

July 10, 2009

Well, it's over. It's done. We've completed our VBS for the year, and it was completely different than what I expected. As most of you reading this know, I have been to Russia to work with the orphans for six years. In Russia, the orphans came and lived with us. We grew to love them within hours because there were so many hours in the day to just love them and hug them. Here in Alaska, we saw the kids for 3-4 hours a day in a very structured setting. I didn't expect us to fall in love with these kids. I wasn't ready to touch them on such a deep level, and in turn, be touched. I think it's safe to say that we all have a different perspective now at the end of it all than when we started.

We have cried together, worked together, healed each other, cleaned together, taught together, and so much more. We have made all of these memories that could never really be explained fully to someone who was not here, experiencing it all. No one else will ever really understand the stories that come from mentioning just one name or looking at just one picture.

Our trip was totally planned by God. I know I have been stressed out at so many points during our adventure that started months ago, but now I see some of the bigger picture that God had been preparing for us. We were supposed to go to Gakona. A few days before, Todd Roeske decided to move his church's VBS up a week, so we had somewhere to go. Everything fell into place, and nothing was as planned. A month before we arrived, two small Native children died in a burning house. The village of Copper Center is rife with grief, and none of us even knew we would be placed there and be challenged emotionally, physically, and spiritually. As crazy as these elements are when you put them all together, we all knew that God was playing a major role in this trip.

We are off on our trek to Anchorage and spending the night at the Puffin Inn. We made this last minute adjustment to our itinerary so we can do some last minute souvenir shopping while still in Alaska. This is probably my last journal on the youth in missions website, since I'm not really sure where I'll be next summer – the likelihood that I'll be in Michigan is pretty low. I have learned more about myself and my faith and teaching and kids in Russia, Lithuania and Alaska than any other experience could have provided me. I am blessed to have grown in my faith so much. Youth in Missions has shaped me as a person and as a child of God, and I thank God for working in me and continuing to shape me.

July 9, 2009

Today was a crazy day for a lot of people. I'm sure you have read some of the heart wrenching stories written by some of our very own youth already. My day was quite a bit different. I was with Robert, teaching the lessons. I saw Sasha and Mary Jane both crying, but they had cried every day previous to this one. I didn't realize what a difference today was. Anyway, during everyone else's breakdowns, I was juggling a lot of the little kids who like to run around and get in Todd and Kim's way during their closing sessions. I was busy enough with one kid on each arm, and another one jumping at me to recognize the rest of the group's emotional vibe.

Afterwards, they all went down to the river, which is again very normal for the group to do, and again, I didn't think anything of it. But when we got them up for dinner, I saw about half of our group in tears, and that's when I realized how hard this week has

been affecting our group. I have no doubt in my mind that every single youth on this trip will be planning on coming back here; the emotional connections run too deep.

On a brighter note, let me entertain you with the happenings of last night on our trip to Valdez. The drive was indeed breathtaking, but we didn't see any moose or bears. We got to Allison Point (which overlooks Prince William Sound) and we found out that we just missed a bear. Are you kidding me? So Carrie and I are talking to another tourist, Maik, Wibbs, Jake, and Megan are looking for fish, and all of a sudden we hear, "Carrie!" And we see Jenna racing towards us. She yells, "Carrie! Get the car! We heard a bear and Melanie's back there by herself!" So we get in the car and start off to see Melanie also racing towards us. She had the video camera out and ready for action. We went back to spy out the bear and Carrie had the car ready for us just in case we had to book it. It was kinda scary because we kept hearing growls and we knew the bear was close by! We kept walking towards the sound, when we see someone looking for birds in the trunk of her pick up truck. We asked her casually, "Have you seen anything good tonight?" And she informed us that the growling noise we heard was just the sea lions in the water. Again, are you kidding me? But afterwards, we all got a good laugh out of the whole scenario.

After that Jenna, Carrie, and myself left earlier than the group – it was already after midnight! We had a really good car ride home, being sleepy and slaphappy, and got into my bed around 3. Fun, worthwhile, but exhausting!

July 8, 2009

Day three: exhausting. I think it is running smoother every day, but it gets hotter and hotter every day! The little ones, ages 3-5, are getting easier to handle since Kim and Todd spend so much time devoted to them – they're so great with young kids! We had a lot of little ones, so there was about 7 adults with them, because one will have to go to the bathroom, one has to be smart and figure out how to open the door, another two get in a fight, and another one cries. I can't tell you how many kids are affected by the death of their friend in the community. The smallest thing happens, and they start bawling. Carrie said yesterday there was a girl who started crying out, "Jasmine, don't die!" All the kids want is to be held in this time of grief. Many of them don't know how to express their grief and it comes out in random ways.

