell that they really wanted to work for the better of their community and being a part of something so fulfilling made me so incredibly happy. Most of all, the children that I got to play with and talk to at Kids Club were so sweet and kind that I didn't want to leave them. I wanted to stay forever so I could talk with them and be their friend, not because they were underprivileged, but because deep down they wanted to help get their community back on its feet as much as I did and probably more. Seeing their faces made me want to cry with sadness, but mostly happiness. They just gave me a little more understanding as to why I was there and what my purpose was. I will never, throughout my whole life, forget them and the ways in which they changed me as a person who serves God.

One of my favorite parts about the whole trip was the prayer walk. It was the point in the trip where I realized where I was and what I needed to do. It was definitely shocking to listen to Nick and Jimmy telling some of the awful incidents that have happened in their own town.

Ana Plefka

Hearing all of the terrible stories of the violence that has gone on and is still going on within the community really opened my eyes. It opened my eyes to the reality of Mon Valley and the entire world. It made me hope with everything I had in me that the people living there would find a way to push through the violence that surrounded them. I wanted every single person living there to see what was happening through a new light and try to do something about it. It made me hope that the children that I spent time with would grow up on a different path than the others who got caught up in violence and drugs. And it made me wish that the people who already were involved in these horrible things would find God and start a new way of living. As I prayed for everyone and everything going on in this broken community, I felt that what I was doing could really make a difference.

Another great part of the mission trip was going to the Baptist church service. It felt like a whole new way to express my feelings about God. It was something that was totally different than what I was used to. It was very nice not having to worry about being quiet in church. It was one of those great experiences that I am very glad I took part in.

Overall, this trip has impacted me in many ways. I definitely understand how I can serve God better throughout my life. I also know that no matter what happens, God will be there, helping you to rise back up when you fall down. The people I have met from the community, the other church, and St Julie's have influenced me in so many great ways. I will do my best to serve others to the best of my ability. I know that God will help me to continue this path of helping others for the better of a community or one person. I learned that anything you can do to help anyone is something great. Even if you may not think that you are doing something wonderful, someone will be benefited from it. The mission trip to Mon Valley is something that gave me a



Ana Piefka

sense of satisfaction that kept on coming even after I left. I am looking forward to going on another mission trip next year!

One of my elderly neighbors was born in Monessen, Pennsylvania, just outside of Mon Valley where we were stationed. She visited Mon Valley frequently, and her husband swam across the Monongahela River, the main river in Mon Valley, for exercise while he was a teen. When I told her I was going to Mon Valley for a mission trip, she told me all of this, and how good the town was when she grew up there. She also mentioned how bad the town had decayed over the years that she had not been there. After the trip, I told her what I did, and she was moved about how much TNT and YouthWorks helped her neighboring home town.

I was moved by this trip also, by realizing how lucky we are to live in such good conditions without everything that Mon Valley had to experience everyday. I think that Mon Valley will continue to get better, despite the bad conditions right now. It is getting better, and I think YouthWorks constant work helped immensely. It is in a better condition than Cairo Illinois, where last mission trip was, but it still needs help. I think that in about ten or twenty years, the town will once again be a good place to reside, and it will become a prosperous town like most of America. God's work is evident in this town, and I hope through the work of teens all over the country with the help of God, this town will once again prosper.

Hey Plucar Clan:
(Aunt Sheila, Uncle Ed, Kelly,
and Annie.)

I just wanted to thank
you for everything you did
for me on this mission trip.
I had so much fun. It really
meant a lot to me!
Thanks again!

♡XoXo Kelly

My Reflection-
Keely O'Donnell

This being my first mission trip, almost everything I did in Monessen was a new experience. Before this mission trip I did not even know that Monessen existed- let alone it needed so much help. On the trip down to Monessen I remember looking out the window and seeing all of the rolling green hills of Pennsylvania and wondering how much help this town really needed. Then we drove passed the old steel factory, and that summed it up for me. Empty. It was the perfect symbol of Monessen, or so I thought. But soon our first day of work was standing in front of me, and I began to realize that Monessen was far from empty.

