

4-26-2013

## **Detroit Volunteer House: The Humble Beginnings of a Life-Long Urban Restoration Pursuit**

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### **ScholarWorks Citation**

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**Detroit Volunteer House**  
*The humble beginnings of a life-long urban restoration pursuit*

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April 26, 2013

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## **{Introduction}**

## **Why a Volunteer House? Why Detroit?**

Detroit is a city brimming with potential. Major work needs to be done on the part of many individuals dedicated to its restoration, but a brighter future is possible. It may be closer than we realize. Hailing from the suburbs north of Detroit, I've had opportunities over the past few years to explore this forgotten city that my grandparents' generation fled. I'm fascinated with it. And for years I've wracked my brain to come up with a way I could help. There has to be some way I can contribute effectively to the process of renewal in Detroit that many have already started.

The idea began to emerge in the fall of 2011 as I tried to plan a weekend service trip to Detroit for students through Campus Ministry. I called countless places in the city who gave me the same response: "We'd love to have you help us, but we just don't have a place for you to stay." It frustrated me that even though I had a group of people willing to serve, there was no easy avenue through which to channel our energy. Fast forward to the following spring when I planned the same sort of weekend service trip to Chicago. This time I called Door Network, which is a connection point that houses out-of-town volunteers and organizes ways for them to serve. A similar trip that took me two months to plan for Detroit took about two days to plan with Door. I thought, "Someone needs to start a Door in Detroit!" This eventually led me to the thought that maybe *I* should be the one to do it.

My vision is to open a house in Detroit where volunteers could stay for week-long or weekend service trips. I would orient myself with all the ministries and organizations in the area so I could connect the volunteers that stay with me to opportunities of service throughout the city. My goal would be to expose them to a variety of problems the city faces as they serve in different capacities throughout the week. Hopefully the experience would educate and inspire them to continue fighting problems they face in their own cities. I see an exciting possibility for youth groups and adults from the suburbs surrounding Detroit to spend a week serving from my house and discover ways they could continue serving on a more regular basis in the city.

In this project, I explore different facets of what it would take to open such a house. Through research, interviews, and my own personal experience serving in the city, working on this project over past semester has been an enlightening quest that has brought me one step closer in connecting my dreams to reality.

**{Information}**

***When Helping Hurts: What I've Learned***

### 1) Poverty is more than material.

Challenged to write down words that come to mind when defining poverty, I thought of words like, “broken,” “hungry,” “ragged,” and “dirty.” I was shocked to discover that when those who are impoverished define their own situation they use completely different words: “humiliation,” “shame,” “depression,” and “powerlessness,” to name a few. My perception of poverty seemed far from the truth and roots of the issue. *When Helping Hurts* illuminated the fact that upper class society will generally describe poverty in terms of material items, and the impoverished themselves will talk about the psychological and social effects that poverty has on them. Specifically speaking of the “African-American ghetto,” the book describes a “loss of meaning, purpose, and hope that plays a major role in the poverty in North America” (54). Sometimes when we only see the external effects of poverty, we think throwing funds and donated items at the situation will make it better. But actually, that kind of response could be like putting a band aid on a much more serious wound. In fact, “if we treat only the symptoms or if we misdiagnose the underlying problem, we will not improve their situation, and we might actually make their lives worse” (54). We can’t just focus on material solutions to poverty, because the problem is more complicated than that. We need to realize that “humans are spiritual, social, psychological, and physical beings,” so that “our poverty-alleviation efforts will be more holistic in their design and execution” (60). It seems that our interactions with those in poverty, rather than the material things we give them, will be what make the difference.

### 2) The solution to poverty lies in relationships.

The book describes four foundational relationships each human being has with God, themselves, others, and the rest of creation. When all these relationships are functioning properly, “people are able to fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work” (57). With this in mind, the solution is clearly not to just give out money or try to make the materially poor into middle/upper class North Americans, “a group characterized by high rates of divorce, sexual addiction, substance abuse, and mental illness.” The true goal is to “restore people to a full expression of humanness, to being what God created us all to be, people who glorify God by living in right relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation” (78). It goes right back to the fish metaphor: I’d rather teach the poor how to fish than have to keep giving them fish to survive. I’d rather connect the poor to meaningful avenues of work rather than disempowering them by constantly sending hand-outs their way. This kind of connection requires a relationship. It’s more time consuming, but more rewarding.