This afternoon was youth group and I was eating dinner next to a girl named Relinda. We were small talking, and all of a sudden she said, "my brother died in a fire." And I talked to her a little bit about it, but I can't believe how many people are related to those two little kids. It seems that the Natives here are all related somehow.

I do not know how these Alaskans have so much energy! It seems that more tired we get, they more hyper everyone else is. I think they must suck our energy and use it for themselves. Tonight we are going to Valdez, which is over an hour away. Apparently it is a nice drive and we might see some Alaskan wildlife.

There are about 987 people waiting to write journals, so I'm getting kicked off. Until tomorrow!

July 7, 2009

Day two was amazing. I felt the connection between us and the kids, which is really important. By the end of the day today, almost every one of us was holding an Alaskan. They are so darn cute here! Another thing that has really changed today is the perspective I have gotten of these kids. I learned a lot of backgrounds on them, and my heart just breaks when I hear their stories. There are so many accounts of drug and alcohol abuse (by their parents!) and it hurts me to hear them talking about it, as if it's not a big deal. And then I'm so proud and impressed that they can tell these stories and see how God has worked through them.

Jake taught the lesson today, and the oldest group again brought the most interesting discussion. I learned that one of our teen helpers is an atheist, another one was abandoned by his mom for a week and left him alone with his three siblings, and another one just got back with their parents because they were in foster care since their parents abused drugs. I asked her, "Wow, and you had to watch all that?" and I didn't mean literally watch them take drugs, but her response was, "No, they made us go upstairs for that." Did I mention that she has two younger siblings, one who is 2 and a half? It's crazy to see how different life is here in the home. Some parents just don't care, and it hurts me more than it did in Russia. I think it hurts me more here, because I can actually hear their story from their mouth. In Russia, I always assumed the best of every kid since I didn't speak their language, but now I can see that I was probably being naïve.

Another thing I learned today is the divide between white people and Natives. There is some racism and bitterness between the two groups. I even noticed it between the kids – not that they were being mean to each other, but some of the groups were all Natives and some were all whites.

It's funny because Melanie has said from day one, "Everyone has their gift. Everyone is here for a reason." And at first I didn't take that too seriously, because I have been on so many of these trips, and I thought she was just overexcited to get here. But now, I totally have to agree with her. There has been more stories that we could tell you that shows a special way in which we connected with an individual here.

Tonight was a women's Bible study with the women of the congregation, and it was all about comfort and how the Holy Spirit is our Comforter. We had some really good discussions, and I felt such a bond and strong fellowship between the women in our group. The more I'm here, the more it's becoming apparent to me that God really did place us here in Copper Center; it was no accident that Gakona cancelled on us.

I pray that the rest of the week runs as smoothly as the past two days have!

July 6, 2009

Our first day of VBS was a success! I was kinda nervous about it, since it was different structure. The lessons people did 4 sessions of lessons, the craft people did 4 sessions of crafts, and so on. So I stayed with Jenna and Wibbs during their lesson, Maik stayed with Jake and Robert during games, Melanie was in charge of snacks (which included some sort of activity), and Carrie was with Megan in crafts. So I can't tell you exactly how everyone else did, but I can tell you how Jenna and Wibbs did. They were great! It was so crazy how fast they had to switch gears from a 14 year old to a 4 year old. The age groups were: 3-5, 5-8, 9-12, and 13 and up. It provided for some challenges, but at the same time, imagine how many ways we can reach these kids!

Todd and Kim informed us in advance that there has recently been a fire in Copper Center that burned down a house and two children, while another kid and their mom escaped. So a lot of kids at our VBS are related or knew the children who died, and that definitely came up today. In our lesson for the 6-8 year olds, we mentioned heaven, and they started talking about Jasmine going to heaven. So of course I took advantage of that and asked, “why did she go to heaven?” but I wasn’t ready for them to talk about that.

Another cool lesson was with the oldest age group. Jenna and Wibbs taught their lesson, and again, heaven and hell were mentioned, and they all started asking questions. The one that shocked me the most was, “When you’re in heaven, is there a chance you can go back to hell?” Wow. I was really thankful for our discussion, because even if they didn’t listen to a word of the lesson, at least they got some truths.

