

July 10th-

Bittersweet is the end, for joy is found in the accomplishment of your task, and yet sorrow pervades your being at the finish of something great. AKA... I hate goodbyes. The process of tearing newfound relations apart and having to say those words... goodbye. Those are two of the most empty, meaningless words in the whole of the human language. We got up and began VBS, like always. As if it being the last day of VBS wasn't bad enough, today was the one month anniversary of the house fire. The kids were high strung and emotional. Robert and Sasha were inseparable the whole day, and Jake and his group of followers were joined at the hip all day too. I floated between the groups, trying to spend as much time with the kids and the youth as possible, trying to imprint their faces and characteristics into my brain as best I could.

Once the day was over, we had a water balloon fight with the kids and we ate popsicles. Then came the hardest part. The kids began to leave. Kid after kid came to us, in tears, hugging us with their wet sticky selves and saying things like, "See you next year." When the time came for Sasha to get in the van to leave, the look on Robert's face had us all holding back tears. After most of the kids left, we threw ourselves into rapid cleaning and organizing so we could get going. We through the stuff in the van and stood in front of the church, looking up at it as a group. We were silent for a moment. One of the little girls, Jayna, had remained behind. She came out and stood looking at us. Her eyes filled with tears and she ran to us, begging us not to leave and hugging us tight. She hugged each and every one of us. I knelt in the dirt and hugged that little girl for a long time, letting the week roll through my head, the highs and the lows, the joys and sorrows. A little girl, Mary Jane, made us all sob when she hugged Jake tightly around the neck and said, "Goodbye, Daddy."

Before I left to come to Alaska, I wasn't sure if I was coming back. My feelings toward the trip were, "Oh, this will be a really cool trip.", but I wasn't hard-pressed to go. The moment I saw those kids, shared experiences with them, loved them, laughed with them, taught them about Jesus, I knew as solidly as I knew my own name. I am coming back next year. I will fight for this trip with everything I have in me. I don't care what I have to do to get there; I will return to Copper Center. Teaching these kids was one of the best experiences of my life; I learned so much about myself, about God, and about humanity. I love those kids so much, I don't think I could live with myself if I didn't try to come back. God truly blessed us to be able to come on this trip.

Tonight we're headed down to Anchorage early so we could spend another night in Alaska's big city. We all want to do some last-minute shopping and sleep in a real bed again. Then it's off to the airplane and back to Michigan. I think this is my last journal entry for Alaska 2009, and I can't wait to see all of you when I get back. Thank you for reading my journal and experiencing my trip with me. I love you guys.

Matthew 4:19- "Come, follow me." Jesus said. "And I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed Him.

John 14:27- Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled, and do not be afraid.

July 9th-

Today was a rough, emotional day, a roller coaster of highs and lows, of joys and sorrows, of smiles and tears. It started out well enough... VBS kicked off smoothly and the kids seemed just as happy to be here as usual. Sometimes, these kids are so happy and cheerful that you forget what they've been through... I was jolted roughly back to reality when I went to investigate why a little girl named Mary Jane was hiding by herself behind the puppet show blockade. Mary Jane was crying, sobbing hard, gut wrenching heart tugging sobs. I was, understandably, concerned. I gave her a hug and let her sob into my shirt. I couldn't get any words out of her for several minutes... there was, however, a suspicion lingering in the back of my mind. Finally, the words were gasped out between shudders... "I miss Jasmine."

I sat there and held that little girl behind that puppet wall for several more minutes after that. I didn't know what to tell her... I've never experienced anything like these kids have. It was the most frustrating feeling I've ever had... to want so desperately to help Mary Jane and to be able to do nothing but sit and hold her.

Then another little girl came over to investigate... Her name was Sasha, a little girl who's become quite attached to Robert. She asked me why Mary Jane was crying, but before I could answer, Mary Jane choked out, "I miss Jasmine and Elijah." Sasha lasted for about three more seconds before she too was sobbing and curled in my other arm. I must have had a strange look on my face, because Todd came over to see us and instantly understood what was wrong. He tried to get the girls to calm down by drawing a picture and explaining heaven to them, but they were too far gone, wrapped in a grief only they understood. Their sobs set off a little boy named Ronnie... Sasha was handed over to Robert, who sat and held that little girl close in his arms. He's the only one among us who really understands what these kids are going through, and her tears really hit him hard. The VBS team from Michigan held it together just long enough to get the kids home before a group of us went to sit by the river. There amidst the dragonflies and the sound of the rushing waters even the strongest among us broke down in tears. I am not ashamed to say that I was one of them.

