

Beyond Our Doors: A Testimonial

From the Bible: Isaiah 58:10-12

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Paul Alcorn

Let me tell you a story.

About Bedford Presbyterian Church.

Which means it is also a story about you and me.

Ten or so years ago, the committee responsible for raising funds to help maintain the church decided it was not enough to just raise money for a building...even as beautiful and as significant and meaningful as this building is. They believed that if we were to be true to who we were and what we believed some of the money raised should be for the work we do in the communities around us. So, they decided that 25% of any money they raised would be set aside for something beyond our doors. That practice continued with our most recent Capital Campaign which, in contributions and pledges, has raised around \$1,000,000 which means, when all the funds are accounted for, \$250,000 will be earmarked for work in the community. Some of that money has already been allocated and distributed. To help the Emergency Shelter Partnership purchase a new bus. To Holmes Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center for needed improvements so they can better serve those who use that wonderful facility. To the Westchester Youth Alliance to help them sustain their interfaith youth program.

But, all of that is background for this.

The story I would like to share with you this morning.

Three and half years ago, we became aware of a young man who had the dream of going to college, but whose family insisted that when he finished high school he go to work to earn money for the family. When he continued to insist on college, he suddenly found himself without a place to live. Some of you already know this part of the story. Kim Lapple and Michelle Gosh, members of our congregation, adopted Kevin Tejada instantly becoming parents of an 18 year old. As college acceptance letters came in, Kevin received an acceptance to Bates College in Maine. On top of that he received a full scholarship. That spring, as Kevin moved towards graduation and getting ready to head off to college, we/BPC raised additional funds to help cover some of those other expenses related to going off to college that were not covered by his scholarship. Kevin is now completing his Junior year.

But, as wonderful as that story is...

And, it is wonderful.

It also proved to be a bit unsettling.

As we got to know Kevin, we began to realize there must be other students like him.

Young men and young women who had the academic credentials and who dreamed of going to college, but who, because of background or income, found that dream impossible to achieve.

So, once Kevin headed off to college, we began a conversation with others in the community.

Were there other students like Kevin?

And, if so how many?

And, could something be done to help transform their dreams into reality?

The answers, we discovered, were: Yes. Lots. And, yes.

Yes. There were other students like Kevin.
Many other students like Kevin.
And, yes. There was something we could do to help.

Remember that money we set aside for something beyond our doors?

We took \$50,000 of that money and said:

Here is seed money.

Let us figure out what we can do.

What emerged from a year long conversation was the *Rewarding Potential Scholarship*, a four year scholarship, whose mission is to meet the gap between the cost of college and what colleges and universities offer in financial aid for students who meet the academic and financial criteria.

In 2015, 30 students applied for the scholarship.

We were able to offer annual scholarships totaling nearly \$20,000 per year to three students.

This year nearly 50 students applied.

We are providing \$26,000 in annual scholarships for four students who will be headed off to college in the fall.

And, because most of these students are the first in their family to go to college and, in some cases, the first in their family to graduate from high school, we also make sure each of these students is connected to a mentor. An adult from the congregation or the community who will be a friend/resource/confidant to help these students navigate the transition from home and high school to college. This past year, Chris Perry and Shirani Ponnambalam have been mentors to two students. Others from BPC - Kim Lapple, Michelle Gosh, Mistie Eltrich, Eric Eichhorn and Kathy DiBiasi have served on the Scholarship Selection Committee.

Kathy DiBiasi....

When Paul asked if I would consider being on the Selection Committee for Rewarding Potential Scholarship, I didn't have to take very long to consider it and say yes. How often does someone get an opportunity to be a part of something where the result of your effort is immediate.

Many of us have served or are currently serving on non-profit boards where it often seems the fruits of our labor never come to fruition. I was going to be a part of something pretty extraordinary. I was one piece of a large puzzle. My part could help a young person fulfill their dream of going to college. I hadn't been more excited about anything else in quite some time. Fulfilling my piece of the puzzle, however, proved to be more difficult than I originally thought. Words to describe the selection process – exciting, difficult, heart breaking, anxiety provoking.

This year the guidance office at Fox Lane High School narrowed the list of 50 applicants to 10. I cannot begin to imagine how difficult that process was.

Each of us on the selection committee received a packet of information for each of the ten candidates. A cover sheet listing the schools applied to and whether or not they had been accepted, a resume done by the applicant, their college essay and finally a high school transcript.

In addition to receiving this material, we each received a Pre Interview Grid with general qualities listed to rate the applicants on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 not so good to 10 as excellent.

We had to rate the applicants on things like, Responsibility, Willingness to seek help, confidence, curiosity, sense of purpose. These young people haven't been alive for very long and to expect that they could even come close to meeting or exceeding something like sense of purpose, or realistic self-appraisal. But they did.

My strategy: Read through each applicant's materials, jotting down a few highlights. Let it sit for a day. Go back and read through all the material again, taking more notes and finally filling out that very difficult grid. You have to understand, I wanted each and every one of them to go to college. They all have the credentials to go, just not the financial resources to do it.

