Paying it forward

by Louisa Erb, SWAP Hindman Location Coordinator

We almost didn’t take the job. In the spring of 2015, we visited a trailer that looked fairly nice. Mike Heiston was sitting in a chair, and his wife Keisha and young, active daughter Paisley greeted us at the door. They needed a new floor in their laundry area.

Mike was suffering from a broken back due to a truck accident that happened on December 14, 2014. He was in a lot of pain. Mike had been a welder and was no longer able to work. Mike and Keisha’s original plan was to sell his welding truck to pay cash for the trailer then put all their savings into buying a house.

Paisley was born in July 2014 and Keisha was not working. Now the trailer needed some repairs and they had no money left to do it. Mike was very depressed. Their son Brayden was also due to have hip surgery. They were also forced to sell two additional vehicles to make ends meet.

That summer a group of men from the Friends Helping Friends group came to do the repairs on the trailer. Mike and Keisha had only asked for floor repair in the laundry room, but once things were torn up it was evident more needed to be done. They ended up repairing the laundry room and bathroom floor and replacing the hot water tank. They also put down flooring that Mike had previously purchased in the bedroom.

John Karl, a member of the Friends Helping Friends group, was amazed that Mike worked alongside them even though it was obvious that he was suffering with pain. Mike said he just was so grateful to the group and wanted to help. Mike’s skills as a welder were easily transferred to carpentry.

Fast forward to June 2019. I ran into Mike in a local grocery store. He said he would like to volunteer with SWAP for a week. He worked alongside the same group of men who fixed his trailer in 2015!

John Karl was totally impressed with Mike’s skill. Mike had good ready solutions to problems they encountered.

I asked Keisha, his wife, why he would give up a week of work to volunteer with SWAP. “God had put it on his heart, and he felt he wanted to give back,” she said. “He is not one to lay down… he keeps on going.”
Coordinators’ Corner - Farewell

by Keith & Charlene Barr, MCC Appalachia Program Coordinators

Where does one begin when things are ending? We had no idea when we signed on for our first three years that it would turn into 14 years.

When we first arrived in West Virginia at the Elkhorn SWAP house, we immediately felt at home. God had called us into this ministry, and we were ready to begin. We gave it our all, and in return we received far more blessings than we gave.

Homes were made ‘safe, warm and dry,’ stereotypes about people in poverty were redefined, lives were mutually transformed, lifetime friendships were made and many were drawn closer to God through their brief experiences in SWAP.

The SWAP program recently underwent an in-depth evaluation by MCC and came through with flying colors. Our concern is that in this current year our numbers are at an all-time low, less than 50% of what we would normally have. One site was in operation this summer for only two weeks out of ten because of the lack of volunteers. The other two locations operated with smaller groups and no week was filled to capacity.

We need staff for our 2020 SWAP summer season!

Summer staff are a critical component of SWAP’s successful ministry. They receive meals, lodging and a weekly stipend during the three month assignments. Call (606) 633-5065 or visit swap.mcc.org.

A SWAP Love Story

by Aaron Jones, SWAP Harlan Summer Staff

Although Katie and I (Aaron) went to the same high school and college, we had never really interacted. Due to God’s incredible foresight, we both applied to work as SWAP summer staff for 2011.

We talked at times throughout the Mondays when we had to prepare camp for the upcoming volunteers and at times throughout the evening sessions. At the end of the summer, we parted ways never being any wiser to either of us being attracted to one another.

Shortly after graduation from college, I ended up in Memphis taking part in Downline Ministry’s Emerging Leaders program. Katie finished college and began studying for the MCAT and waiting for God’s timing about medical school. While being placed on a wait-list for a spot in a medical school, she took the GRE, applied to PT school, and was accepted.

Katie and Aaron’s engagement photo.

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Reflections of Summer Staff

by Summer Staff:
Kimball, West Virginia

In the words of a summer volunteer, “There are two types of visitors: tourists and pilgrims. Tourists pass through a place, while pilgrims let a place pass through them.”