The sadness is like a shadow hanging over our heads, the tears thickening our voices and lingering in even the most cheerful of words. We move in a daze and our smiles don't reach our eyes. We just had dinner (we had chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, and corn. YUM!!!!) Two people that I never thought I would ever see cry were late to dinner because of that very reason. This trip is affecting us in ways none of us foresaw. I thought that seeing the memorial made me realize how much these kids were hurting... not even close.

On a completely unrelated note, there's supposed to be another group coming to do VBS and share our space today. Hopefully there will be enough room for all of us... we have enough problems with the nine of us.

July 8th-

We found out two things when we awoke from our exhausted dreamless slumbers this fine Alaskan morn... one was that there was a forest fire last night. If you go outside and look up, one can see the hazy remnants of smoke still drifting in swirls through the air above our heads like some giant is stirring it with a wooden spoon. That means we have to have all the windows tightly bolted down so as to protect our lungs and those of

the kids that have asthma. This means it's going to be simply sweltering in here by the end of VBS. The second thing we learned was that one of the little girls who came to VBS yesterday has the Swine Flu. We had a frantic scramble of a cleaning party before VBS began, wiping tables and doorknobs with bleach and water and frantically washing our hands until the skin was tinged an irritated red. So far we're good... no one but the little girl and the helper whose lap she was sitting on were infected.

My lesson was today; I taught the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The three to five year olds... you can't teach. You just have to say things like, "Tell me one thing you know about Jesus." The high schoolers were odd to teach... It's really weird teaching my own age group. It was heart-pounding at first, but then once I got into the rhythm, it was nice to not have to try to simplify things... I could explain to them what I wanted to teach them. The two groups in between were my favorite to teach. They were the most excited to learn about what I had to say. Sure they were a little hyper and hard to focus, but they were still my favorites. The light of understanding in their eyes was the coolest thing I've ever experienced.

Remember when I was complaining about the heat a few journals back? Today hit an Alaskan record of 96 degrees. So what do I wear? Jeans, because it wasn't that hot during the morning when I got dressed. The middle of the day, I had my pants rolled up and was sweating. I felt so gross... then we're going on a trip to Valdez, because it's supposed to be the bear population of Alaska, and Jenna and Carrie are dying to see some sort of wildlife. It's currently... 11:05 at night, and we drove past a glacier. Needless to say, it's rather nippy. Guess what I wore? I wore shorts. Why can't I ever win? ☺

July 7th-

Well, the second day of VBS is over. There were more kids today... about 88 compared to the 47 that were there the first day. The craft today was God's eyes, in honor of the story of blind Bartemaeus. I was so proud of those kids... they were way more into the crafts today, and they picked us the God's eyes really fast. They even asked if they could do more than one and voluntarily made two or three. After the VBS we did what we did on Monday... collapsed in an exhausted heap. Wibbs, Jake, and Jenna fell asleep right on the floor, no blankets or pillows or anything to cushion their world-weary bodies. Jake had the lesson today, and he said it went really well. Apparently, they had some really good discussions with the kids, especially the high schoolers, and it lightens my heart to know that they already feel this comfortable opening up to us, and are this interested in the Word.

We went and got ice cream later and stood on the bridge above the river while we ate it. We watched a guy catch a fish (which really irritated Maik, Jake, and Robert, who are dying to catch something, anything). After that we returned home and gathered our own things and went late night fishing ourselves. No, we still haven't caught anything, nor have we seen a moose yet, much to the chagrin of Carrie and Jenna. Audrie Roeske spent the night here with us.