The kids are sooo rambunctious. I have never seen so many hyper kids in my life, but apparently that is an effect of fetal alcohol syndrome, which a lot of them have. I don’t think it would be so bad if there weren’t so many kids together! I think the final count was around 45 or 50. The individual sessions weren’t bad because they were split up, but the opening and closing was rough since there were so many kids!

We had the youth from the area to help us, and I was appreciative for their knowledge, but they weren’t the most supportive in getting the kids settled down or disciplining them. They kind of reminded me of the first few years in Russia, when we had Russian teens try and help us, but at least these kids were more helpful than they were. After our VBS today, Kim told us that a lot of those teens are not church-ed, so they are learning too. That’s hard – the helpers could really be the students!

My goal for the week is to be as good as today was. Normally, we have 4 regular days and one day with an excursion; however, we couldn’t manage that with so many kids. So today we decided that I will teach a lesson, and Jenna should have enough extra crafts, and then we can have a sort of end of the week party with water balloons and popsicles. I’m a little nervous about writing the lesson because when I have written the other four in the past, I have had pages and pages of exegetical work done by Pastor Thoma. This time I’m on my own, so it probably won’t be as in depth as the other ones, but hey, I figure I should get used to throwing lessons together last minute, because it will probably happen in the future as a teacher.

The highlight of the evening was getting ice cream from a convenience store, and it was delicious. I had Alaskan wildberry flavor. While driving back, we stopped and saw some of the houses that these kids come from, and it really made me think. These kids come from really poor backgrounds. It makes you realize how much you have.

Well, this is a long one for the day, so I will turn the computer over to Carrie and Melanie. Until tomorrow!

July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009

We had church this morning and it was so refreshing. I was really spiritually hungry, and so Bible study and church was just what I needed. They have Bible study for all ages at 10, with church at 11 to follow. I sat in the adult Bible study, which was covering the book of Revelation, and it led to some really interesting discussions.

Church was different from Our Savior, to be sure, but I liked it. It was really laidback and they had really strong fellowship. We presented our grant money from the church, and following the service, they had a potluck, which they do every week. They all brought Alaskan cuisine (including salmon) and it was delicious! When one of the older guys in the congregation informed me that the salmon I was eating came straight from the river (which we can see from the church), I thought it was pretty neat that we were eating fish as fresh as it gets.

After church, we met with Kim and Todd Roeske about our upcoming schedule for VBS this week. This VBS is much more structured, and it will be interesting to see how we do within a structure that we didn't plan. Normally, we come to a site and we do our thing, but this time, we have all of the supplies and lessons prepared, but I feel like we have to adapt our stuff to the itinerary here, and we're not used to that.

This afternoon has been really chill. The guys went out fishing, and the girls hung out, took naps, wrote journals, and made name tags for this week. Once the guys came home, we ate tacos (yum-o!) and played some games so our group could bond a bit before we all have to work together this week. The first two games were kind of getting to know you games, and the second was a team building activity. After that, Jake and Robert taught us how to play Sharks and Minnows, which they are playing tomorrow with the kids. We ended our fun game time by practicing our skit that we are doing for the opening tomorrow morning.

Right now the kids are all running around, getting their crafts ready, and doing last minute prep for the lessons. It will be interesting to see everyone's attitude tomorrow evening after VBS. Normally, everyone is really down because they felt they could have done better, and a pep talk is in order. We'll see if we need one.

Who knows what to expect for tomorrow? We could have anywhere from 25-60 kids! Flexibility is key!

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Jenna and I have been having a little patriotic competition of who can tell more people happy Independence Day. I have won, even though Jenna would never admit to it. What's more, I'm wishing everyone who reads this: Happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July! Now I really win.

We have arrived at Mt Drum Lutheran Church in Copper Center, Alaska! It is always really interesting to see the place where you could potentially be doing VBS for years for the first time. The inside space is great. We could use another room, but we can definitely work with what we have. The only thing that I am a little concerned with is the outside space. The church is right on the river, which has dangerously rapid currents, so automatically that's off limits for the little ones during VBS. That leaves some gravel sections for us to play games, which is ok for kickball, but not for running around or playing 4 square or sidewalk chalk. I'm sure we'll figure something out.

Pastor Roeske met us at the church this evening, and I'm really looking forward to working with him. He is familiar with the people and the setting of which we're working in, and he is also a spiritual leader for us to look to or talk to if we have any questions.

