

S T O R Y

ADVENTIST
Review

online edition

ABOUT THE REVIEW

INSIDE THIS WEEK
WHAT'S UPCOMING
GET PAST ISSUES
LATE-BREAKING NEWS
OUR PARTNERS
SUBSCRIBE ONLINE
CONTACT US
PRINT INDEX

HANDY RESOURCES

CHURCH LOCATOR
SUNSET CALENDAR

[FREE NEWSLETTER](#)

SEARCH THIS SITE


 Exclude PDF Files

 Email this article


Reading, Writing, and Cockroach Powder

Not far from where we struggle with the twin evils of "too much to do" and "too little time," countless people are fighting for their very lives.

BY JAN WEBB MC QUISTAN

HECTIC SCHEDULES leave little time for reaching out to people who do not share our abundant lifestyle. I don't normally come into contact with people struggling with drug abuse and poverty. I tend not to notice the beggars along freeway off-ramps and hurry past welfare recipients seeking medical care at the Loma Linda University's medical offices on my way to a doctor's appointment. I avoid inner San Bernardino, with one of the highest rates of crime in the United States. Until a few years ago I was completely unaware of a small "inner city" in Loma Linda, of all places.

When our recently retired senior pastor, Bill Loveless, arrived at the Loma Linda University church in 1990, he encouraged us to begin a tutoring/mentoring ministry. Soon the EXCELL tutoring/mentoring program was born under the leadership of Pastor Jennifer Ferrell. One of the first projects joined by university students and church members involved tutoring sophomore students at a public high school in downtown San Bernardino.

When I signed up for the program and was assigned a student who wanted tutoring in geometry, I knew immediately I was in over my head. However, my teenage son had just completed academy geometry. I enlisted his help, and he agreed to assist, albeit unenthusiastically.

As I watched Benji do the actual tutoring, something special began to

happen. Soon Benji was drawing "our" teen into conversations about sports and other things guys have in common. Benji discovered he had a talent for working with kids. As we drove back and forth to San Bernardino, my usually noncommunicative 16-year-old shared what was going on in his world in a way that just didn't happen the rest of the week.

Stepping out of our comfort zone and giving a little of ourselves gave us a great feeling of fulfillment and joy, and added meaning and purpose to both of our lives.

My New Adventure

When Benji left for college I felt the "empty nest" blues. During my daily Bible reading and prayer time I was impressed with God's call to help those who are in need. About that time our United States president encouraged us to mentor children and help them learn how to read. Helping mold children before they reach high school seemed like a good idea (not having to bone up on geometry sounded even better).

I asked a friend who teaches second grade at a local public school if he had any students who needed help learning to read. One student in particular had captured my friend's heart with his special needs.

Tommy was not only struggling to read, but came to school unbathed on most mornings, wearing the same rarely laundered clothes. But there was a special sweetness about him, and he seemed hungry for love and attention.

Just a few blocks from my comfortable home I discovered a street stricken with poverty, where Tommy and his brother and sister, Billy and Laura, lived in a small two-bedroom apartment with their father, Bob. Bob seemed to favor lying on the couch and watching TV to cleaning house or washing clothes, but he did fix supper for the kids each evening and see that they attended school.

The first evening my friend, the children's teacher, led me up a narrow stairway to the apartment and into a kitchen filled with dirty dishes covering the counter. The only place to tutor was on the kitchen table, which was covered with several meals' worth of spills and crumbs. Calmly the teacher asked the father for a rag we could use to clean the table. We gingerly sat with the children around the table on some dirty metal folding chairs.

As I began tutoring each week I would begin the evening feeling tired after a day's work, thinking of all I needed to do at home. But I always received a fresh surge of energy and joy as I worked with these children.

Little by little Tommy made progress in reading. One evening he asked if I wanted to see his new puppies. In the bedroom I noticed that all the children's clothes were strewn about on the floor. Three mattresses were wedged together in the small room, without sheets. The children slept on

dirty old blankets and pillows.

