

## The Story of Ground Zero

During the Summer of 2009, the students at Turning Point at Calvary experienced a dramatic change. On several trips during the summer months, these students experienced firsthand what it was like to serve someone less fortunate, someone who is terminally ill, and someone who was facing discouragement. It opened their eyes. They thought, "Why can't we do this at home?" They caught the vision to serve and to love like Jesus did. It was out of these experiences that the Ground Zero Ministry was started.



The first experience that opened the students' eyes was our annual Choir/Missions Tour to Maine. We spent our week helping a student evangelistic ministry host events, singing at local churches, assisting a church plant get the word out about their ministry, connecting with students and children at Christian youth camps, and spreading the Good News of the Gospel to whoever would hear it. For many of the students in the 45 member choir, this was their first time this far away from home, and it was definitely out of their "comfort zones," but the students saw a commonality between themselves and the people in Maine: they are people who Jesus loves and died for.

Later in the Summer, we took a small group of key leaders to Orlando for a service weekend. The first stop was to Give Kids the World Village, a place where children who have a terminal illness can come with their families for a week of vacation where they don't have to worry about anything. GKTW provides meals, snacks, entertainment, housing, tickets and transportation to Orlando theme parks, and many other special touches that make the week memorable to the family. It is staffed each night almost completely by volunteers. The students were excited for the opportunity to serve and impact the families at GKTW, but they came back being impacted. Chelsee Sims said, "I went down there wanting to make an impact on kids, but I was so humbled at how much I was affected by the families there. I felt sorry for them because of their medical condition and all they were facing, but they looked at themselves as made special by God. What a positive outlook!"

The next day, this same group joined another church in passing out backpacks to underprivileged children in downtown Orlando. They worked hard filling the bags, organizing them, passing them out, staffing the event, serving food, and interacting with the children. At one point, the organizers/sponsors of the event came to see how it was going, and they were giving props to the kids who were working inside, but most of the students from our church were outside serving. Youth Pastor Kevin Taylor found himself feeling frustrated. He wanted the sponsors to see what his kids were doing and how hard they were working. Then the Holy Spirit brought Matthew 6:3 to his mind: "But when you do merciful deeds, don't let your left hand know what your right hand does."

Later on, the students from Turning Point attended the Youth Evangelism conference where they heard teaching on their role in the Great Commission. That Saturday, the students from Turning Point worked together with the students from First Baptist Orlando who have an established ministry to the government-subsidized housing neighborhood next to the church. They took First Baptist's ministry truck and passed out bags of groceries and Gospel flyers in the neighborhood. At first the students were scared, but when they saw people respond to the love that they were trying to show, the students caught the vision. They wanted to reach out their own community. They wanted to love and serve their own neighbors the way they thought Jesus would. They decided to call it Ground Zero. Junior Dylan Parsons said, "The summer of '09 with all the trips and experiences we had was a summer where I saw the hand of Jesus all over everything. It set us ablaze with a fire from God instilled into us all."

Why the name Ground Zero? The students decided on the name because getting out and helping people see the Love of God is where their faith hits the ground. They desire to be the "boots (sneakers or flip-flops) on the Ground for Jesus. The Ground Zero Ministry seeks to engage students in ministering to the needs, both physical and spiritual, of their community. Since starting this ministry in August of 2009, the students have organized a clothing drive, collecting and distributing new and used clothing to the needy in the community. They have taken an active role in the monthly food and clothing distributions at Turning Point at Calvary Church. They have established a relationship with a local Publix grocery store, and they pick up, organize and distribute weekly donations. They have organized a toy drive to give toys to the families that have participated in the food and clothing distributions to date. They have raised funds for and have purchased a 18 foot long box truck that is used in the Ground Zero Ministry in a variety of ways.