The armpits first two days of work began at kids club. Now in all honesty I never really considered my self a "little kid person", despite hanging around my tens of thousands of little cousins. But these kids didn't care one bit. As Alyssa told us and as they showed us, all these little boys and girls wanted, was to be loved. That's it. Just to be loved. That to me was incredibly touching. It was amazing to just stand back and watch, for even just one minute, everyone purely loving. We would give up just about anything to make the kids happy, get covered in chalk, play four-square for hours on end, teach them how to make friendship bracelets, do whatever. But what you got from them, for just one second of your time was unbelievable. And in return you just wanted to give them the best two days of their life.

The armpits second two days of work was at Highland Manor (I'm not sure how to spell that, sorry.) We spent those two days working on two houses and fifty-thousand tons of mulch (haha you had to be there.) When we pulled into Highland Manor, and we all piled out of the van, all the kids came out of the houses and ran over to say hello. Just by doing that, the kids made you feel welcome in the community. And as we were painted one of the houses, two of the women from the community were in there painting as well, and they were talking about how much Youth Works and all of their volunteers have helped the community so much. And for me being there listening to that conversation, and helping change a community for the better made you feel so blessed, to have an opportunity like that because making people happy is the greatest thing on earth.

Besides having a great time working in the community the people I met from St. Julies were amazing. From the second I arrived at the rest station until the second I drove away from one. One of my favorite experiences with all of them was when we were shoveling mulch with the armpits. I don't think that anyone was really excited to shovel mulch in the hot sun for a couple hours, but as soon as we were all out there with our four shovels and four rake, and two trash cans we borrowed, I know that I have never had more fun shoveling *anything* in my life. Time really flies when you're having fun. That was really how the mission trip went for me; the five days that we were there went so fast.

I really want to thank all of you at St. Julies, especially you, Aunt Shelia, Uncle Ed, Kelly, and Annie, for thinking of me when you decided to go on the mission trip, I was so happy you invited me. And as we did the prayer walk through Monessen and saw how far the town has come since its bad days, I saw too, how far I, and everyone else has come, thanks to a small town on the comeback, Monessen, the town full of love.

Freedom. As a teenager in our society, I have found that freedom is a coveted right. During this time in my life, I will gain the freedom to drive, earn and spend my own money, stay out later, and many other privileges that signal coming of age. However, most of these benefits are materialistic in nature. What I didn't realize until this summer is that I also have the freedom to serve and make a difference in the lives of others. In June, a mission trip was sponsored by a neighboring parish, and I decided to venture to Monesson, Pennsylvania to help those less fortunate. Originally, I joined the trip to step out of my comfort zone, and to make new friends. I anticipated helping others, but thought that the trip would be more social than anything. This journey was not what I had expected: I learned about myself and about what I can do to change the world. This may be a cliché statement, but I truly realized that I have the freedom to control my life and positively impact others. In Mon Valley, which is about thirty miles outside of Pittsburgh, we were told that two days would be spent running a Kid's Club and the other two would be spent on a work site in the community. Each night, we would discuss the events of the day and also come together for inspirational speeches. I spent my first two days serving with the young children of the community. They were not shown the love that I am accustomed to every day; many of them did not have stability in their home life and therefore depended upon us to provide them with love and friendship. Each child wished to become your "buddy", and didn't want to share you with the others. I held little children all day and played with them constantly, and what struck me the most was their love and compassion that never wavered. They depended on us to care for them for three hours, but it was never a burden. Their desire to be loved inspired me to show the utmost compassion, and I honestly respected and admired them. Although many of the children lived in subsidized housing units and had very few of the things that I consider necessities, they still looked forward to every day and displayed optimism; their joy overflowed at the simplest pleasures. It was in looking at the

happiness on their faces that I decided that the freedom to serve was undoubtedly the greatest freedom that I could ever be given. When I heard the giggles of the toddlers, I instinctively knew that nothing could compare to helping those who have little support to form relationships and realize that many people, even mere strangers, care for them. This is certainly not limited to helping those in communities located hours away. There is so much that can be done to serve locally. I can choose to use freedom not just to help myself but also to help others. With age comes greater opportunities, and I hope to use this as a privilege to make a difference. Who wouldn't want this freedom?

