

“You Are the Equipment” by Carol Duerksen

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 If you have access to *With* Magazine, you will need at least one copy of the Winter 2006 issue. If you don't have the hard copy, go to withonline.org and print off the cover of the magazine and the story “God's Gift to Me Isn't Being Graded on my Report Card.”. If you are planning in advance for this session and have time for a copy of the magazine to be mailed to you, contact Carol Duerksen, carold@mennoniteusa.org, phone 620-367-8432
- 2 Copies of the story “God's Gift to Me Isn't Being Graded on my Report Card” for half of the students, and “Making a Difference” (see below) for the other half
- 3 Newspapers and news magazines
- 4 Print the verses from Matthew (see below) on cards so that each student will have a card
- 5 A digital camera
- 6 A photo printer

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

Pass around the *With* cover and ask students to respond. What are their thoughts about the guy under the bridge? What do they think is his connection to the theme, “What's that again, Jesus?”

After students have responded, say:

Jesus had some really different ideas. Actually, the unusual stuff with him started before he was born—like when he was conceived. His mother was a teenage virgin, and he had two fathers—an earthly dad and God.

With God as a parent, you'd expect Jesus to line up with the religious folks, but that's where it gets real interesting. More often than not, Jesus was disagreeing and arguing with the people who thought they had it all together. More often than not, he was siding with the misfit, outcast, poor, sick, unlovely people. Sometimes he even said that the Religious We Are Right could learn from those “out in left field.” Jesus seemed to have everything turned upside down and inside out.

So ... What about today? Jesus would find reason to visit the homeless kid under the bridge or on the park bench. He'd have good things to say to the teens who feel left out because of a learning or speaking disability. He'd know how to talk to those who are socially inept. He'd love the youth group presidents, but no more than he'd love the kids who get drunk on Saturday night.

Is this the Jesus you believe in? Is this the Jesus you've been taught about? Is this the Jesus you want to model your life after? What could it mean to live like that?

Let's look at two examples.

CONNECT TO THE STORIES:

Hand out the stories and ask youth to read them silently to themselves. Half of the group should have "Making a Difference" and the other half should have "God's Gift to Me Isn't Being Graded on my Report Card." After students have read the stories, ask them to share what happened in the stories.

Say: *If you want to model your life after Jesus, that means accepting yourself the way you are created, accepting other people the way they are created, caring for people who have made big or small mistakes with their lives, and accepting Jesus' love in your life when you make small and large mistakes.*

Hand out the magazines and newspapers and ask youth to find stories of persons who need to know the love and acceptance of Jesus in their lives, as well as people who are showing the love of Jesus to others.

Share those stories with the group.

APPLY:

Hand out the cards with the verses from Matthew on them. Ask students to spread out in the room (or other parts of the building) and to meditate on the verses. Encourage them to read the verses several times, then to find one phrase that speaks most directly to them. Concentrate on that phrase. What does it mean for their lives? What is God saying to them through that phrase?

RESPOND:

Bring the students back together. **Say:** *One of the key phrases in the passage you just read is this: "You are the equipment." We're going to take your picture and print it for you to take home as a reminder that you, indeed, are Jesus' equipment."*

Take individual pictures and print them. Hand them out to students.

Close with a prayer, asking Jesus to make each student the equipment that he can use to spread his love and caring for others.

Making A Difference

By Jennifer Gore as told to Helen Grace Lescheid

As I approached Cyrus Center on that cold rainy day in February, I was scared. Yes, I wanted to help youth at risk, but could I handle it emotionally? Would I know what to say? Would I know how to react to someone who's living on the street?

See, I come from Abbotsford in the Bible belt of southern British Columbia, Canada. My mother took me to Sunday School, church, youth group— you name it. She enrolled me in a Christian school right from Kindergarten on. My Christian high school was small—there were only 20 students in my graduation class—so we were a tight group of friends.

After graduation from high school, I enrolled in a small university in Abbotsford to get a Child Youth Care Degree. I wanted to work with children to protect them against abuse and neglect. When I heard of Cyrus Center, I opted to do my practicum there.

So here I was, parking my car in front of a two-story building. Upstairs was the Bavarian Restaurant, downstairs was the drop-in center. Three girls were standing by the door, talking.

What's it like to be homeless? I wondered. To sleep in a barn, a recycle bin or under a bridge? To live out of a car, foraging for food? To be sexually exploited in exchange for basic needs like laundry, a shower, and food?

Cyrus Center was opened by Christian Outreach of Canada to meet basic needs of street/homeless youth in a non-threatening, supportive environment. It's a safe place where teens ages 14 to 18 can hang out, have a shower, do laundry, eat a good meal, receive clothes and items of personal hygiene and referrals to community resources available to them. Free hair cuts and vouchers for free dental services are also available. But most of all, it's about building relationships between the teens and supportive, properly trained volunteers and staff. The goal was to offer love and hope to the youth no matter how bleak the situation. Would I be able to do that?