Tuesday is also the night for the women's Bible study here at Mt. Drum, and all we women were expected to participate. It was cool; we talked about the Holy Spirit. During the study, I met a woman named Roz who has a 25 year old autistic daughter. She and I ended up talking about the trials and joys of having an autistic family member for maybe 45 minutes. It was really nice for me to be able to compare autism traits with

Roz, being able to talk to someone other than my family who understands the autism thing. Anyway, tomorrow's my lesson—the Good Samaritan.

July 6th-

My feet are dirty and throbbing, my face and arms are splattered with paint and my hair's falling out of its bun, and yet I've never been happier. Today was our first VBS day and I'm not kidding when I say that this is one of the most... satisfying things I've ever done. These kids are ADD and ADHD and have trouble sitting still. They're still ripped apart by the grief that rampaged their community a week ago. They have ill-fitting clothes and different mental quirks, and yet they're the sweetest kids I've ever seen. I worked the crafts station and it was a completely different experience to not expect the kids to be quiet and not talk while I was talking. They chattered and demanded and were sometimes all out rude, and yet they really seemed to enjoy the craft of stained glass window painting. The kids are friendly and affectionate, and it's not hard to \\\\make friends with them. After the camp though, we all just sat around a table and stared at each other in dull hazes of exhaustion. I don't think we really realized just how much energy it was going to take to attempt to corral these little kids. Yet, Jesus was totally with us, and I think Jenna's lesson really got through to the kids today.

The real thing that personally struck home for me happened a little later though. We decided after dinner to go get ice cream at a little convenience store that one of the Alaskan youth helper's parents owned. It was cool; it had these local flavors like Kodiak Brownie. (That's what I got) After we ate our ice cream, we took a drive through a few of the communities that our VBS kids lived in. Liz thought it would strike home for us and make us realize where they came from... and boy, did it ever. At least for me it did. I mean, I complain about my little house sometimes, but looking at the places where some of our kids lived... These houses are little one room shacks barely the size of my combined bathrooms at home. The roofs are bowed, as though struggling through one more Alaskan winter would prove too much for it. Shingles are hanging by a single thread, ready to tumble to the ground and shatter with a single strong gust of wind. The paint is peeling, and the yards are littered with random pieces of junk that we in Michigan would wrinkle our noses at. It really made me appreciate what I had back home... Then it happened. We pulled up in front of the memorial that the villagers had set up for the two children that had died in the fire. The memorial was sitting in front of the remains of the house. There is nothing left. Absolutely nothing. The foundation of the house is still there, the stones charred and blackened and the wood a barely recognizable pile of ash. As we sat in our rental van, staring at the remains of the house, Carrie told us what happened again. I mean, I'd heard the story and had felt sad about it, but this really hit me in the heart. The house burned for thirteen hours while the fire department worked on it... And the two children that died were ages 7 and 9. We were told that their bodies were found hugging each other, as though they found each other and were trying to protect the other while they burned. I sat there and looked at that memorial and the only thought that was running through my head was, "What if that was my little brother and sister, and I was the only survivor?" And I literally started to cry in the van just thinking about it. (Although, no one saw me, so you guys have to keep that one a secret.) The only surviving kid in the family is in the VBS program and he's extremely clingy, desperately

seeking human affection. I was just... suddenly filled with determination to teach these kids all I could about Jesus, and His love for us. I want them to be able to be comforted by Him more than I've really ever wanted anything I can think of. These kids actually need this, and I just realized today how great of an opportunity this trip is, and how much these kids appreciate us doing this. Please please please continue praying for these Alaskans back in Michigan, and if you haven't been, start. You will never quite understand the importance of these mission trips until you go on one yourself. Never. I didn't. Now, I realize just how much these help people, how much they help the mission participants. My faith in my Savior is so much stronger for this trip, and it's a truly wonderful feeling, so show these kids that Jesus does love them, to answer their questions, to wrap your arms around them, and to see them look up at you, their eyes shining as they say thank you. It truly is the best feeling I've ever felt. Thank you... More updates tomorrow. May God bless us.