"Aren't they cute?" asked Tommy as he snuggled one of the puppies, eyes still closed, up to his cheek. *Just what they need, I thought-more mouths to feed.*

Deeper Involvement

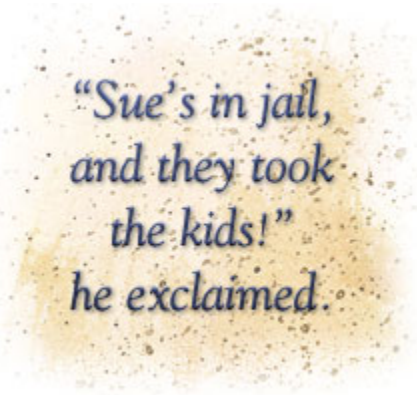
I struggled with my own conscience through the next week. *What's a tutor's responsibility here?* I wondered. *How far should I go in trying to "improve" the kids' living conditions?* I asked my friend, the teacher, and he said, "That's totally up to you."

I guess I was half hoping he would say "You shouldn't get any more involved." I tried to contact Child Protective Services, but no one returned my call. I decided to take action.

I went shopping for sheets, pillows, and mattress pads. I wondered as I lugged the bags of bedding up the stairs, *Will they be offended by my gift?*

The father, Bob, didn't make much comment when I arrived. But he nodded to me while watching TV that it would be OK to go in and make up the kids' beds.

The children's reaction was more rewarding. When the beds were made, 5-year-old Billy wondered, "Miss Jan, why are there two sheets?" I showed them how to get in between the sheets, and soon Billy got into his bed, snuggled into the pillow, and closed his eyes with a smile of contentment. I left the apartment that evening with a heightened sense of joy. Perhaps you could call it a "mentoring high."



"Sue's in jail,
and they took
the kids!"
he exclaimed.

Once while visiting with Bob on the porch, I heard Laura screaming from the bedroom: "Cockroaches! I hate cockroaches!" Her father explained that he was waiting until he had some money to buy some cockroach powder.

That was enough for me. I headed to the store and got the powder (and a flashlight, as their electricity had been turned off). Other evenings found me buying lice shampoo for Laura or cold medicine for a sick child. For the children's birthdays I took them shopping for shoes, underwear, and clothing.

But still the floor was covered with dirty clothes, the closets were empty, and the beds were unmade. At first I shuddered at the thought of helping get those clothes washed, but I finally offered to take Bob to the Laundromat.

Bob piled my car's trunk with bags of clothes and went with me and the kids to the Laundromat. *Wish I'd brought rubber gloves*, I thought, as I helped take the clothes out of the bags and pile them into the washing machines.

I could see myself making regular trips to the Laundromat, but this one trip prompted Bob to ask a friend down the street if he could wash their clothes in her machine.

Obstacles in the Path

As time went by there seemed to be so much disruption and confusion in the home that I decided to try taking the kids to the library for our tutoring sessions. By that time I was tutoring all three children.

One evening I noticed an especially offensive odor in the car as I drove Billy to our tutoring location. The library was near my home, and I thought, *Wouldn't it be nice for Billy to have a bath?* I figured he was, at 6 years of age, old enough to bathe himself. So I took him home, introduced him to my husband, and led him into the master bathroom.

"Wow! Look at all those lights!" he exclaimed when he noticed the row of lights above my bathroom mirror. At home he was used to a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, attached to an extension cord connected to another apartment. Billy was wide-eyed as the large tub filled with water. I gave him a towel, showed him the soap, and explained how to use a washcloth. I left and closed the door, wondering what would happen.

Soon he emerged with a grin, re-dressed in his dirty clothes, but at least one layer of dirt was gone.

One day I got a call from the teacher. Ongoing bruises on Laura's arms led the school to suspect the father of child abuse. The police investigated, but no action was taken.

At our next tutoring session Bob was frightened: "I would never do anything to hurt Laura," he assured me. Then he said, "I just can't lose these kids. I can't afford to lose them." Child support was Bob's main source of income. "And if I go to prison again, I might as well be dead." I listened as Bob opened his heart and shared his hopes and dreams, and his frustrations and disappointments over repeated unsuccessful attempts to find a job.

Eventually the inevitable eviction notice came. Bob and the kids were camped out in a vacant apartment down the street (again with no electricity) when he was arrested for child neglect. *That's strange*, I thought. *Arrest someone for child neglect and leave the children on the street? Something is wrong with this picture.*

Hope and Disappointment

The children's mother, Sue, who had been in jail on drug charges,

decided to turn her life around, and regained custody of the kids. She made sure the kids had regular baths and had them ready for our weekly tutoring sessions. We visited Bob in jail several times, and took the kids to the park and the zoo.

