

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

By Brian Beckman

Greetings from The Ladder! Friends, we celebrate **you** daily, as we thank God for each one of you. Thank you, not only for following The Ladder story, but for putting yourself in the storyline by becoming part of The Ladder by contributing your time, talents, and treasures. We are grateful for the many incredible ways you invest in The Ladder, our community, and the Kingdom of God. We are blown away by your generosity! May God bless you.

You may not know this, but The Ladder provides opportunities for youth who have been involved in unlawful activity and have been ordered by the courts to complete community service hours. Each year a dozen or more youth come to The Ladder and complete those hours. Each youth is screened on the severity of the offense. Parents are involved in the initial meeting to go over all expectations. One requirement is that each youth be present at our daily Bible devotional. Most are agreeable to that requirement; a few opt out at that point.

Steve's story

Recently a young man, *Steve, came through The Ladder doors to ask if he could complete his community service hours. Nancy, our Community Service Coach, then met with him and his stepdad before his community service began. Steve came the first couple of days. Under Nancy's supervision, he completed chores, such as wiping down exercise equipment, washing tables, picking up litter outside, and taking out the trash.

On the third day, Steve dug his heels in, told Nancy that he wasn't going to do any more chores, and was going to leave. When I learned of this, I sat down and talked with him. After exploring what was wrong, I finally got to the heart of the issue: his mother was in the hospital. We talked some more, but in the end, Steve said he was done.

A couple days passed, and Steve didn't show. When he walked in the next day, we learned that his probation officer told him there was

no getting around it—he had to complete his hours. Understanding the difficult situation of his mom's illness, we accepted him back at The Ladder, and he faithfully came in each day to fulfill his community service.

Toward the end of Steve's service, Nancy brought in some flowers. I happened to be sitting at the table next to him and Nancy, who patiently instructed Steve how to make a bouquet with the flowers. He cut stems at different lengths and assembled a beautiful bouquet for guess who? His mother! I could tell he was satisfied and proud of his work. He walked out of The Ladder a little taller that day—and more mature—with the bouquet in his hand.

Progress

What has happened since Steve completed his community service hours?

- He regularly participates in The Ladder's youth program, The Huddle.
- Staff and mentors model and teach Steve appropriate behavior.
- He brought his Mom (who is now out of the hospital and in a wheelchair) and stepdad to the Spring Fam Fest.
- He was majorly disappointed that Nancy wasn't able to attend the Fam Fest, because Steve wanted his mom to meet her.
- He is attentive during the Bible lessons.
- During the month of April, family worship was the focus. Daily the youth read a Bible passage, prayed, and listened to a song. After the song finished one day, Steve came up to ask for the name of the song. "I want to listen to that song again and share it with my Mom," he said.
- Recently he brought his Mom to The Ladder to meet Nancy.

Love in action and in truth

Steve is turning to God and his ways. He is soaking up the Bible. It will be exciting to see Steve becoming a man doing business God's way. This is just one success story from our experiences of helping youth complete community service hours.

One of our volunteers sums it up this way: "The Ladder is accepting of all and never gives up on anyone."

The Message Bible describes it best:

Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak up for the people who have no voice, for the rights of all the misfits. Speak out for justice! Stand up for the poor and destitute!

We all have a choice to make:

- Complain about the bad behavior of others (essentially giving up on them by not helping them grow),
- Ignore them (which also fails to help them grow), or
- Stand up for them by taking the time to listen, correct, forgive, teach, and celebrate them.

God gives us all opportunities to love people where they are at in life. We must seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in all situations, so God can work through us to reach the misfits, poor in spirit, and destitute.

**This name has been changed to maintain privacy.*

Growing From “Hope So” to “Know So”

By Troy Love

One of my favorite parts of being the Youth and Men’s Coach at The Ladder is leading a program called Men of Honor. Shelby Middle School has graciously given me the opportunity to have Men of Honor meetings after school in the library every Thursday. It is a voluntary club that about a dozen young men have attended over the last two years. Men of Honor instructs and encourages middle school boys in the principles of Biblical manhood.

One Thursday in April, I arrived to find that only one sixth grade boy showed up for our meeting. This was unusual, but instead of being discouraged, I decided to make the most of it.

