

Out of the Storm: From the 'Hood to the Tower

Linda Nicholson, April 12, 2015

Forest Home Chapel

My story today is about planting seeds in fertile soil, and about leavening --- leavening, as in a catalyst that modifies or transforms something for the better.

Specifically, my story is about three things: a storm, a prayer from an anguished heart, and an amazing answer to that prayer. This answer came in the form of ten remarkable Cornell students from inner-city Chicago, with whom I'm on an incredible journey as their Faculty Mentor in the Posse Program. *I'll explain more about Posse in a minute.* My job as their Faculty Mentor is to help them find fertile soil here at Cornell that will enable them to produce their proverbial grain, in many-fold abundance, to enrich their lives, to enrich their communities back home, and to enrich the world. My story is about the leavening impact this Posse experience has had and continues to have on all eleven of us and beyond as we navigate the Cornell undergraduate experience together as a Posse family.

My story begins with a storm. Storms carry such power --- the power to destroy indiscriminately, and the power to join together disparate worlds in the healing of communities in their aftermath. They can take our carefully separated, orchestrated, class- and race-based world and turn it upside down in a heartbeat. Storms can create need, but they can also provide opportunities for change ... including personal opportunities for going outside of your comfort zone, for expanding your mind and heart, and for redefining the boundaries of family. A storm is incredibly symbolic of the mission of the Posse Foundation --- to change the face of leadership in the world (*more on that in a minute*).

As I said, my story begins with a storm. In late October of 2012, Super Storm Sandy slammed into the east coast. I don't think I need to elaborate on the vast devastation and extreme need that Sandy left in her wake. About 2 weeks after Sandy hit, I joined 4 other congregants from First Baptist Church to deliver donated supplies to a Staten Island church we had connected with. We had stuff, we had a place to bring this stuff, we were feeling pretty good. We pulled up in our van filled with with flashlights, batteries, food and paper products, thinking that we'd drop them off at the church and maybe visit for a while and then be on our way. Our host, an amazing woman named Vanina, greeted us

with open arms and a very warm heart, and instead of showing us where to put the stuff she said, “OK, let’s go!”.

Vanina hopped into our van and guided us through visit after visit to people in need. At one stop, she led us to a door about 3 feet high, cut into the foundation of a house. It had a doorbell next to it, which she rang. A tall man named Sam answered this miniature door, and gracefully unfolded himself from his basement home, followed by his cat. I was so thankful that we had a big bag of cat food to offer as we loaded him up with supplies. At stop after stop, it was clear that with or without that storm, these precious people would be in profound need, trapped in a cycle of poverty by lack of education and lack of opportunity --- on truly rocky ground.

Our visit with Vanina ended at the church’s Community Center, a volunteer-run operation located in a former grocery store building that included an after-school program, tutoring, a senior lunch program, clothing distribution, and they were making their list of recipients for Thanksgiving turkeys (I think the list was up to about 200 families). They were doing SO much. It was intensely humbling. I stood in awe of this army of angels zipping around the place making it all happen, and thanked GOD for these amazing people.

I came away from this experience filled with anguish, with a deep, aching sadness and a HUGE question ... I thought I was going to make a difference by taking a day out of my oh-so-busy life to bring some stuff to some people in need, and I came away with a profoundly eye-opening realization that I had no clue about how to fight poverty, about how to REALLY help people who were trapped in the cycle of poverty, and that communities of faith served as true lifelines for the people in their neighborhoods.

In the van on the ride home I cried ... and I said my Gethsemane prayer from an anguished heart. It went something like this: *God, great Creator of the Universe, it is by Your grace alone that I stand in this position of privilege and power in this ivory tower that we call Cornell University ... how can I REALLY help to alleviate suffering, how can I REALLY help to build bridges out of poverty? If education is part of the answer then use me, I am Your tool, show me what to do, guide me ... PLEASE ...*

The next morning I gave my 9 am lecture and returned to my office to find an email from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Peter LePage, asking if I could come to his office, preferably today. He said he had a proposal for me. I emailed back that I could be there in 20 minutes, and he immediately responded with “see you then”! I had never been called to the Dean’s office, so I was more than a little nervous, wondering what he could possibly want? It was a very long 20 minutes as I gathered myself and walked over to see him.

A few seconds into our visit Dean LePage began an impassioned monologue about the Posse Foundation, a non-profit that was one of the 10 organizations that President Obama donated his Nobel Peace Prize money to. He explained that the Posse Foundation draws talented students from inner-city public schools, selects the top students through a highly competitive dynamic assessment process based on merit and leadership, and then matches groups of ten students from the same city (a “Posse”) with a partner college or university for admittance into college with full tuition sponsorship.