### 3) We are all broken.

Anyone involved in urban community development cannot view themselves as some sort of “savior.” All of humanity shares a brokenness. Even if a person is not materially impoverished, they could experience poverty of relationship or meaning in their lives. When we realize our own brokenness, our approach will be “less about how we are going to fix the materially poor and more about how we can walk together, asking God to fix both of us” (82). This humble perspective could make all the difference in poverty alleviation efforts. We also have to realize that we are not somehow bringing God into impoverished communities, because he has already been working there since the creation of the world. Because of this, “a significant part of working in poor communities involves discovering and appreciating what God has been doing there for a long time!” (60). Instead of coming in with our own agendas of what we think is necessary, we should learn from an impoverished community first, and play up the strengths that already exist.

- 4) In each situation it is important to decide whether relief, rehabilitation, or development is the appropriate response to poverty.

Relief is described as “urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis.” Rehabilitation seeks to restore people and their communities to positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. Development is the process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved (both the “helpers” and the “helped”) closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation (105). In each context of poverty, it is necessary to decide which approach will be the most helpful. One of the biggest downfalls of the way we respond to poverty in North America is “applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention” (105).

With this in mind, I would say relief is hardly ever appropriate in the context of Detroit, unless we have a major disaster happen or an individual in the community was in some sort of crisis. The majority of efforts should be focused toward rehabilitation and development. Depending on the neighborhood I choose to start my house in, rehabilitation will be necessary to restore the community to its pre-economic-crisis conditions. Development will also be necessary to foster continued growth within the community.

(Corbett, Steve, and Fikkert, Brian. *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009. Print.)

**{Information}**

## **Volunteer Hub Comparisons**

*Door Network*

**Mission Statement:** Discovering Opportunities for Outreach and Reflection (DOOR) is a faith-based network of six cities that provides opportunities for service, learning and leadership development within the urban context. We highlight the strengths of our cities, as well as the needs. We believe this is best accomplished through collaboration, mutuality and partnership.

**Cost Per Participant:** Week: \$305 (College discount: \$275) / Weekend: \$95

**Included in Cost:** Meals, housing and programming.

**Accommodations:** Varies between cities: usually in houses or churches.

**Types of Volunteer Work:** Varies between cities (From personal experience in San Antonio, TX: homeless shelter, Catholic worker house, food bank, working with special needs children).

### *Center for Student Missions*

**Mission Statement:** To provide an effective urban ministry experience that transforms lives, influences churches and communities, and honors Christ.

**Cost Per Participant:** 1-2 Nights: \$20 / 3+ Nights: \$65 (College discount: \$55)

**Included in Cost:** The safest, most secure housing possible, three meals per day, plus staff, training, and management.

**Accommodations:** Varies between cities: usually in houses or churches.

**Types of Volunteer Work:** Varies between cities.

### *Motown Mission*

**Mission Statement:** The Motown Mission Experience is an urban work mission destination in Detroit, MI for Christian youth, college, and adult groups interested in economic disaster recovery work in the name of Jesus Christ. Begun and continuing as a United Methodist connected organization, the Motown Mission offers an experience

deeply rooted in Wesleyan theology and the contemporary UMC's call to mission and service as a means for individual and communal transformation.

**Cost Per Participant:** Week: \$275

**Included in Cost:** Housing and 3 meals a day (Sunday dinner - Saturday breakfast).

**Accommodations:** Metropolitan United Methodist Church

**Types of Volunteer Work:** Economic disaster recovery work projects and "feeding and greening" ministries. Motown works with each group to match their skill level and interests with appropriate projects.

### **{Information}**

#### **Potential Partner Organizations**

Capuchin Soup Kitchen  
Catholic Worker House  
Central Detroit Christian  
Citadel of Faith Church  
Detroit Rescue Mission  
Earthworks  
Focus: Hope  
Forgotten Harvest  
Goodwill  
Life Builders  
On the Rise Bakery  
Woodside Bible Church  
Youthworks

### **{Interviews}**

**Mark Van Andel**

**Pastor of Christian Formation at Citadel of Faith Church in Detroit**

**Initial Face-to-Face Conversation {November 24, 2012}**



We started by sharing brief versions of our stories, and he told me the process by which he and his wife ended up in Detroit from Grand Rapids. Although faced with warnings from friends and family about moving to “dangerous” Detroit, he realized that he had no other choice because it was where God was calling him. He learned that the safest place you can be is in the center of God’s will, even if that means being in the center of Detroit. If he was still living in the safety of his previous suburban life but ignoring God’s call to Detroit, he might be safer physically, but his soul and spirit would be in much more danger.

