Ava M. Sherer

Christian Life Church, located in Columbia, South Carolina has multiple community outreach programs with which I am actively engaged. Last summer I was encouraged by my youth pastor to join a ministry team on a mission trip to serve the local community at a children's summer camp. Circle J is a vacation bible school for indigent children in Central Florida. I had no idea how to prepare myself. Most of the kids grew up without a church home and they did not know Jesus, so this camp was likely going to be the first time they had ever heard the Gospel. Despite all of that, I was apprehensive. The thought of working with kids I did not know caused me anxiety, but I surprised my pastor, my family, and even myself. I joined the team and headed to Florida.

The trip began with a seven-hour drive to Lakeland, Florida. The days started early as I was assigned to the transportation team. That meant I was with the children more than anyone else. We picked up kids from their homes on buses, took them to the host church, and then returned them to their homes at the end of the day. We were the first people at the church, and the last to leave. It was a demanding schedule. During camp, the kids watched shows that taught them about Jesus, played games, sang songs and we served them lunch. There were about 36 kids in my group, and all of them had some type of discipline issue. As the camp progressed through the week, I found myself starting to connect with my kids more and more. They started to call me by my name, asking me to sit and play with them. I was surprised to find myself really enjoying my time with them. On the final day of camp, the pastor asked the kids if they wanted to accept Jesus into their hearts. As a volunteer, I was asked to pray with some kids who had come forward for prayer. Multiple little girls came up to me and I prayed with them, but one girl named Harmony crawled in my arms crying. She asked me to pray for her to “be kind like

Jesus." As I was praying for her, she began to sing "Oh happy day, happy day, how you washed my sins away." Those lyrics were from a song we had sung daily the past week, but I never thought they would stick with any of the kids. I had helped to make a difference in the lives of these children.

In addition to youth mission trips, I serve locally through Show Some Love. We help those in the Columbia area communities who are less fortunate with food banks, car washes, mowing and cleaning up yards, and building handicap ramps for the home-bound or elderly. These services have not only benefited those we served but the experiences have taught me empathy, and kindness and given me an enormous sense of pride for my community. This outreach program has taught me that there are many families in my local community that have fewer resources and options and without assistance, they could go hungry or not have shelter.

Another area I have served my local community is teaching gymnastics to children. The sport of competitive gymnastics is relentless, exhausting, and exhilarating. It has molded me as a person and was a major part of my life as a young child. I spent countless hours in the gym strengthening my body, honing my skills, and pushing hard to be a better version of myself every day. Gymnastics has taught me many things and helped me grow as a person. I learned how hard I am willing to work to achieve a goal. I am disciplined and I learned how to take care of myself physically and mentally. And now I share the sport with children in my local gym as a coach.

The children at the gym are young and full of Olympic dreams. As a volunteer coach, I am tasked with teaching proper form and technique, while instilling an early love for the sport through play and engagement. The children range in age, skill level, and work ethic. Many of the children in the program are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The gym allows the children a

safe place to play, use their imagination, and practice new skills. It is so motivating to have kids come in for practice and show me how much they have worked at home to master a new skill, like a cartwheel or handstand. I am reminded daily that these kids need cheerleaders because they may not have one at home. This realization has broken my heart and made me tender to them when they have a bad day or are disruptive in class. There are many days I leave the gym wondering if I learned more from the kids than they did from me. It is incredibly rewarding.

The joy I experienced in serving others with my youth group at camp and in the community, as well as teaching children's gymnastics has put me on a career path pursuing a degree in exercise science at Clemson University. With this degree, I can continue to serve my community through healthcare, rehabilitation, and healthy living.