The outcome is to provide a path to college for talented inner city kids who otherwise might not go to college. In the 23 years that Posse had been in operation, Posse scholars had a 90% college graduation rate. Part of how they achieve this success is to provide a peer- and mentor-based system at the partner college to support them. Dean LePage had spent two years establishing Cornell’s College of Arts and Sciences as a Posse partner institution, and our first Posse would arrive the next year. He needed a Faculty Mentor for this Posse #1 --- he then asked me to consider serving in this role. Tears were streaming down my face as I said “YES, and let me tell you what I did yesterday ...”. He encouraged me to not make a snap decision but to think carefully about it, and I said I would (and I did), but I knew that my YES was utterly unshakable.

Was I completely confident in my abilities to serve in this important role? NO! But fortunately, Faculty Mentors receive training before their Posse arrives on campus. In a 3-day training at the National Posse Office in NYC they put tools in our hands, and made it clear that they’ve got our backs --- that an extensive support structure is in place not only for the Posse scholars, but also for the mentors who support them. In a

second 3-day training at the Posse Chicago Office, I observed some of those tools in action during mock situations role-played by Posse trainers and “seasoned” second-year mentors, and I briefly met Cornell Posse #1 for the first time. Finally, a 3-day retreat with Posse #1 at a camp in Wisconsin launched us on our journey together.

So what does a Posse Faculty Mentor *do*? In addition to being a fierce advocate for our Posse scholars, the Faculty Mentor role includes helping scholars find the resources they need, helping them to develop time management and study skills, and helping them to develop a sense of belonging on campus. That last one is a biggie.

When Posse #1 scholars first arrived on campus, Cornell was foreign planet to them, “a sea of whites and Asians” in which some feared they would lose their identity. Others were overwhelmed by the enormous contrasts: surrounded by conspicuous consumption --- while simultaneously worried sick because their mother’s electricity was turned off because the bill wasn’t paid. One was uncomfortable because her ‘hood survival instincts were useless here --- on campus, she didn’t have to worry about getting shot. Through our bi-weekly one-on-ones and weekly group meetings, I have witnessed incredible transformations as they found their feet, established community, gained confidence in their academics and found that sense of belonging. I am in such awe of these Posse scholars. They possess such immense strength and determination and resilience --- and brilliance!

We’ve had our share of storms, but all ten are here, as sophomores in good academic standing. They are doing incredible things on campus, in leadership positions in organizations and clubs, being powerful voices in their classrooms, winning awards, representing Cornell in various ways nationally and internationally --- I am so proud of them! I just attended the induction of one of them as a McNair Scholar yesterday --- McNair is a pipeline program that gears-up undergraduates for their future pursuit of a PhD. They are being leavened by their Posse and Cornell experiences, and they are serving as leavening everywhere they go, here on campus, in their communities back home, and in the world.

In about two years each one of them will walk, in cap and gown, from the Arts quad into Schoelkopf field to have their degree conferred upon

them, and I will be an absolute mess as they cradle their diplomas, embraced by their families, which I am so honored to say includes me, their “other mom” who loves them fiercely and believes in them completely.

In summary:

Life is a gift that places us on a journey. Where we pop out in the world has a profound impact on that journey. Like seeds that are sown into different ground, our fate could simply be determined by the lottery of the womb, and it all too often is --- but I believe that all of God’s children were made to thrive! As we find ways to form meaningful and effective connections between disparate communities, as the Posse Foundation has, we can provide fertile ground to enhance that thriving. We miss out on the richest and most meaningful experiences of life if we don’t embrace the opportunities that God places before us --- to get out of our comfort zones, to make amazing connections with people in need, to expand our definition of family. And we don’t need a storm to create a reason to act --- poverty, hunger, bias and injustice are all around us, and we don’t have to look very far.

I stand here today to testify that, based on my own experiences, the more you give from your heart, the more you receive! YOU are leavening, and YOU have the power to transform the world for the better, and YOU will be richer for it. So here is my challenge for you:

Tune in and raise your awareness of the injustices in our world, acknowledge the power that you have, and say your Gethsemane prayers --- and be ready for, and rejoice in, God’s answers!

I have faith that when you do, you will experience joy unspeakable, faith unshakable, and love unstoppable --- and you will know that anything is possible! *(modified from “Thrive” lyrics, by Casting Crowns)*

All we have to do is open ourselves to God’s guidance, and let the Holy Spirit, the Ultimate Wisdom, the Sophia, do the driving. As Vanina would say, “OK, let’s go!” And as our Reverend Rebecca Dolch would say, “And that’s the Good News!” THANK YOU!!!