Mark had much wisdom to share about how important it is to actually live in the community you’re doing work in. Instead of driving into the community you’re trying to affect from the safety of a better area, it is essential to plant yourself where you’re trying to make a difference. He said that when you build relationships with your neighbors, they become people with names that you care about, instead of simply being “those people in poverty.” And you have no choice but to respond to them in love when they need help.

I shared my volunteer house idea with him and he encouraged me with his response. He thinks the ministry I am envisioning could have a powerful impact on Detroit, if pursued carefully and thoughtfully. He gave me assurance that this house could actually be something the city needs, rather than just another good idea.

### **Email Interview {January 7, 2013}**

#### **1. From your perspective, what is the biggest issue facing the city of Detroit right now?**

If you are speaking of the city as a governmental entity, it is the financial crisis which faces the city and is pushing us towards bankruptcy or State takeover. This would cause the city of Detroit as a whole to change drastically. Other critical issues that touch the lives of people directly in my opinion are fatherlessness, poverty, and grief/anger.

#### **2. What can be done to remedy this issue?**

As for the government, we are going to have to make critical and painful decisions that will require many residents and employees giving up services and opportunities that we have grown accustomed to. We will also lose control of some of the assets and departments that we have held for decades.

As for the daily issues of families, I believe that church's need to enter into neighborhoods with healthy patterns of behavior and relationships to model and shape

communities to be healthier. Essentially, I see this as a "loving your neighbor as yourself" resolution.

**3. What are your thoughts on volunteerism in Detroit? What have you experienced?**

I think that there has been a growing movement of people wanting to see Detroit "come back". This is in contrast to the 1980's and 1990's where I think people were content to let Detroit flounder. The problem as I see it is that the volunteerism is sporadic, without much purpose, and focused on relief and not on development (See *When Helping Hurts*). I see a need for mobilizing people for holistic community development that involves longer-term relationships in order to break down the walls between those living in poverty and those with affluence. This requires trust-building and longevity.

**4. After hearing my idea for a volunteer house, what are your thoughts?**

I think that it has potential if it is set up properly.

**-How could it be beneficial to the city?**

I think that it could help to give more people an insider's view of Detroit. It could promote more people considering moving to Detroit for the right reasons. I think that it could help to stabilize a neighborhood. I think it could bring more positive attention to the city.

**-What are some potential problems you see with my plan?**

If it is handled improperly, it could be seen as another "do-gooder" effort by outsiders who are disconnected from real people in the neighborhood. If the work projects are superficial, they won't address the real concerns of the neighborhood, or worse yet, they might reinforce stereotypes and disempower the local residents from taking ownership of their community (see "When Helping Hurts"). If the people who visit are not teachable, then it defeats the purpose of the concept. Obviously, there will also be legal considerations (liability, safety, insurance, etc.) for you to manage, but those can be handled with planning. I would suggest that you quickly seek out indigenous leaders to partner with in order to make your work extends beyond yourself and to focus on a CCDA.org (check this out for sure) type plan.

**My Response:**

*Mark's lifestyle inspires me to engage fully with the community in which I decide to open my house. I cannot just half-heartedly serve people from a distance. I must be completely involved and available. His interview responses challenged me to be very careful of my motives for opening a volunteer house and the way I go about putting my plans into action. I see Mark and the church where he pastors (Citadel of Faith) as potential partners for my house in the future. He came and spoke to the group of students I led on a service trip to Detroit over spring break one night, and he was such a valuable resource for all of us to learn from.*

### **{Interviews}**

**Lester Anderson**

**Detroit Resident / Grand Valley State University Student**

**1. From your perspective, what is the biggest issue facing the city of Detroit right now?**

I think the biggest issue in the city is the people. These people are Detroit and have seen it at its worst and that is all they know. The people only seen the bad side and I think that they keep the trend going. These people lost confidence in the city's

potential and just try and make the best out of the worst, instead of trying to restore the roar to Detroit by putting in the time and commitment that is needed.

**2. What can be done to remedy this issue?**

I think it will take someone from the city who has experienced this issue first hand and has left the city to gain outside perspective to remedy this. This person has to come back to the city and reach out to the city. The people would more than likely connect because the person knows how it feels to be in such situations.

