

## First-time mission trip participants share their experiences

*Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.” – lyrics by James Kilbane*

For Britt Flanagan, it was the chance to spend a week with her son helping those fortunate. For Bev Hill, it was listening to a “nudge” from God to use her skills on a medical team. For Ashley Cram, it was a chance to travel with her mother and work with needy children.

Britt, Bev and Ashley had different reasons for taking their first mission trip last year. But they all ended up in the same place – incredibly grateful for an experience that enriched their lives and their relationships, opened their eyes and brought them closer to God.

Is 2015 the year for you to follow in their footsteps?

Westminster is blessed to offer a rich variety of mission trip experiences, from close to far away, from comfortable to rustic, from short to long. The church generously subsidizes all trips to make them affordable. In addition, confidential scholarships are available to those who want to serve but need financial assistance.

### Bev Hill, Haiti

**1. *What was the main reason you decided to go on a mission trip in 2014?***

**God's nudge and the support of my family. I have wanted to do this trip for many years because it had a "medical" focus but never felt like it was a good time to leave my family. This year they encouraged me to go and promised to take care of everything at home.**

**2. *What about your experience surprised you the most?***

**How much I want to go back again. I hesitate to talk overly fondly of the experience for fear I may lose my spot in the years to come. It was so fun to work together with the team of people I traveled there with. I felt like we were needed, useful and appreciated. I think we made a difference by being there.**

**3. *Describe a moment or experience you had that touched you (or perhaps a person you met.)***

It was very, very busy one afternoon and I was sitting in the pharmacy, feeling overwhelmed and backlogged, doing the final medication check on each filled prescription and there were lots. A little Haitian girl escaped from her mother and just ran over and gave me a hug out of the blue. I am sure I probably appeared to need a hug at that moment. She picked up on that and gave me one. It just made my day!

4. *What was the hardest part about the trip? How did you deal with it?*

The most difficult experience I encountered there was our visit to an orphanage in an extremely rural area of Haiti on a non-school day. In my opinion, it was very sad and less than ideal living conditions for any child. I just wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible as we hadn't come equipped to do anything there but visit with the kids. Missy, the Family Health Ministries nurse who took us there, reminded me that the children were at least able to have three meals a day there and were able to attend school. Education and nourishment were their greatest chance of a safe and healthy survival in Haiti. I tend to still block this part of our trip from my mind because of the sadness it brings me. I couldn't stay and fix things there at that orphanage but ... I can do my part here in Greensboro to make the futures brighter for children who may have not so bright lives right now. I have started volunteering at Eastside Park once a week. We work with the kids who come to the after school program there on their homework and also give them a snack/meal while there. It's not the orphanage in Haiti but it is a place I'm needed and can make a difference in the lives of children who need someone to love and care about them.

5. *What is the main thing you took away from the experience?*

I don't want to forget the people of Haiti and how vastly different their lives are from ours. Their lives seem so difficult in comparison. I don't want to forget them as I don't want to forget how blessed we are as Americans, with the opportunities we have to provide for our families and keeping them healthy, clean water, flush toilets, air conditioning and ICE! Others on the trip who had been to Haiti before said they saw great improvements in Haiti since their last trip. To me, that means we are making a difference there and as long as that is happening, I want to keep going!

## Sopheap Duong, New Jersey (Presbyterian Disaster Assistance)

### *1. What was the main reason you decide to go on a mission trip in 2014?*

When I saw the 2013 December Westminster Sunday bulletin asking, "Is this the year for you to step outside your comfort zone?" I decided I would like to know how difficult it would be to step outside my comfort zone. Then I had a chance to listen to an information session about the mission trip in the chapel. I selected New Jersey (disaster assistance).

### *2. What about your experience surprised you the most?*

The experience that surprised me the most is when I was at the first work site, in the town of Toms River, and at the second work site, in Seaside Heights, I saw many homes that continued to be in need of repair. They are very close to the shore.

### *3. Describe a moment or experience you had that touched you (or perhaps a person you met.)*

On Tuesday, the second day, we were at the second work site. While we worked on the roofing job and throwing bricks, I saw a huge man walking around the house with an emotional heart-wreck. He was the home owner. He was very anxious and weary, having seen his home destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. But he was surprised and pleased to see that our group and another volunteer group had come to repair his home.

### *4. What was the hardest part about the trip?*

Since I am a native of Cambodia in Southeast Asia, I was not sure how I would get along with my volunteer group made up of native Americans. But during the New Jersey mission trip, we went to Wal-Mart as a group, we ate together in the homeowner's driveway, we cleaned up the kitchen at the Morning Star Church. We knew we were all tired from working even though a few of us had no special skills.

### *5. What is the main thing you took away from the experience?*

Although Hurricane Sandy damaged many homes around the shore of New Jersey, ironically OR unexpectedly, it brought two different nationalities -- American and Cambodian -- working side by side in one place. It is a mystery to me: Who can understand the hand of God when He appointed His regular people to accomplish something called a mission trip?

## BRITT FLANAGAN, MEXICO

*1. What was the main reason you decided to go on a mission trip in 2014?*

I have always had compassion for people who do not have the opportunities I have been blessed with. We joined Westminster about five years ago, and I immediately took interest in the mission trips. When I learned about the various trips and the opportunity to do it with the younger generation, I decided to wait to experience it when one of my children could go with me. It has taken awhile, but my oldest finally turned 15. Will did not blink an eye when I asked him if he wanted to do a mission trip with me. Therefore, I was glad I had waited.