Deirdre Rudolph

MonValley 2009

Where are you going? MonValley. Where is MonValley? Pennsylvania was the best answer.....just outside of Pittsburgh.

At our first leader meeting, they asked what our expectations were. I answered that I've learned not to come with any on any trip or retreat and if you do that, you tend to be quite surprised by the outcome. Most other answers centered around what was expected of the teens, etc. "I hope they grow in their faith, leave their comfort zone, meet new friends, etc"

Interestingly though, being human, our expectations seem to rise and fall on the shoulders of others. We allow what others do, say or "put out there" affect us and how we live our lives. This happens not only on trips but in our daily lives. We spend a lot of time worrying about what others think instead of just being who we are, who God created us to be and doing what we know to be the right thing to do.

On Tuesday night we were led on a prayer walk by two young men who were once in a gang. They took us to several places where some incredibly violent things had happened in the past and we prayed that peace would come to this town and its beautiful residents so no one would suffer like that again. We saw rows of homes that were once the talk of the social scene, everyone who was anyone in the area wanted to live there. Now they are boarded up and crumbling down. Some folks have tried valiantly to repair and rejuvenate the neighborhood. It is a very slow process. We prayed that more people would soon join them in their quest for a growing and vibrant population.

However one distinction on this prayer walk was that the first group that went out was met with friendly faces and a warm welcome to those we met along the way. The second group at one point was met by a man who was not so welcoming. He expressed his anger and said that instead of walking around we should be doing more work to help the area. He was likely more frustrated than angry with us. Who wouldn't be living like that day after day? And he didn't have any idea of the work that we had been doing, all he saw was some people walking through his neighborhood.

Later that night during our church time one teen spoke up and said "I know the second group didn't have the best prayer walk experience, but I want you to know that a man came up to us earlier today and thanked us for coming here and for what we were doing and said we were doing a great job!" "I just thought you should all know that."

At our Mission Lock-In we talked about a lot of things but in one room in particular was the idea of "Love". Can we love too much? Do we throw the word around too much? What does it mean to really love someone? Do we tell the people that we should that we love them? Or just the easy ones? Who is easy to love? Who is the hardest person in our life to love?

It's easy to go to another state and love those we are serving and come home after a week and feel good about ourselves. Is that what God's plan is all about? Do a good deed and you're done?

Hardly. After all, if we can help cook breakfast or dinner for over 70 people, surely it must be easier to make breakfast or dinner for our family once in awhile. And working with the kids at Kids Club, it's fun to meet new kids, play games, make crafts, sing songs, do skits, etc but how much time do we willingly spend with the younger kids in our families or neighborhood?

And much to my personal amazement, there were actually teens who cleaned a toilet / urinal for the first time in their life! Dishes too! Parents, they did a great job! Keep them practicing at home!!! :)

At the Lock-In, we didn't have a concrete answer for the question if we can ever love too much. I think it depends on the ways we choose to share our love. Perhaps it's not just saying the words that gives it meaning, I think our faith calls us to fill our words with substance and good works. That same night we wrote the name on the back of a heart of someone who we wanted to really try to "love" more. Do you remember whose name you wrote down?

I hope we have all made an effort to do that. I hope spending a week in MonValley opened our eyes to the possibility of how easy it is to love. Sometimes, it starts at home but each and every time, *with God's help, it begins with us.*

Who do you love?

Mrs. Pluchar :)

PS. My Small Group Rocked! Thank you for an amazing week.

Mission Trip 2009 Reflection

This was my first mission trip with the church and it was amazing. It helped me as a person and showed me that I'm not the only person with problems. I liked the experiences that I had there as well.