**3. What are your thoughts on volunteerism in Detroit? What have you experienced?**

My thoughts on volunteerism in Detroit is that it doesn't happen enough, and not many people know about the opportunities to do it. I haven't been involved in volunteer projects in the city.

**4. After hearing my idea for a volunteer house, what are your thoughts?**

I think the idea of you starting a volunteer house is awesome. I feel that you have heart, passion, and you really love the city of Detroit and want to show other people why you love it so they can too!

**-How could it be beneficial to the city?**

It could definitely help the Detroiters see the value in themselves.

**-What are some potential problems you see with my plan?**

A potential problem could be getting Detroiters to participate along with people outside the city.

**5. Give me some insight into what it was like to grow up in Detroit.**

Growing up in the city was definitely a challenge. The city was dying, people were moving out, crime was happening, and so was poverty. My mom was a single parent however, that didn't affect the way I was raised like most people would think. Schools weren't that great and neither was there a lot of things for kids to do besides sports. My neighborhood was a big block with probably 5 houses. So a lot of empty fields that were not being taking care of unless the neighbors pitched in together. My current neighborhood is full of houses but a few that are abandoned and look really bad and makes the neighborhood look bad.

I think I learned a lot from Detroit growing up. I have experienced stuff that many people at my school probably couldn't imagine. But those things have made me

who I am today. Some advantages are use to a lot of people, experience gained, wisdom. And some disadvantages would be school, proper nutrition, lack of community involvement, limited resources.

### **My Response:**

*Lester is one of the most positive and encouraging people I know- living proof that good things come from Detroit! I met him about a year ago through Campus Ministry, and have gotten to know him better in conversations as we carpooled to the Detroit area a few times for holidays. I continue to learn more about Detroit through him all the time by his stories, perspectives, and character.*

*I thought it was so interesting that he saw the problem in Detroit as lying within the people themselves. Any hesitancy I have about moving to Detroit and opening a volunteer house comes from not wanting to step on anyone's toes. I don't want Detroiters to think I'm trying to tell them what to do or believe I have all the answers. And I know I will definitely have to be careful not to seem like some sort of uninformed savior coming in to give my opinions where they are not wanted. But from what it sounds like, I do have something useful that the people of Detroit could benefit from: vision. I see so much potential for community and growth in the city, and hopefully I can inspire people who have lost all hope to catch a glimpse of that vision.*

## **{Interviews}**

**Keysha Boggess**

**Founder/Director of Center for Student Missions (CSM) in Denver**

**Email Interview {March 26, 2013}**

Hi Emily- Thanks for your email and for sharing a little bit of your heart with us. I'll do my best to answer your questions here and if you have any follow up questions let me know. Hope this helps! I'd love to talk to you more as you get closer to starting your site. I started the Denver site and would love to encourage you and share any wisdom that I have gained.

Peace,  
Keysha

### **1. What drew you to become involved in CSM?**

I went on CSM trips while in high school and they really opened my eyes to poverty and God's heart for the poor. During college I did an internship in Chicago for a summer and again God gave me a love for the city and urban ministry. After I graduated I got the opportunity to move to Chicago and work for CSM. I was the associate director for 2 years and then stepped into the city director role. I worked there for 5 years and then needed to move back to Colorado. After 2 years working in a food/clothing bank CSM approached me to start the Denver site. It is really amazing how I am now serving with the organization that rocked my world view as a teenager and in my home city.

### **2. Describe the impact you've seen CSM have on the community around you.**

CSM values consistency and partnership. Being full time in the city I am able to cultivate relationships with our ministry partners to not only encourage them but to learn from them. When our groups come into the city we feel like we are introducing them to our friends. We not only provide our student groups with an opportunity to serve in Denver, but to also learn and grow from our ministry friends. Our hope is that our groups would catch that passion and fire and go back to their homes to find their own ministry partners to work consistently with. Also, providing ministries in Denver with extra hands so that they can do their work is an added benefit. We partner with a ministry called Mean Street Ministries who visit homeless families living in low-income motels. They bring burritos/pastries and resources guides and go door to door visiting with people. When we first met James, who is the founder, he was excited to have youth be a part of their ministry as it was something that had been on his heart for a while. After about a year of serving with Mean Street James began to see more local youth showing up. His regular volunteers were seeing the effect of the youth on the street and went back to their own churches to encourage their youth groups to volunteer. It's exciting to be a part of something that can truly bring about change in others.