But I had to stay on task. Who among the group is most likely to succeed if they get to college? That was the focus. That was my task. So I completed the grids.

Each of us on the Selection Committee submitted our grids and based on the results the candidates were put in order from 1 to 10. 1 being our top candidate. It was determined that we would meet the top 6. How exciting to see some of my personal favorites make the top 6 and how heart breaking to see one of my favorites ranked 9th.

Then we got to meet our top 6. Putting a face to the resume to the essay to the GPA. To put it in perspective – statistically these teens should not have been able to get to the point where they could be sitting at a table across from a group of adults talking about their dreams of going to college. They defied the odds. In contrast, statistically my children should have no problem getting into a good school based on my and my husband's education, the financial resources we have, the gift of my presence, helping with homework assisting where needed, and my knowledge of how to maneuver the school system to meet my children's needs.

So we met our top 6 candidates. We loved each and every one of them. Putting a personality with the resume. Through our conversations a current theme began to emerge - the desire of each applicant to continue their education and the gratitude they had for Fox Lane High School. I would like to make this more personal for you. I would like to share some of the joy I received in learning more about these young people. I have taken a small morsel from each of the 10 applicant's essay to give you a glimpse into their lives....

In no particular order

1. "The events in my life may have been horrible, yet they taught me many things about growing up. I learned to be independent and walk on my own two feet. I learned to manage myself and keep moving forward. I face them stronger now, little things do not bother me, school and social issues seem trivial in comparison to what I weathered."
2. "On an August summer day, my body reacted to the intensity of the sun's rays as drops of sweat fell down my forehead. I suffered as I tried to dig two holes. Not only was it physically draining, but the thought of other kids my age having fun while I was working made me upset. As the hours went by, the ache from my hands escalated to the point of being unable to dig a 30-inch hole for a six-foot fence that my father and I were installing. This was embarrassing because Dad would dig one hole in twenty minutes."
3. "I've realized I will not always be successful in something I do, so I just have to strive harder to make it a success. This lesson, I will carry with me throughout life. I know that there will be times where I'm going to fail but that doesn't mean I have to give up. It just means that I have to try harder."
4. "Going forward, I would like to build on the responsibilities I already have. I believe that college is the key to success and a great place for me to become an even better man. I know I have the potential to thrive at the next level and I have come way too far to stop now. This is what my mom has wanted and I want to make her proud. Most importantly, I will never be an empty seat for anyone who relies on me."
5. "One of the most challenging experiences in my life was moving to a new country with a different language and culture. Here I have faced many challenges that tested how much I was willing to give in order to strive. One challenge was learning English. Going to a new school wasn't easy. I had to start from the bottom and work my way up, step by step, to be where I am today."
6. "I knew I had to change. My mother wasn't being all that helpful and my grandmother found everything related to my brother's situation disgusting. I was the only person who

could support him at home because I was the only one who could understand his situation.”

7. “Soccer is like an intense friendly war; shots being fired from all over the field, battle scars on the player’s legs, braces and bandages to heal the wounds. Trudging through the mud and sprinting down the field for eighty minutes or more. Having to fight back and defend your home. Eleven soldiers with their armor made of plastic fighting hand to hand, or foot to foot, combat for possession of the inflated ball. Sweat running down their forehead, joy radiating off their face; the beautiful game.”
8. “It took me years to fully recover from not having my mother in my daily life. By the time I was in middle school, I fully understood that she had chosen to live her life without me. Thankfully, I had my grandma to help look after me. Every night, she would tuck me into bed and read me bedtime stories. I remember forcing myself to remain awake just to hear my favorite story read over and over again. She taught me how to clean, cook, iron, sew, and do laundry. These became my new responsibilities once my mom disappeared. Perhaps these skills are not what every child learns at the age of six. My grandmother knew that I needed to learn how to become responsible.”
9. “Many people see school as something that is required, but for me school is my way of having a good life and being the first in my family to go to college. Having a job is important because I don’t have the luxury of having my parents pay for college. I have to work hard for anything I need. I use the money that I do make to help my mom pay for things that my sister needs in school. Since I want my sister to have a good education I can’t stop working because they are relying on me.”
10. I will move forward and become everything I always dreamed I would. I repeat this mantra to myself everyday. I will not let what happened to me define who I am, and I will work my hardest to achieve greatness. Although, I will never be able to express my gratitude sufficiently to my parents, I’m determined to make their sacrifices worth it by reaching my full potential as I pursue my college dreams, and bring home a college degree.”

As Paul mentioned earlier, Rewarding Potential Scholarship has helped 4 of these 10 students achieve their dream of attending college.

Paul Alcorn

Beyond our doors.

The \$50,000 in seed money has grown into \$500,000.

And one student has grown to seven additional students.

And poverty has given way to aspirations to be doctors and lawyers and veterinarians and physical therapists.

Repairing the breach.

Restoring the streets in which to live.