The first few days up there let me hang out with the kids and learn about their lives and what they go through everyday. I made some close friends that were almost like brothers to me. Their names were Andre and Kesean, both were very close seeing as they were brothers and they looked out for each other. I spent a lot of time with them because we all got along well because I'm still in touch with the kid inside me and would talk with them about different kids television shows like power rangers and yugioh and talk about games that I play on different video game systems that they have either played only once or twice or only heard of. When I hang out with some of the other kids, I felt like I was helping them just by giving them something to do instead of staying home all day. By talking to them, I found out that they had had a hard life like I did because of problems in their family and in their neighborhood. They told me that they had been bullied a lot and gotten into fights because they wouldn't give up. These brothers showed me how strong people can be when they can work together to try and accomplish one goal.

Another thing that helped me change was hanging out with the older boys like Nick and Desmond. They told me about the gangs and things out there and explained to me how they were able to get through it. They helped me see that no matter what the obstacle, you can overcome it with hard work and determination. They were great guys to be around especially because the little kids all respected and listened to them when they

said something. But they also showed us around the community and showed how the community pulled through all the hard times that they had had throughout the years.

The last thing that helped me change were the people that were around me all week long from youthworks and the churches. The people from youthworks helped me by getting me more involved with God during the week. I also hung out with them and they let me talk about my problems and they helped me find solutions that actually worked when I tried them out. They also gave me someone to look up to and something to look forward to. I looked up to them because they are great people and they went through things that were either similar or worse to my own experiences in life. The people from the other churches gave me people to talk to at night and during the day when I was a little down. I met people that were really cool and caring and that showed me friendship right off the bat. The first time I saw this was when they came out and offered to help us carry our bags up to the rooms even though they had no idea who we were. I got along with them right away and they helped me to enjoy my week in Mon Valley, Pennsylvania.

All in all, the trip was a great experience for me and it helped me see a sides of myself that I haven't seen before or haven't seen in a long time. With everything that happened that week, I was influenced to look to God more. I also saw that I had places to go when I was down. Because of this trip, I will probably try to get more involved in the TNT group. I will also definitely be going on more church trips through the years. So the big picture is that this trip was a life changer for me in so many ways and I hope to be apart of so many more trips and events with the church.

Anne Pluchar's Mon Valley Reflection

As my second Mission Trip, I didn't want to go in with any expectations. I'm glad I didn't. Being open to new experiences makes them so much better. That's one of my favorite and one of the most important elements of Mission. It's going to be like nothing you've ever done before, and you shouldn't think otherwise.

At the Salvation Army, we got to sort out donations for a community giveaway. Really, I think it was more than that. Captain Amanda was so happy to have any help at all. It felt good to be able to do something, anything, for a group we see standing outside Jewel in freezing temperatures asking for spare change. They don't take anything for granted, like sorting out make up or separating the St. Patrick's Day decorations from the Christmas ones, and it's about time we learned to do the same. Isn't that part of Mission?

The next part of the trip was Kid's Club. I love working with kids and this is a fantastic opportunity to get to know the community better. They love coming and doing anything with us. Playing kickball, making up rules in Sorry, or teaching us how to shoot hoops, they love it all. There's nothing like one of them asking you to be their buddy. For some of them, this is the only place they can come to learn about God and have fun while they do it. It's a safe haven for them and I love being a part of it.

There's more to it than helping the town though. We also help ourselves. Mission Trips are on a whole new level than anything else we do with church. The intensity of a whole week to focus on our faith affects everyone. There's something about the songs at Club that makes everyone sing along. Half the room doesn't know each other and yet we still come together to sing about God. It falls just short of a miracle.

God works in so many ways, you can't go in expecting anything. He's there in the 'thank you' of a grateful person, or in the smile of a little kid, or in the hand of a friend you hold as you sing out loud. We can't predict where we'll find God. We shouldn't go in with any expectations.