### **3. What are some challenges you've faced doing urban ministry?**

Our ministry is unusual because we aren't necessarily doing direct services, but working alongside those who are. One of our challenges is dealing with challenging groups who come in with their own agenda. Sometimes groups believe that they are bringing Jesus to the city, not understanding that He is already here. It can be a challenge when those groups serve with their agendas instead of as a learner. A personal challenge that I have faced is burn out. Not only are you daily reminded of

how difficult and unjust life can be, and the challenges of working with different cultures, but finding a balance between work and personal can be very hard.

**4. Are there other organizations like CSM in your community, and if so, what are your interactions like with them?**

Yes. We know of several organizations doing similar things. We work directly with one of them because they are also our housing/office partner. We are a little different because the groups that they bring in work only with them whereas we work all over the city. I have become good friends with the person who runs their program and we encourage each other and work together to solve problems. One way we respect other organizations that we don't have direct contact with is trying to not take over anyone's "turf." So, if we find a new ministry and discover that they work very closely with another organization we will move on glad that they are getting the volunteers that they need. One of our goals is to only serve where we are invited and needed.

**5. What advice would you have for someone who's interested in committing their life to this type of ministry?**

First, find a support group and a mentor. A group of people who will listen to your stories and even if they don't fully understand what you are doing will support and encourage you. If possible, find a mentor who can walk with you, ideally someone who is also in ministry. Second, work at finding balance with your work and personal life. You need the times of separation and rest. You need a day off and you need to guard that day. There will always be people who need you or work to be done, but you need to say no and believe that you are doing it for them as much as you. When you take care of yourself you are taking care of those you are leading. And lastly, always remember to be a learner- from those you serve and from those you lead.

**My Response:**

*When Keysha discussed CSM's approach to similar organizations they work alongside in Denver, it was helpful for me to have perspective on Motown Mission. Mark Van Andel directed my attention to this organization when he stumbled upon it recently. They are doing the almost the exact same work I want to do in Detroit already, and I was a little discouraged that there might not be as much of a need for my house as I had imagined. But hearing Keysha talk about how each organization simply respects each other's "turf," I realized it would be possible for my house to co-exist with Motown Mission. I may even be able to learn something from them! But I could never create a competition between my organization and theirs, for that would be counter-productive.*

*In further email conversation with Keysha, I inquired about what it would take to start a CSM site in Detroit and if that would be something their organization might be interested in pursuing. She encouraged me to talk to the director of CSM about it, because it could be a*

*definite possibility. Even though I have never directly served with CSM, I respect the work they do and what they stand for. I plan on visiting their Chicago site over the summer and serving for a weekend to get a better taste of what they do and how they operate. I also plan on pursuing a connection with the director if I find that my vision jives with theirs and discuss what it would take to open a CSM site in Detroit.*

### **{Experience}**

#### **Campus Ministry Spring Break Trip to Detroit: Ideas Into Action**

After having our rental van rear-ended before we even left Grand Rapids, my co-leader Aaron and I could only wonder at what the rest of the week held in store. We were hopeful though as we met our group of 8 other students at Grand Valley on Friday afternoon to depart together. Everyone was excited to have a week off from classes and amid enhanced conversation and laughter we began the 3 hour journey to Detroit.

When we arrived at Central Detroit Christian (CDC), the organization we were to serve and stay with for the week, we were greeted by Dottie, who told us that there was a plumbing problem in the house we were supposed to stay at. So instead, we



would all be staying in a one-bedroom apartment. I found out later that a family had just moved out of that apartment because they gambled away all their money and left in a hurry. Even forgetting their Christmas cards on the back of the front door, along with a magazine cut-out of President Obama. Having all 10 of us crammed into that small apartment with only one toilet was...actually pretty great. We didn't kill each other by the end of the week. Instead, we bonded maybe even better than we would have in the other house because we were constantly around each other. All the time. We developed patience as we waited in the eternal line for the bathroom. And we had nothing else to do besides engage in conversation and learn a great amount about each other. Living like this also gave us insight into how some families are forced to live in similar close quarters all the time.

That night we had planned to hang out with CDC's youth group, but we found out they had gone skating that week. We could have gone, but I felt like the purpose of us going to bond with the kids would have been lost. Fortunately, Aaron and I remembered the Scottish dance going on that night we had recently found out about the week before. So we changed our plans for the better and headed over to the Capuchin soup kitchen to get our dance on with the college group that was hosting. It was a great way for our team to bond together and kick off the week (literally, there was a lot of kicking) on a good note.