First, it carries the food, clothing and toys that are collected and take them to the areas of the community that face the biggest needs. Second, the truck is outfitted with a portable stage and sound system that attaches to the side of the truck, so that the Calvary Crew Student Choir and Ministry Teams can have a "mobile platform" to share the love of Jesus through music, drama, puppets and stomp routines. On December 8th, one week after the truck was purchased, the students loaded it up and distributed bags of groceries to needy families. The truck is armed with inflatable bounce houses, a portable grill, games



supplies, a portable stage, puppet stage, two generators, and just about anything else needed to share God's love.

The truck was painted and the graphics put on by talented church members who wanted to be apart of what God is doing. The gentleman who painted the truck said, "I can't preach or teach a Sunday school lesson, but I can paint a truck for Jesus." That is exactly how God keeps "tricking out" His truck.

These students will use any opportunity to load up the Ground Zero truck and go out! Each month, after the students distribute food to and pray with the nearly 30 families who come to the church's food bank, the students will load up the leftover food and distribute the rest in neighborhoods strategically chosen by our church. In December, we took a bus full of students on Operation Elf. The students collected, refurbished and wrapped toys and bikes to distribute to needy families. We asked God to lead us to the families who needed help the most. As we unloaded presents and bags of groceries and caroled, we created quite a stir in the neighborhood. People started coming out of their houses and directing us to the families who needed help. We were able to tell them about the Jesus who loved them so much that He had come to the earth to die for them. While Kevin Taylor was talking to one family about Jesus, he sensed that the students were not around. Then, he saw the students walking into a house down the street. While the students had been singing to the first family, a man had approached one of the adults and said, "Would you come meet my mother? She's real sick and discouraged. She would love a visit." He was not interested in "free stuff;" he was drawn to the love of Jesus shown in the students. Thirty students walked into the modest home, and sang Christmas Carols and Amazing Grace to this precious lady as she sat in her bed. She asked if we could all pray for her, and we held hands around her bed and lifted her before the King of Kings. She said, "You've made my Christmas." "The truth is, she made our Christmas!" said Maudena Sims, adult leader. "As our students sang and prayed with this lovely lady, I realized what it meant to be the hands and feet of Jesus."

This March, the students were able to pass the vision on to another youth group. They packed up the Ground Zero truck and met up with the youth group of Ridge Point Church in Auburndale, FL. The two groups packed up bags of food and flyers about Ridge Point Church and then headed out to a neighborhood that the church has been trying to reach. Before the distribution was complete, the senior pastor text messaged the youth pastor and let him know that the church's website has had 3 hits, and they had received an email from a family saying how blessed they were by the students who served them.

On our summer Choir Tour/Mission Trip this summer, our Ground Zero Truck hit the road with the crew and led in some amazing ministry. We partnered with local churches to reach out to their community. Some of the highlights from the tour were an open air performance at Teen Challenge, a puppet show in a park in for about 100 kids, and a youth service with three youth groups. God showed up in amazing ways that week.



During the summer of 2010 the Ground Zero Love Squad was formed. 22 students went through a challenging application process to be apart of this team. This team was trained in personal evangelism, puppet ministry, and general outreach strategies. Every week this team went out into our local community and did a variety of activities to share the love of Jesus. The Love Squad set up block parties, cookouts, random lemonade of love hits, daycare performances, homeless ministering, and simple drove around our city looking for people to share God's love with. We saw many pray to receive Christ and some have begun to worship with us.

There have been so many blessings this group of students have experienced by serving in this way. Adult leader Kelly Singleton said, "As a youth leader, one of the greatest joys that I have received through Ground Zero is how our students have looked beyond their own personal lives and have realized all the great gifts that God has put into their path - the ability to have clothing, shelter, food, pens and paper to do their schoolwork, toys to play with, family members that love on them and spend time with them, only to name a few. It's a humbling experience." Student Kaley Hudgins put it this way, "Ground Zero is important to me because I know it's important to God. I feel like if Jesus was here, this is what He would be doing. It's the most rewarding feeling to know that God has used you to make an impact in other people's lives."

The theme verse for Ground Zero Outreach comes from I John 3:17. Scripture says, "If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion – how can God's love be in that person." That verse really answer the question of why Ground Zero exists!

