

Following Freshman Virtues

The Ripple Effect

By

Shon Pernice

Have you ever read a story, seen a picture, or heard about a situation that warms your heart, mind and soul? An event where people come together and go above and beyond for someone else? A story, like in a children's book, that makes you feel good inside with excitement as you turn the page? Moreover, how a freshman class and a young man in a wheel chair, gave meaning and purpose to a group of prisoners? Let me tell you how.....

I picked up the Springfield News-Leader paper, from our "free table", in the common area of the wing. It was the October 2, 2019 edition with, "Students: Collin is part of our family", on the front page. Pictured is a young man in a wheel chair, alongside a school nurse. The story about Collin Langston, and his congenital disorder, that has kept him in a wheelchair his entire life appeared to be a setback: not for his Glendale High School freshman class. The teen was scheduled to go to Florida for a potential life-altering surgery that can help his mobility. His goal is to walk across the stage in four years, to receive his diploma. So what does his classmates do? Hold a fundraiser, "Candy for Collin". Lilly Wead, the vice president of the freshman class, had several quotes in the article that spoke to my heart. "We are all saying 'Flock is family' and Collin is part of our family", she said. And, "To support him is the main goal to show our love." In my world, with steel doors slamming, razor wire on the perimeter, guard towers and constant threats--this is pure, it is good, it is bigger than me and I want in.

Step One

I obtained the address to Glendale High School and established contact with the Freshman Academy Blue Team. They gave me the information on how to donate funds to help Collins family. That's great, but I also want to purchase the Candy for Collin. However, in my situation, I cannot receive the candy in prison, and I wouldn't want them to pay for shipping. I want a student, who receives free lunches, to get the candy. That is a win-win: Collin gets the much needed funds and a random student has some treats! I had been that student receiving free lunches so I know it will mean a lot to someone.

Funds are limited inside of prison for most. It so happened that I had just won \$35.00 from getting published in a veteran's magazine. It was also the month that my favorite pizza was being sold as a fundraiser inside the institution. I don't need to bother with horror stories of prison food. Outside food is golden. It is comforting and tastes so much better than the chow hall. I have a choice to make.

Decisions

Real pizza from an outside vendor or Candy for Collin and support his classmates? I came to my decision based on this: the pizza will fill me up, taste delicious, and provide short-term gratification. Helping a cause much greater than myself, the excitement, the morality I feel, the type that touches your soul, it gives you goose bumps as you fist bump into the air, will fill up my entire being much longer than any food source can bring. As I share the excitement with my peers, the positive energy is infectious, it spreads, and others want a part of this mission. Skipping pizza and donating to Candy for Collin is going to provide much more happiness and a sense of rectitude.

The next day I went down to my case manager's office and wrote a check from my offender account. Out of my \$35.00 award: \$20.00 to the bank account the school directed me to, and \$15.00 to Glendale High with the request that candy be purchased for a student. Both donations are to be from my late wife Renee.

Unique Jaycee's

I belong to an offender organization, at this institution, called the Unique Jaycee's. It is an offshoot of Jaycee's International that promotes leadership and virtues in young adults. We are "Unique" due to being much older and made some poor choices to get to where we reside. However, we desire change within ourselves, and the betterment of our community.

We were having our monthly meeting and it was my turn to pitch a donation in regards to Candy for Collin. I was nervous but harnessed the feeling of fortitude for Collin and his class. I brought the newspaper article and letter from his teachers. I boasted on what the class was doing and reflected on when I was in high school. As I described the teasing that I witnessed, and recalled the terms of: pizza face, nerd, stupid, metal mouth, four eyes, fatso and all of the other horrible bullying--the men nodded as I connected with them. I spoke of how I wasn't the brunt of the jokes, and how I laughed with the group only because I was glad that I wasn't getting teased. I never stopped it, and never did anything about it, until now: promote positive peer pressure for students doing what is morally right.

As I read about Collin, I saw the seriousness in the men's eyes--a porthole of hope--to do good. The men are hungry to make a difference. Former drug addicts, thieves, murderers, and dealers: that was the past, now we move forward. These are men experiencing a new high: a sense of self worth, a team, a purpose. The group of Unique Jaycee's, inside a medium security correctional center, unanimously agreed to donate to the freshmen cause. We brainstormed creating a card for Collin. Not so much a Get Well card, but a Recovery Card. We wanted something with strength, motivation, and of interest to Collin. I noticed the picture, in the

newspaper, Collin had a lanyard around his neck that contained the Star Wars logo. Now we had a good idea of his liking, so we compiled Star Wars movie pictures and made a card. I involved the Veterans Wing and included the U.S. Army Warriors Creed on the back of the card. Various men, from all around the prison, signed the card, in support of a young man's recovery.

We also needed to recognize the freshman class for righteousness with a certificate. A tiny moment became a huge moment for us. The ripple effect of kindness traveled out of Springfield, MO, up the New Madrid fault line, and shook the emotions of men at the Moberly Correctional Center. It created a high, a drug of contrition, manufactured at minimal cost, no harm to the body, and a firebrand release of goodness. I took my freedom for granted; I want Collin to enjoy his. That young man has his whole life ahead of him and I want to be a part of his support team. Collins battles are now ours too.

Conclusion

Although it has been several weeks since I made the donation, I still feel fulfilled with satisfaction. More than any pizza could provide for my soul. As the freshman class is helping Collin, they are also helping me in my life's mission of moral restitution. If the rest of our country, politicians, and community leaders was to emulate the freshman class blue team, at Glendale High, we would be a country of "humanity, pure motives, and of compassion" ⁽¹⁾

1. Quote from Marc Lee's last letter home. (First Navy SEAL killed in Iraq 8-2-2006)