Our conversation evolved into talking about the future. I described the vision I had of him as an honorable husband, father, grandfather, and even as a leader of Men of Honor in his community—wherever he ended up. I then took him to the end of his life, and the conversation went like this:

Me: “When you die, will you go to heaven or hell?”

Him: “I hope heaven.”

Me: “You hope? You don’t know for sure? Why should God allow you to go to heaven?”

Him: “Because I do a lot of good things.”

Me: “So you’re going to heaven because you’re a good person?”

Him: “Yes.”

Me: “Can I give you a test to see if you’re a good person?”

Him: “Sure.”

Me: “Have you ever told a lie?”

Him: “Yes.”

Me: “Have you ever taken something that wasn’t yours, even if it was small?”

Him: “Yes.”

Me: “Have you ever been disrespectful to your parents?”

Him: “Yes.”

Me: “Have you ever used the Lord’s name in vain? In other words, you used God’s name like a four-letter cuss word to express disgust?”

Him: “Yes.”

Me: “Have you ever heard of the Ten Commandments?”

Him: “Yes.”

Me: “The Ten Commandments are God’s standard of good. You just admitted that you have not kept four of them. If God judged you based on the Ten Commandments, would you be innocent or guilty?”

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YOUTH &

A Family Easter Celebration

By Mechele Martinez Gonzales

On the Saturday morning preceding Easter, The Ladder held its first Easter Egg Extravaganza, which was open to families and their children of all ages. It was important for us to celebrate our risen King, Jesus Christ, and also share some hands-on fun with our beautiful neighbors.

The morning started out early for some of The Ladder staff and an amazing group of volunteers. Three of the youth who attend The Huddle regularly also volunteered to help with this event. The Ladder was transformed into a fun Easter/Resurrection scene with various stations for our guests to visit. These stations consisted of crafts, the story of the resurrection of Jesus, a snack bar, and mini Easter egg hunt.

Fifty-five people attended, 19 of whom were children. It was truly wonderful to see several generations of families gather to experience the true meaning of Easter with their extended Ladder family. Two parents said they were grateful to have a Christ-centered event available to attend, rather than just an Easter egg/bunny event. Upon leaving, one parent said, “I hope The Ladder does this again next year. We will definitely be here!” We are thankful for this wonderful community, and we praise the LORD for all of His goodness!



Scott and his daughter practiced their art skills together at the Extravaganza.



Clockwise L-R: Annabelle, Ladder youth Ashlyn, Kyla, and Everlee help themselves to snacks in between activities.

Our Mission

The Ladder helps people pursue God by building caring relationships and sharing God’s Truth. The coaches enthusiastically guide adults and youth to love God by following Jesus, living in step with the Holy Spirit, reading God’s Word, loving people, and making disciples.

& FAMILY

Planting Seeds

By Mechele Martinez Gonzales

On April 24, The Ladder held a Spring Family Fest to celebrate our youth and their families. Our focus was to bring the youth and their families together with our volunteers and staff to enjoy a meal, a time of devotion, and (of course) some fun!

The theme of this celebration was based on spring, the season of new beginnings. We had 27 children and youth, 28 adults (including 11 volunteers/leaders who really are family, and four staff) in attendance. After greetings, introductions and prayer, we enjoyed a delicious meal together. The menu consisted of a house salad, roasted chicken, barbeque ribs, baked potato, pasta salad, coleslaw, and a beautifully decorated flower cookie for dessert.

After dinner, Coach Love led the devotional, which focused on planting and growth. In order to grow, a seed needs good soil, water, and sun. In order for us—as individuals and as families—to grow, we need to be:

- rooted in good soil (the Bible),
- watered (covered in prayer), and
- given the Son (Jesus).

We also had fun playing plant trivia and planting flower seeds in containers we decorated ourselves. Some also created homemade cards and flowers made from Styrofoam balls, pipe cleaners and Jesus/God loves me stickers. The artistic talents and gifts of the youth and their families were on full display!

The evening wrapped up with families being offered leftovers to take home. Everyone's hands were full with food and the wonderful crafts they created.

They were also given a Jesus treasure box to take with them. As the youth and their families exited, we made sure they knew that they are important, they are appreciated, they are loved, and they are a part of the Ladder family.

Let's make it a great growing season by reading God's Word, praying, and trusting Jesus!



Ladder youths Christian (far left) and Dane (far right) and their siblings planted seeds, decorated pots, and made flowers out of pipe cleaners with volunteer Paulette.