I greeted the girls at the door and they followed me inside, then plopped themselves down at a table. As I looked around the room, my heart was pounding. Where do I start? A man and a young guy were playing chess at one table. I can't let them see I'm scared. I joined the girls at another table and said, "Hi, my name's Jenn. What's yours?" They gave me their names. I was surprised how easily they talked to me about being stoned at parties, kicked out of school, scared to go home. A guy came over and joined us. He put his arm around me and asked me out for a date. They think I'm one of them, I thought. Maybe getting to know them won't be so hard.

From that first day on, I worked at Cyrus Center every chance I had, 4-5 days a week from 4-8 hour shifts. When the kids found out I was on staff, they backed off for awhile, but then they began to trust me again.

So what's my job description? When I come on, I read the log book to see what has transpired while I was away. I answer telephones, serve dinner to 15-20 kids. (Church groups and other charitable organizations bring in cooked meals). I help them with homework if that's what

they want or play a game of Trouble, Sorry or a card game. I'm even learning to play chess. But mostly I listen, and we talk, one on one. I want to be a friend, to show them they're valued for who they are—that they're not alone, that there's hope and they can succeed in life.

I've really become attached to some of the youth who come. Like Nicole* who's in and out of detox centers. She keeps going back to her boyfriend who is a pimp. She knows he's using her but she's desperate for drugs. I get so frustrated. The other day she was arrested again and ordered by the court to go to detox. Nobody can force her to stay at the rehabilitation center but it's been two weeks now. I have to keep believing that one day she's going to make it. Maybe this time.

I'm learning to scale down my expectations. If a young girl or guy picks up the newspaper and looks for a job, they're already doing something. I'm learning to never give up on a person and to keep on trying. After all, it wasn't so long ago when I was a messed up teen myself.

Even though my mom was a Christian, my dad was not. Mom warned me of drug traffickers in our neighborhood. I didn't see why she was so concerned—Dad was using cocaine. Maybe this is what caused the fights. The tension in our home became unbearable. When I was 14, I rebelled. I quit church—I'd been preached at from every angle and was sick of church. I started running with the wrong crowd. Soon I was smoking pot, using ecstasy and mushrooms and drinking. I attended all-night rave parties which were illegal. When my parents divorced and Mom remarried, I was totally upset. I hated my step dad and his daughter who was just a few months younger than I. But through it all, my mom was patient and nurtured of me.

I try to remember that part of my life on days at Cyrus Center when I want to pull my hair out—when nothing seems to be working. One Saturday the youth were totally hyper. They weren't listening to anything I said. They were rude and mean. I'd given them candy bars for a treat and told them to drop the wrappers into the garbage can. Instead, when I went outside a few minutes later, the ground was littered with candy wrappers. Most of the time, I can keep my cool, but this time I lost it.

"What's so hard about throwing a wrapper into a trash can?" I yelled. It shocked them.

They calmed down and actually picked up a few wrappers. Even a small change like this makes me feel like it's worthwhile. Like I'm actually succeeding at something.

Every day has its drama. You never know what's going to happen. We've had to call the police on occasion to break up a fight or to remove an individual. One day a 15 year-old girl needed a place to sleep. She'd been sleeping under a bridge, she said. It broke my heart to tell her we're not set up for overnight accommodation. All we could do is give her a sleeping bag and drive her to Compassion Park in our town where homeless people have set up tents.

Some days I wonder if I'm making any difference. But then something happens and I know I have to keep trying. I can't give up on a person because God doesn't give up.

Like the two girls who were pregnant. One was 14 and the other 15 years old. After they had their babies we encouraged them to finish high school by taking a special program

called New Beginnings. One of the girls didn't stick with it—she keeps disappearing into the drug scene. But the other girl is actually doing it. When I see small changes like that, I feel encouraged.

Then there's Bruce* the 15-year old guy who said, "I want to change. I need a job." He filled out a resume and registered for classes. He's stopped hanging out with the pot-smoking gang. He's really trying to turn his life around.

Tom*, who's 16, fled from his home and for the past several months has been living in his car. He's a good guy. He's working full time. He's not a partier. He does not use drugs. He'd been trying to rent a place in his price range but nobody wanted to rent to him. Everybody seemed to be afraid that he'd attract the wrong crowd. Every day we were on the computer trying to find him a place. We kept telling him we were praying and God would answer. Four months later, he'd still not found a place and he was pretty discouraged.

But yesterday he found a bachelor apartment above a garage looking out on a backyard with a creek running through it. The owner was friendly, welcoming, and warm. When we moved him in, he could hardly contain his excitement. "I guess prayer does help," he grinned.

We were all pretty excited for him. One street person turning his life around—that's pretty cool. I want to be a part of that. That's why, even though my practicum is finished, I plan to keep working at Cyrus Center. I want to keep making a difference in somebody's life. However small.

*Names have been changed

*The name of Cyrus Center comes from the Bible verse in Isaiah 45:13 which reads in the Life Application Study Bible: "I will raise up Cyrus to fulfill my righteous purpose, and I will guide all his actions. He will restore my city and free my captive people—and not for a reward! I, the LORD almighty, have spoken!"

Matthew 5:5-10, The Message:

Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge:

"Don't begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.

"Don't think you have to put on a fund-raising campaign before you start. You don't need a lot of equipment. You are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day. Travel light."