

The Process

The process begins on a college campus. Cold air, fall temperatures, pretty, big buildings.

Lipscomb, Belmont, TSU, Vanderbilt- They're all very different but largely the same- filled to the brim with eager young people ready to make their mark on the world through positive change.

Perfect candidates for the process.

The process is Bethany and I setting up our table- picture frames on the left, candy bowl on the right, station identification signage in the middle, all atop the thick black tablecloth. The process persists with students coming next, but hopefully snacks coming simultaneously, because talking for hours makes you hungry!

Big smiles, hard smiles, but not toooo big to scare away the potential prospects.

"Heyyyyyy want some candy? Yes, I love Sour Patch kids too! Ya know what else I love? Real kids! Haha do you like kids? Well good! We volunteer with kids at PTM!" - me.

I sound so silly sometimes I could kick myself, but the energy I've displayed has her interested. Her, meaning the candidate for the process. Now comes the sell...

"At PTM we believe in 3 things as core tenants of our work! We want our students to develop 1. Joy filled friendships, 2. A lifelong love of learning (say that 5 times fast HA), 3. Their ability to pursue their God inspired dreams."

She's nodding along smiling. She's either interested or a solid actress- regardless, I press on.

"We serve our students in a variety of ways at PTM! We have summer camps, field trips, bible studies, mentorship programs and more, but our most popular offering for our college-aged volunteers is our after-school programming. "If you'll look at this handy dandy brochure, it shows some of our offerings from Monday-Friday after school!"

She flips quickly through the booklet- half sold and half disinterested- as my mind flips quickly through my next scheduled line. Improvisation or mastery.... improvisation or mastery...improvisation or-

"I like your hair!" - I blurt out. "Your hair looks really cool! Do you like Chick Fil A?"

Bethany looks at me and laughs at my fundamental mishandling of the process. But the girl likes being complimented, she likes Chick Fil A sandwiches, and now we have found common ground. We speak for 10 minutes, not another word about the kids- and all of a sudden, the process looks like a hit. She says "sign me up" and I smile while snapping my fingers, knowing I have closed a deal.

Her and her friend walk away. Bethany slaps me 5 as we celebrate 2 quality volunteers coming into our midst.

Part 2 of the process is set to commence. Part 2 means I email everyone we met the volunteer application saying, "It was so nice to meet you at that_____ location" After emailing each name from the list that we've gathered I wait and I hope that they'll come through to help because PTM isn't going to run itself

BEEP

A RESPONSE! An email from.... that girl at that fair at that campus out there! She says... She would love to work with K-4th children Tuesdays after 3, wants to get started ASAP, and it was so very lovely to get to meet me!

YES!

The next step in the process is the connection game. Let's see.... we have eight K-4th sites here at PTM and we need different numbers of volunteers at each one for peak efficiency... Park Ave needs 3 and has 2, Wilson Center needs 6 but has 4, St. Luke's needs 12 and has 14 and hmmm Mt. Nebo needs plenty more.

The next thing I'll do is to clearly connect her, via email with the Mt. Nebo Site Director. My job's almost done just gotta log her innnnn to our Volunteer Tracker google sheet and MyAttendance tracker class andddd BOOM what a win.

This process was quick and easy today, but the stress of getting volunteers never goes away!

Crucial to our operations the process persists, at least I'm finally getting good at this!

College Dreams: PTM poem

I close my eyes and I'm 5 years old. It's the morning of my first day of school. I'm struggling to put my brand new two strapped Sacramento Kings themed backpack on my back. I complain audibly to my parents: "Why do I have to go to school anyway??" I pout.

My dad comes down to my eye level and says, "because you have to get through kindergarten in order to eventually get through college." I don't know what college is. His words mean nothing.

Middle school now and college is talked about every single day. We do class projects on west coast schools- Oregon GO DUCKS, U-C-L-A 8 CLAP, fight the fu____.... freak on because we don't curse in this house. And I have sweatshirts for them all!!! For some reason mom can't get enough of my love of schools for old people, so she buys them happily! We visit campuses too. Cal Berkeley Golden Bears, Stanford Cardinal- my cousin's there! Sacramento State is great, UC Davis is my mom's home base- so many colleges to count I lose track- not attending college isn't found anywhere on my mind map.