One Sunday afternoon as we were driving along, I asked the kids, "How was Sabbath, uh, I mean, Sunday school this morning?"

Sue turned to me and asked, "Are you a Seventh-day Adventist?"

"Yes."

"I am too!" she said. Sue had spent about five years in a Seventh-day Adventist foster home and had been baptized. What a thrill to discover that we shared a special bond in Christ.

When Sue found a tiny apartment to rent in San Bernardino we shopped for dishes and other supplies. Sue was so thrilled to have her own home. She proudly showed me her stove and refrigerator-someone else's discards. In a week she had her drawers and shelves arranged neatly with the dishes, silverware, pots, storage containers, and other supplies we had purchased. I'll never forget how happy she was.

There was only one small bedroom, but she arranged for bunk beds for the kids and a friend gave her a sofa so she could sleep in her small living room. The front yard was bare dirt, but at least the kids had a place of their own.

But addiction doesn't let go easily. Sue became more and more distant or was simply not there when I came to pick up the kids. Soon she told me that since the school had an after-school tutoring program I really didn't need to come each week.

With plenty to do at home after a full day's work, I willingly took her up on the offer. A few weeks later I called the apartment manager, since the family's phone had been disconnected. Bob, who had been released from jail and a rehabilitation program a few weeks earlier, came to the phone. I could tell something was wrong by the sound of his voice. "Sue's in jail, and they took the kids!" he exclaimed.

I learned that when Sue fell behind on her rent payment, in desperation she began selling drugs and slipping back into drug abuse. Someone notified the police, and they came and arrested her. Then, because Bob was on probation and not to be alone with the children, the police came back that night and took the children away to be placed in foster homes.

"How did they take it?" I asked.

"They were pretty upset," Bob replied as he painted a picture of the children crying frantically as they were awakened by the police and taken away from their home.

When I located Sue in jail she was delighted to see me. In tears she shared her decision to turn her life around once and for all. "I'd like to be rebaptized and also start bringing the kids to church," she said. She also shared her concern for Bob. When released from detention a few weeks earlier, having spent almost a year in a drug/alcohol rehabilitation program, he was determined to live a drug- and alcohol-free life.

Unfortunately, Sue revealed, someone who worked at a bar in their neighborhood left bottles of beer out with the trash each evening for Bob's use. Such easy access was just too tempting, so after a while Bob was right back where he started.

The children began living with Sue's brother and his wife, who had five children of their own, plus another on the way. Both of them were recovered addicts, doing the best they could to live clean lives and raise their children with Christian values.

When Sue was released from her rehabilitation program we spent a day filling out job applications and shopping for clothes for work and church. But after several weeks of support and assistance she slipped out of sight once again. I continue to see the children on a regular basis and help them with their schoolwork. What a pleasure to have a relationship that has lasted over several years. Having someone consistently there for them, even if only for an hour or two each week, has enhanced their self-worth, and they have a vision of their potential to rise above the lifestyle of their parents and make a better life for themselves.

Mentoring and tutoring seems only a small drop in the vast bucket of the needs of the children born into poverty. Yet studies show that mentored youth are "healthier and at less risk for involvement in dangerous behaviors."*

My small gift of time and resources continues to ignite a concern in me to help children escape poverty, avoid drug use and violence, and grow into an abundant relationship with Christ. Each time I share my life with these dear children I return home on a "mentoring high," realizing that we truly are Christ's hands and feet.

* A. Handysides, G. Hopkins, T. Amato, "Twenty-first-Century Health," *Adventist Review*, January 2001.

Jan Webb MoQuistan is regional sales manager for CaliforniaChoice, a health insurance plan for small businesses, and a concert pianist and organist. Her e-mail address is jwebbmcq@msn.com.

 Email this article

[LATE-BREAKING NEWS](#) | [INSIDE THIS WEEK](#) | [WHAT'S UPCOMING](#) | [GET PAST ISSUES](#)
[ABOUT THE REVIEW](#) | [OUR PARTNERS](#) | [SUBSCRIBE ONLINE](#)
[CONTACT US](#) | [INDEX](#) | [LOCATE A CHURCH](#) | [SUNSET CALENDAR](#)

© 2000, Adventist Review.