Oh, on a brighter and completely unrelated note, Robert and Lil' Man are teaching me to skip rocks! My best so far is four skips, but everyone's back was turned and no one saw it. ☺

July 5th-

Greetings from Copper Center to all Michiganders! (Or, at least those Michiganders reading my journal). It's really hot. That's the first thing I wanna say, because when most people think about Alaska, they think brr, ice. No. It's boiling in this room. We're all decked out in tank tops and shorts. We had church with the people of Mt. Drum Church today. That was a cool experience. It's a little community of people who all know each other and were super friendly to us. We sang some songs, and listened to Todd's sermon about freedom and did that spreading the peace thing. That was neat... I think we should do that at Our Savior. It was nice to shake someone's hand and wish them God's peace, because I wouldn't normally do something like that just randomly.

After church, we had fellowship and eating. The people of Mt. Drum really take their fellowship eating seriously. We set up tables and there was really really delicious food. I had my first salmon sandwich and my new Alaskan friends clapped for me when I ate it. There was roasted fish and moose chili (Yes. Jenna is really hoping that that's not the only moose she was going to see up here.) After the fellowshiping we met with Todd and Kim and had about an hour long meeting going over the finer details of VBS tomorrow. They and their family then left to go to another city to do a church service there and it was up to us to organize our space and prepare Monday's lesson, which is what we girls did while Maik, Jake, and Robert went with Little Man (not kidding, that's what they call him. He's a big fellow, too. A complete oxymoron.) to a fishing spot an hour away. They haven't returned yet. Clearly some of us are taking this a little more seriously than others.

Currently we're relaxing, waiting for the guys to return. Melanie's in the kitchen making tacos (I almost died when I heard we were having tacos. YUM!) for our dinner and nothing much is happening. Getting to meet some of the kids and youth we'll be teaching tomorrow made me super excited for it. I was a little nervous before, but now

I'm just excited. God's totally going to work through us and help bring Jesus to these kids, and it's going to be amazing. I'll tell you all about it upon the morrow. I love and miss you guys! ☺<3

July 4th-

Happy Independence Day! Alaska is the 49th state to join the union and they take their 4th of July very seriously. At least, the people who run Costco do, as we found out early this morning. Let me rewind to the start of our last day in Anchorage... We rose the happy and cheerful teens and adults we are and had a group Morning Prayer responsive before checkout. After cramming all the bags into our two cars (which was no small feat, let me tell you) we were off to seek and discover breakfast. Turns out that practically everything closes for the 4th. We drove for several streets pulling into every restaurant parking lot we found. Closed. All of it. Maik drove the wrong way on a one-way street and had to do a U-turn. In the middle of a street. I'm just happy I was driving with Carrie at that point. Just before we decided to hunt down and shoot a moose for our breakfast, we found a lovely little restaurant with a super kind waiter. Full and sleepy, we were off to an Alaskan Wal-mart with a grocery list and needs to be fulfilled.

Remember how hard it was to fit all the suitcases in the two cars? Yeah, let's attempt to fit all the suitcases, two giant Styrofoam coolers, a week's worth of food, and nine people. I'm gonna let that clown car of an image just sit in your mind while you picture us riding like that... for five and a half hours... aaaaalll the way to Copper Center. That was a real blast. We drove the wrong way on a One-way street again (yes, again.) then through more mountains (which are all starting to look the same) and stopped for dinner about a half an hour from the church. Mmmm... Pizza.

We finally got to the church and praised Jesus in exuberant voices for the end of a rather hellish car trip. We met with Todd and laid down some ground rules for the usage of the church, which isn't really a church in the usual sense. There are no stained glass windows, no permanent altar, and it has a drum set in the back corner beneath the white board. The entire place is not churchish... and yet simply resonates the feel of a people who don't have much, but are determined to worship and will worship where they please. And to be up here in the mountains, surrounded by God's creation largely unsullied by the touch of humanity, it just feels... right.