While serving with SWAP in Kimball, WV, we have felt more like pilgrims than tourists since we have embraced the diverse Appalachian culture. Over the course of the summer we were able to gain valuable experiences through our five senses.

In the mountains of West Virginia, we saw creation in all its wonder: Beautiful ridges, flowing streams, and bright wildflowers. We saw the wonderful people whose lives and history are one with the area. We saw abandoned mines, houses, churches and schools. These are a testament to the history in this land.

McDowell County was once full of people and had an abundance of jobs. There is now a dwindling population, and many are on disability and welfare. We saw joy and faith in the people that stand strong in the face of many trials. The community is made of a tight knit group that looks out for, and cares deeply about each other. We saw hearts open in fellowship with volunteers and homeowners and volunteers as they connected with homeowners and volunteers, other staff, and community members. We learned about the community in McDowell County through their stories.

As you roll down your windows upon entering McDowell County, you are instantly surrounded by the fresh mountain air. There are the aromas of fresh brewed coffee and home-cooked meals; of fresh gyros from the local Greek restaurant. In contrast are the smells of musty rooms from leaky roofs and the odors caused by plumbing in need of an upgrade.

Through the sense of touch, we have felt hot temperatures and rain-soaked shirts, mosquito bites, poison ivy, scratched and blistered hands. However, hugs at the end of the week and the joy of fellowshipping with volunteers overcame the scratches and bruises. Pushing through the heat, humidity, and rain storms enhanced the enjoyment of relaxation in the evenings.

Although there was pain and loss outside of SWAP for staff, volunteers, and for local residents, our confidence has stayed in our only constant-God.

The spoken word had a profound impact on our summer experiences. Each morning we gathered as staff to begin our day with devotions. Taking the time to center our thoughts helped remind us that we were here to serve a community that has experienced much struggle and pain. We reflected that while we cannot always see the bigger picture, God is active, and is using us in ways that we can only imagine.

We were blessed each week with volunteers who brought the skills we needed, reminding us that God always provides. Both volunteers and homeowners blessed us more than we could ever imagine.

Over the course of a summer that has ended far too quickly, we have grown closer together as the family of God.
We can’t sing the praises of the program enough, but unless we have enough volunteers to keep the program alive it’s future is unsure. So, if you want to see lives impacted for good by God, please continue to talk to those around you, form groups, large or small, to come to SWAP this fall, next spring or summer. The online application is at mcc.org/swap/apply.

We are not certain what’s next on our horizon as we move forward. We do know that God is faithful and that we are not finished walking with our Lord and Savior. We are prayerfully seeking God’s leading. As we receive direction we will move forward, and we continue to anticipate Christ’s soon return.

While I was in Memphis, we began messaging back and forth and decided to meet up around 2 a.m. one morning when I was travelling to Kentucky. We met at Huddle House, drinking coffee and talking.

We continued to talk to each other and decided to begin dating when I moved back to Kentucky in March 2015. And … then I broke up with her right before working my fourth summer as SWAP staff.

We spent about a year apart. In reflection, we both needed time to grow and for God to work in each of us. We began dating again in December of 2016.

It wasn’t until I helped her move to Tupelo, MS, in August 2018 that I knew I didn’t want to spend another minute of my life without her by my side. I had been saving for a ring but did not know until I left her in Mississippi that I absolutely had to propose to her soon.

The only place that made sense was where we first got to know each other: at the top of Pine Mountain in the chapel behind the SWAP dorms.

We met at SWAP, got engaged at SWAP, and will probably continue to volunteer with SWAP, because the work it does, reflecting the love of Christ throughout Appalachia, is firmly rooted in our calling to make disciples of all nations.

As we look forward to celebrating MCC’s centennial in 2020, all former MCC Appalachia service workers and SWAP summer staff are invited to attend this reunion at the Forestry Camp in Harlan, Kentucky. More details will be available closer the time.

For more information or questions, contact: AppalachiaHarlanLC@mcc.org