High school- where ya gonna go? Visits, fairs, and much, much more. College counseling info sessions, ACTs and SATs- they were annoying but it all made sense because we had those dreams instilled in us- the dreams of waking up in your college dorm room with your roommate best friend- the dreams of actually being EXCITED to go to class because in college you get to PICK your subjects- the dreams of drinking a little too much and having all the stories that follow- we had those dreams in high school, inspired by our parents' college experiences and

our older brothers and sisters and cousins and uncles and aunts and— you get it. College was our destination.

I'm in college now, I followed the map, and I made it big. Top 10 student at the top 14 school I'm THAT kid. Now I'm here with 5th graders less fortunate than me, who have never been told about securing a degree. Their family members have not attended a school, and the young adults in the community don't either so it's hard for them to see that's the path they should go. I think that right now if I instill in them that college is the answer they may surely win

So, I talk to the next gen to raise them right up and I want to inspire them to seek the heights they can- I can see it, I can picture it, their futures their jam

I can see Emani walking in the quad- it's in my mind but in the picture he's large- larger than he is now about 6 ft 3 maybe at UTK trying to leave a legacy

Malik says he's gonna go to TSU because it's "more better" than Vanderbilt and I agree with him too- I'll sell him that dream if that's what he likes- I'll work hard, I'll stay up, we'll do math and reading all night

Marcel says he's gonna play football in school- I tell him that's good but remember the sport is a tool- a tool for education to get your degree, I tell him he likes to talk a lot so maybe he can play for Vandy and study HOD :)

The girls say they want to cheer for LSU so I bring them a towel that says Geaux Tigers brand
new-

I'll nurture these dreams as best as I can because at the end of the day it starts with one man-
man or a woman but someone who cares and someone who tells the kids what's really out
there, and how to achieve it and pay for it clean and watch your peers cross the stage cuz we
started this team, team of college readiness checking in for action but hey sit down for math-
college kids need to know subtraction!

Fried Fish

GATHER ROUND GATHER ROUND THE FISH FRY IS GOING DOWN she yells at me excitedly! She is Denita, the raw, authentic, unquestioned heart and soul of Preston Taylor Ministries. She is 50+ years old, but has more energy than the posse of excitable kids who knock on her doors once a day, twice on school breaks, and constantly over summers. Doors that lead to a compact two-story home, filled to the brim with people big and small, pictures on the wall, memories, and... fish.

Fish. Fish. Fish. Sounds.... fishy. Small house, tight living room where 7 people who barely fit are brought together by warmth, hospitality, and a plate of fried fish. Why does food bring us close it hardly makes good sense, but I will not complain about camaraderie in a time like this. See, I wondered why I was here, in this neighborhood of strife and I wondered what the heck it had to do with my life. The fish helps it make sense. I was not the only one to wonder- there were three of us there. Three kids in the living room- but not kids for long. We were graduating college soon and our innocence was largely gone. Three kids my age about 22 learning about kids much younger discovering life's' hard truths- trying to learn the ins and outs of this life in a tougher neighborhood than we ever were raised where the shots ring out each night and each day. I close my eyes and I can see a better day, shocked by the violence and the crime at play- as the kids we tutor and we hug and we love come home at night sometimes without food to eat and sometimes without a warm and comfortable place to sleep- this thought makes me sad- sad turns into mad- what difference can I make to end this horrid state of affairs- through

PTM guiding little black friends to make them better people still and get them to believe in themselves as they should because they're powerful, they're good.

But wait. The fish. We sit and we eat and we talk and we learn. We learn about the world as it is, not as we have dreamed it to be coming from our privileged homes of wealth. We learn that nothing is better for the cold winter weather than a hot plate of fish with a hot fiery sauce. We learn that this is why we are here: we are here for the kids, yes. But we have chosen to come here, to work for free, for our own benefit as well. This is it- the benefit. The raw real true feelings that emerge from the muck. These are the thoughts and feelings that Denita spills into our heads- stories of nephews who made it out and made it big and bought a house- stories of kids becoming the first in their family to go to college- stories of joy and stories of hope for a better today and a better tomorrow. Denita is a woman of power because she gives off the sense. The sense of belonging amongst brothers and sisters. The sense that everything will be okay as long as we are together- together with the kids of PTM; as long as we believe and they believe that they can truly win. The sense and the love. The love you feel when surrounded by goodness- the love you feel when encompassed in bliss, the love you feel in the tiny room with the people you never knew you would miss- I never thought so much fond emotion could be tied into a plate of gosh darn fried fish.