Now we're situated... the food's away and organized (thanks Carrie!), the crafts stored in a back room and the sleeping bags spread. Most of the others went out fishing down by the river. Soon we will sleep to prepare ourselves for our first church service in the great state of Alaska. God bless. ☺

July 3rd-

Mountains. That is the word of the day. Mountains. You people back home have not seen a mountain until you've driven through an Alaskan mountain range on an epic quest to seek out the remains of a time old glacier. But let me start at the beginning... We woke up to Liz's wake up call on our hotel phone. (Apparently, she knocked on the door, but no one heard it.) Nine o'clock and off we were to meet with the oh-so-kind Ruth to

talk a little about our responsibilities as the VBS teachers. Oh, by the way? The whole 24 hour daylight thing is weird... but very cool. It makes your sense of time feel like it's been tipped upside down and spun till it was dizzy. It's currently 8 o'clock, and the sun is still high in the sky. Anyway, after we talked to Ruth we were off to do our tourist thing... It was into downtown Anchorage for sightseeing and shopping. From tacky tourist traps of souvenir shops to the tasty restaurant where we ate for lunch, downtown Anchorage is a sight to see. (That restaurant, by the way, was called Humpey's. It was... delicious. To say the least. Yum!)

After wearing ourselves out in Anchorage, we returned to the hotel for some much needed relaxation and naps. Then we decided to drive fifty miles south to see a glacier. (Well, it doesn't get dark, and we had the whole afternoon... Alaska is our oyster!) We drove through Alaskan mountains. They were... breathtaking. It is honestly impossible to use the spoken word to describe the utter majesty of these mountains. These are almost living beings themselves, the guardians of this stretch of Alaska, always visible upon the horizon. Being here, in Alaska, among these giants is just showing me how powerful God is, and how in control of things he is. It was only take a single event to send these giant landmasses tumbling down upon the highway. I mean, to have created these gargantuans is obviously no small feat. It's simply incredible.

We finally arrived at the glacier point, after passing it once and having to double back, only to find the adjacent gift shop closed. We snapped pictures, got Subway, and ate it off the side of the road next to a natural waterfall tumbling down the side of the cliff. Now *that* was cool. Now it is 9 pm and the sun still shines above us like a lighthouse beacon. We're heading back to our hotel in Anchorage to rest up and prepare for another full day. Our tourist days are over... pack up, buck up, let's teach these kids about Jesus! Seeing the mountains has filled me with a new appreciation for the things that God can do... that God has done, and I can't wait to tell the kids in Copper Center all about Him. I'll regale you with details of our first day in Copper Center tomorrow! God bless you. ☺

July 2nd-

WE'RE IN ALASKA!!!! Ok, that was a really obvious statement, but we are. And it's so cool! First we had a reeeeeeeally long plane ride. Our flight got delayed by 45 minutes so we sat in the airport for a while... (Can you say airport Taco Bell?) We also discovered that Jenna, Wibbs and I had to get seats at the gate. The entire group ended up split up on the plane... Liz, Maik, Melanie and Jake in the front and Wibbs, Jenna and I in the back. Taking off and landing was fun... the seven hours in between was not. But I digress. We finally dipped below the endless expanse of clouds (did you know that clouds look the same in Michigan and Alaska? You've seen one cloud, I guess you've seen them all) and the first part of Alaska we saw were mountains. Tons and tons of mountains. It looked like a giant toy box. I could just picture a toy train winding its way through those peaks... it was way cool. We got to the airport and made our way to the luggage claim and THANK THE LORD all our luggage arrived intact. (This is after both Jake and Liz got searched at the Detroit security check, so this was a major relief.)

We dropped our stuff off at the hotel...which is rather nice. It doesn't have a pool (disappointing) but it does have a large Jacuzzi (a nice bonus). We decided to skip the sandwiches and splurge on a nice healthy meal of Wendy's. Alaska Wendy's... actually different than Michigan Wendy's. The menus are different. And the value menu? NOT a dollar, but a dollar fifty. Disappointing. Anyhoo, we ate there, returned to the hotel, and the five teens ran rampant in the hotel and sat in the Jacuzzi for way longer than the intended limit. Now we're sitting in the rooms, where it's midnight here and four in the morning there. Strangely enough... none of us are tired. But I'm being called away to go play cards... Tomorrow we meet with Ruth and go over what we're doing and shopping! I have to get a stuffed caribou for my sister Emily. I miss you Michiganders and will update y'all upon the morrow. Good night! ☺