

Showing up

By Santina Lengacher

It started as an opportunity to spend time with a small group of girls and teach them about Jesus. It turned into a life-changing experience. I started volunteering with Sisters Mentoring with a Mission (SMM) when I was a freshman in college. The group met as an after-school club in a local public school. I had never led a group of girls, but knew I was passionate about working with girls.



I was placed in a group of six or seven fourth-grade girls. They were excited, energetic, and very talkative. We wrestled through trying to sit long enough to journal about our week, eat our snacks, and let out copious amounts of energy during game time. Teaching them the Bible lesson was always an adventure. One minute they would ask a question about how God really made Adam and Eve, and the next minute they were talking about what color of Skittles they ate at lunch. Those girls had my head spinning, but I loved them dearly.

It was during that first year that I saw some of the impact that ministry and mentorship had on younger girls. One of my fourth graders endured a trauma that no adult should have to go through in their lifetime, let alone a ten-year-old girl. Her father took his own life. I watched as she became more quiet and reserved. I walked alongside her as she began to let out her grief through her writing. One day at SMM, all she wanted to do was keep writing during the journal time. She cried out to God in sadness about missing her dad, and I held her at times when she couldn't hold her tears in any longer.

My heart was broken to see a girl in so much pain, yet I was in awe by the fact that she continued to show up to SMM to spend time with me and her friends and learn about Jesus. This girl inspired me to continue to show up and be present no matter what was going on in my own life.

I continued showing up and mentoring the girls for the next couple of school years. I witnessed how these girls formed strong bonds not only with me but also with one another. Their questions about God and His Word kept growing deeper and deeper with each lesson. One afternoon, I asked the girls about their home church. I wanted to know more about their church-related experiences. One of them told me that her family attended one of the well-known churches in the area. Others said that their families took them to church every so often or for special occasions. But one girl came to me, looked me in the eyes and said, "This is my church."

I was speechless! I used to think that SMM was a fun program for girls to gather with their peers to learn some Bible lessons. However, my entire perspective changed when I discovered that some of these girls did not have the opportunity to know about Jesus in a church setting. They would not have the slightest opportunity to know God at all if it was not for the involvement and passion of the SMM leaders and mentors. Knowing how truly important it was to bring SMM to the school for these girls ignited a fire in my heart.

The time came for the girls to graduate and move on to middle school. I was distraught over the thought of not being able to continue to see them and teach them about God. I knew that this couldn't

be the end of our story. Therefore, I went to my mentor, the director of SMM, and explained my concerns. I told her I felt like I had just started to scratch the surface and my time with the girls was being cut short. She agreed that there was a need to continue the program for them. So, after spending time brainstorming ideas and sharing some thoughts as to what we could do, we finally decided to bring SMM to the middle school.

During the next school year, we put the plan into motion. We were able to work it out with the school so that we could meet with the girls once a week after classes. The first week didn't go as planned, but once all of the girls were aware that SMM was going to continue in middle school, they all showed up for the program. It was interesting to see how much the girls had grown. They went from playing games after eating a snack to wanting to process the events that were happening in their lives. Not only were we teaching them about Jesus, but we were able to use tangible examples for how to follow Him in different areas of their lives.

I was encouraged by watching the girls benefit from the program throughout middle school. However, their time to transfer to high school was fast approaching and my time with them, once again, was coming to an end. I also had to deal with some personal transitions during that time. I graduated from college and received a job offer that required me to work regular business hours. The only problem was that I was no longer available to meet with the girls after classes. I was heartbroken again! My mentor knew the passion of my heart. She helped me find an alternative solution: after work, we could meet with the girls at a local coffee shop. It took me a while to get my schedule to work, but I was able to readjust the new demands of my busy life.

Fast forward to the present day. My mentor and I meet with the girls once a week at a local coffee shop. We talk about friendships, family, schoolwork, teachers, drama, funny stories, extracurricular activities, and boys. At the end of our time, we still have a book/devotional that we go through with them to see how we can learn about God and bring Him into all of the areas previously mentioned. I do not take this lightly when I say that these girls mean the world to me. In a way, I have watched them grow. They've gone through the process of trying to figure out who they are while learning about God along the way. And the best part is that I've been able to walk by their side. We have been able to discuss, reflect, and answer tough questions about God and the world around us. From the time I first started teaching them, these girls have amazed me with their curiosity, and it continues to grow deeper and deeper as they learn even more.

SMM has been an amazing journey. Teaching other girls about Christ not only has allowed me to learn more about His love and grace but also has shown me how vital this program has become for the girls at school. Without SMM and the support of its leaders and mentors, some girls wouldn't have the opportunity to know anything about God. Through SMM, I have had the honor of watching my first group of girls grow and mature, not only in their day-to-day lives, but also in their faith. They have become beautiful young women of God. Therefore, it is my hope to see more women taking the opportunity of SMM by becoming mentors and leaders to other girls. Showing up for these young girls, walking by their side, and helping raise a new generation of women for God's Kingdom is one of the most life-changing experiences we could ever get.