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March Youth Challenge:

Kimie won the Ten Commandments Challenge in March. She was one of 10 youth who memorized them all.



April Youth Challenge

Landon won the Family Worship Challenge in April. He was one of 12 youth who led their family in reading the Bible, praying and singing.



Our Vision

The Ladder is a friendly, intergenerational, and ethnically unified community center aimed at loving God and knowing and serving neighbors, so that individuals and families are transformed. Together we will make Jesus famous in our community.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Carol Bitson

By Vicki Davey

If you have ever owned a quilt, you would know that they can be either large or small, bright or muted, well-ordered or quirky. The life of Carol (Strait) Bitson is much like that quilt: pieced together by colorful adventures and secured by a freeform path that takes its shape from the days that are added to it. This inner beauty is bordered and hemmed all around by love for God and others, which gives clarity and harmony to the whole.

Family forms a substantial block in Carol's life. She was born in Walkerville as the middle daughter of five children in the days when everyone knew everybody else. She met and married Robert Bitson, and together they added four more little Bitsons. Her children and grandchildren are a great joy, and she makes them a part of the many adventures she pursues. Carol still lives on the Bitson ancestral homestead, although the children are grown and Robert has passed on. A long-arm quilting machine helps fill this empty nest.

The next colorful pieces involve work. After the full-time job of raising her children was largely complete, Carol honed her seamstress skills at Caron Creations in New Era for two years before the company closed its doors. One day as she was shopping at the IGA in Hart, she saw a notice for employment posted on the bakery case. Not only did Carol get the job, but six months later, she was promoted to deli manager. Many years later, the slick winter roads convinced her that it was time to pass the torch (or tongs) to another and retire.

Service makes the fabric stronger. Leaving the deli didn't mean leaving a life of serving others. Carol merely shifted her focus to serving her community by choosing to assist aging snowbirds on their migration to Florida. De-

scribed by someone as an Uber for seniors, Carol dedicates time each spring and fall to ensuring these friends reach their destination safely.

Carol's relationship with The Ladder goes back to the days when it was Fox's garage and a place of work for her father. She often prayed that God would transform the closed business into something wonderful for the community. Her prayers were answered, and now she happily serves us by washing dishes, boxing lunches, attending Bible classes and praying about the needs placed before her.

God forms the bright center of her life, and has been a present and guiding force from the early Sunday school years through to today's membership at Faith Christian Fellowship in Hart.

Carol's life is a beautiful blending of qualities. Like a quilt, her warmth and smile will envelop you and make you feel loved.



OUR FRIENDS

Debbi Clark

By Vicki Davey

What's in a word? If I said to you, *quiet, humble, shy*...you might begin to form a mental picture. If I added the words, *youthful, caring, giving*...the picture may become clearer still. But it takes the words *radiant* and *lovely* to fully complete the picture of Debbi (Mansko) Clark. Debbi was born in Muskegon, where she spent her elementary years. Then came the day when her father, who dreamed of being a farmer, relocated the family to New Era and began a hobby farm. Rather than mourn for this change of circumstance, Debbi embraced the quiet rural life with both hands. She had always been shy at school, so having less of a crowd around was a welcome change. As the second of seven children, Debbi loved the abundance of family time on their little farm. After graduating from Shelby High School, Debbi married, moved to Sparta, and had four children (two boys and two girls), eventually making her way back to this area, where many happy memories were made.

A natural nurturer, Debbi began by caring for her own younger siblings when her parents were away. Next came the years caring for her own children, and she currently loves to spend time with her grandchildren. It's a particularly joyful event when the whole family can get together.

The Ladder's morning exercise class is pleased to welcome Debbi on her rehabilitation journey as she recovers from recent hip surgery. We are also blessed to have her come share her lovely spirit-filled voice as she worships God at "Celebrate" on Saturday evenings. I'm told the glow on her youthful face is radiance itself.

Debbi also takes pleasure in growing a vegetable garden, reading a good book, solving jigsaw puzzles, and participating in tandem daily Bible readings with her sister. She attends the Shelby Road Baptist Church, where she is a giving participant of the Promoting Encouraging Words (PEG) group; making decorated note cards to be used by the members to reach out to others.

It is our hope that these words have been as much of an encouragement to Debbi as she is to us!



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