*2. What about your experience surprised you the most?*

The relationships I developed over such a short period of time -- both the group from Westminster and the connections I made with the families at the village.

*3. Describe a moment or experience you had that touched you (or perhaps a person you met.)*

So many moments touched me, individually, but it was watching Will that amazed me the most. He really embraced the experience in its entirety by connecting with the other church members (peers and adults), giving his all, physically, when we worked on building the homes, and then branching out with the kids in the village.

*4. What was the hardest part about the trip?*

Leaving was by far the hardest part of the trip. Watching the children and the mothers wave as we drove away on the bus was heartbreaking for me. At that moment, I felt like I was abandoning them. On a positive note, though, I figured out that I definitely wanted to return.

*5. What is the main thing you took away from the experience?*

**Faith. Working full time and having three very busy children, I had not been able to focus on myself much, and when I did have time ... well ... I needed to get a pedicure.**

**I realized I wanted to create more meaningful moments for myself, when I could just be me. When I could think about what was really important in my life and give some attention to what my core values and beliefs are, then incorporate those into my life, not just talk about them.**

**I also took away some meaningful relationships with everyone on the trip. I know when I see one of my group from across the sanctuary, that even though we may not have a chance to speak that day, we know what the other might be thinking.**

## **Mike Phillips, Appalachia**

**1. *What was the main reason you decided to go on a mission trip in 2014?***

**Although we have been members since 2000, I have never been on a mission trip with Westminster and it has been something I have thought about for several years now. Part of the reason I have never gone is because we have had little kids for a long time – we have 4 sons aged 15, 13, 10 and 4. Now that one of our sons is old enough to participate on a trip as well, it seemed like the right time to combine mission work with some one-on-one time with him. I also grew up in southwest Virginia so the opportunity to perform mission work in that part of the country with Appalachia Service Project was also appealing to me.**

**2. *What about your experience surprised you the most?***

**I was most surprised by how easy it was to do mission work. The work itself was not easy, but having flexibility in regards to when we arrived and then having great support from the rest of the team made it so much easier to fulfill work and school obligations while at the same time having the opportunity to serve God in a different way.**

**3. *Describe a moment or experience you had that touched you (or perhaps a person you met.)***

**The work itself was fulfilling and it was rewarding to see what a difference you can make in someone's life with an investment of just a little time and effort. Being able to share that experience with my 15-year old son and establish a different connection with him was probably what touched me most.**

**4. *What was the hardest part about the trip?***

**The hardest part was knowing that there was only so much we could get done in a two-day period in an area and for people who really need help.**

**5. *What is the main thing you took away from the experience?***

**The benefits of mission work – serving God by helping others, building relationships with those whom you share the experience, the satisfaction of seeing the result of your efforts – are all possible in our own back yard.**

## **Ashley Cram, Honduras**

**1. *What was the main reason you decided to go on a mission trip in 2014?***

**I wanted to go on this mission trip because I felt it was a good opportunity to help others and to also learn something about myself. My mom and I always talked about finding a mission trip to go on together and this trip provided an opportunity for us to give back and help others in a different way than usual.**

**2. *What about your experience surprised you the most?***

**The most surprising part, in my opinion, was the amount of love present in the community we worked in. Everyone was so willing to help out on other people's houses. It was incredible how even though the community didn't have much, they all continued to be selfless and work together as a team. They also were so welcoming when we came in to help. They accepted anything but they weren't rude about it. They didn't ask for more from us and they were overjoyed with what we gave them. This community opened my eyes and taught me that even though they don't have much, they can still be happy. It made me appreciate what I have and also gave me a new outlook on my life.**

**3. *Describe a moment or experience you had that touched you (or perhaps a person you met).***

**The children in the school at Santa Rita changed my life. I worked mainly in Vacation Bible School because I wasn't much help in construction. Every child was so happy to have us there and they were always so excited to do new activities.**

**They also loved playing outside with us. We taught the kids how to play “Miss Mary Mac” and they all found it to be so much fun. These children always came to school so happy and so eager to learn which was weird to see because here in America, kids dread going to school and we take our education for granted. Their willingness to learn made me appreciate the academic opportunities that I am given and their excitement from seeing us warmed my heart.**

***4. What was the hardest part about the trip?***

**The hardest part about this trip for me was seeing the circumstances this community lives in. Since I was mainly in the school, the supplies they are provided with were heartbreaking to see. Each classroom had a chalkboard and one day I happened to look down and noticed they had white board markers on the shelf. Someone must have donated those markers not knowing they were of no use. It was hard to see these kids, who get so excited about learning, not have the right supplies when I sit in school with other students and the nicest supplies, and none of us appreciate the education we are receiving.**

***5. What was the main thing you took away from this experience?***

**The main thing I took away from this experience was to appreciate what you have. I used to dread going to school and learning but after seeing the circumstances these kids live in, I started to be more thankful for the life I was given. I also learned a lot about love from this community. The kids from the school loved having someone pay attention to them for just a little while and to play games with them. They showed so much love for us when we had only known them for a day. It showed me that love is what builds friendships, not similarities. I may have been nothing like some of those kids, but my love for children and the happiness I felt when they were happy and having fun, brought us closer.**