So far, the boys have gone fishing by the river, Melanie has made us a makeshift closet, and Carrie has employed her amazing Mom powers and turned this kitchen

around. She cleaned it thoroughly, organized all of the food we bought earlier today, and now it looks like sparkling new.

Tomorrow we have church at 11 here at the same place where we're sleeping. Literally, the altar will be on top of where one of our air mattresses is. So we have to wake up extra early, get showered and ready (all of which we can do here at the church), and then stow our sleeping bags and air mattresses and pillows in our closet, and then set up for church. It will be interesting and very different from Our Savior back home, but this church just doesn't have the resources or room for us to sleep anywhere else. I'm very excited to see the church service here, because I'm always interested in seeing other churches, especially LC-MS. One day soon I hope to be working for the synod as a teacher, and so I appreciate all the different settings and experiences I can get.

I hope everyone is enjoying fireworks somewhere – we can't because it never gets dark! – and has a great 4<sup>th</sup>.

P.S. Sorry about the lack of photo pages – I think it was taking up too much space on the internet. I couldn't even upload anymore journals without deleting yesterday's pictures. I will try and call Pastor Thoma tomorrow and figure it out so you all can get the visual as well as the journals.

July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009

Today was our travel and leisure day. We started the day with an orientation from Ruth Zellar, who works for Alaska Missions for Christ. She informed us the significance of this trip – it will change people's lives. However, we also learned that a overwhelming percentage of the kids we will be working with have been sexually abused or have fetal alcohol syndrome. Apparently, drugs and alcohol are incredibly prevalent throughout Alaska. All the more reason for us to continue these types of trips!

After that, we walked around downtown Anchorage. It was really cute, and there were a lot of tourist shops, so I got all of my presents done. We also had lunch at a place called Humpy's, which specializes in fish and burgers. I had a salmon burger, so I can now say that I have eaten Alaskan salmon.

After walking around, we came back to the hotel to drop our souvenirs and get ready for our afternoon/evening trip to Portage, Alaska. I took a wonderfully refreshing nap, and then we began our road trip out to the Portage Glacier, which is about 40 miles south of Anchorage. It should have only taken 30 or so minutes, but we were so overtaken by the natural beauty of the Alaskan wilderness, it took us probably over an hour to get there. Our handy dandy Milepost proved to be a worthy travel companion, as I told Carrie (and anyone else who would listen) what we were passing and any random information at a mile by mile pace. We stopped frequently for picture opportunities, and each one got better and better. Carrie, Wibs, and I saw a Beluga whale! There were spottings on the way down to the glacier.

Once we got to Portage, we walked around, took lots of pictures, and saw God's creation from a whole new perspective. It was stunning and absolutely beautiful. Now I'm really excited about traveling to Copper Center, because someone in Anchorage told

us how beautiful the drive will be. And if it's anything like today's drive, it will be breathtaking.

Tomorrow's schedule is: wake up, breakfast, Costco and Walmart for last minute supply shopping, and then drive to Copper Center where we'll meet Pastor Roeske and his wife Kim. Keep us in your prayers as we travel tomorrow!

July 2, 2009

Welcome to the Land of the Midnight Sun! That's what we heard when our flight arrived in Anchorage. So far, Alaska is beautiful! It's a lovely temperature, nice sun, and good company.

Everything has gone really smoothly – it almost makes me nervous. Our flight was delayed a bit, but we made up almost all the time in the air. We pulled into Anchorage around 7ish and was greeted by Ruth Zellar, who is representing Alaska Missions for Christ. We set up our orientation for tomorrow morning at 10 at a local Lutheran church.

After we got our luggage (it was all there!) we found our shuttle to the Millennium Hotel which is only a mile or so away from the airport. We found our rooms – these hallways go on forever – and walked to Wendys to eat some dinner and have a brief meeting about all of the new scheduling things.

I don't know what everyone knows, but about 4 days ago, Pastor Roeske informed me that we will not be going to Gakona to do our VBS. 2 days ago, I found out that we are filling in for Pastor Roeske's VBS at his church. The only difference is that this VBS might have up to 80 or 90 kids a day, with ranges of 3 years to high school. Not exactly what we prepared for, but this is a great example of the flexibility factor on these trips – you never know what you're going to get. When I first told everyone the news, I was expecting complaining and whining, but instead, they all had a great attitude. Melanie even reminded us all about the amount of kids not as a stressor but as more people to hear the Word of God. What a wonderful perspective!