Even at the end of the first day I already felt so much peace leading the trip. It was almost surreal. I felt more than ever before a comfort in my own skin. In my role. In the words I said and in what I did. I was made for this.

When we woke up on Saturday we set out for a wonderful morning at Eastern Market. As we loaded in the van, Doose made us all crack up laughing. She's from Nigeria and I love the unique perspective she brought to our group. The previous day, Aaron and I had told everyone there was no smoking allowed in the van as a joke because that's what the rental place told us. Not like we were planning on it anyway. So as we were pulling out to go to the market she said, "So, are we allowed to smoke in the van today?" So nonchalantly. She was full of surprises! The weather was mild as we walked from our van to the larger-than-life antique shop. There were rooms upon rooms of ancient treasures for us to explore. I found a plaque of old timey house rules that was only \$5 so I got it for our family and put it in the windowsill of our apartment when we got home. I especially liked the last rule that said, "Unauthorized trips to the bathroom frowned upon." because our toilet stopped working just about every other second so there was some truth to it. We ventured to the market after the antique shop and sent everyone off on different produce-related missions ("Okay, you guys go find us some peppers and carrots"). I love how colorful and alive Eastern Market is. Even in the dead of winter, there is a warmth and kindness that still thrive. Eventually we made our way to Supino's for a lunch of some of the freshest, most delicious pizza I think most of us had ever eaten. Finding my way back to our apartment without directions was kind of a big deal to me. I had a moment of realization that I felt more confident in knowing my way around the city than I ever had before.

That afternoon we deep-cleaned Peaches and Greens, the fresh food market in CDC's neighborhood. I'm realizing more and more what a rarity that place is for Detroit. There are hardly any grocery stores in this food desert city, and many community members have to rely on corner liquor stores for all their shopping. Especially for the elderly, or disabled, or people who don't have cars (which, combined, probably make up a majority of the population in Detroit), this is a serious problem. Finding fresh, healthy food to eat is almost impossible. So it was awesome to be a part of keeping Peaches and Greens running smoothly in order to serve the community. I love teamwork. That may be such a generic, cliché thing to say, but I experience the true meaning of teamwork more fully every time I see it in action. I could not be more blessed by my group. Lisa (the director of CDC) picked us up after we were done cleaning and she took us on a tour of the neighborhood. I had already been on this tour once with her a few months ago, but it was great for me to hear it again. And I loved that our group got to hear it too. Knowing more about the community gave us such a great framework from which to serve throughout the week.

We had some free time in the afternoon, and I loved being able to talk with Danielle for a while in our room. She told stories about her experience with DOOR last summer and relationships with guys and we solved some of the world's problems, so it was cool. I mostly just listened, and she mentioned near the end that she appreciated that.

That night we had a delicious pasta and garlic bread dinner made by Hollie, my dear friend who came on the trip with us and also happens to be one of the most talented chefs I know. We started the devotions for the week and I presented a general overview of what we'd be discussing throughout the next few days, a lot of which I took from the book, *When Helping Hurts*. We were going to cover the four foundational relationships that make up human existence: with God, ourselves, others, and the rest of creation. And how if any of these relationships are not healthy, it can lead to material, spiritual, or emotional poverty. I posed the question we would return to at different points throughout the week as well: "What does this community have that we need?" If we recognize that we're all impoverished in some way, then this community has got to have qualities that we can learn from.

We were able to wake up slowly on Sunday morning and had time to cook a more elaborate breakfast of eggs and bacon, because the church service at Citadel of Faith didn't start until 12:30pm. I love the diversity represented at Citadel. What a rich cultural experience for our group to participate in. After the service we grabbed a quick lunch back at our apartment and then met my friend Jamie so he could give us a tour of some "off-the-beaten-path" places in the city. I've known Jamie since elementary school and he's a student at Wayne State University. In the honors program he's apart of there, he's had to take classes on Detroit history and current issues so his knowledge of the city is quite vast. I drove the van as Jamie talked to our group. We went to places like the abandoned Packard Plant, the Heidelberg Project (basically a work of art spanning an entire neighborhood block), the Brewster-Douglass Projects, and the African Bead Museum. At many of the stops we took a few minutes to pray for a related situation (for

example, at the Packard Plant we prayed for families who had been negatively affected by the fall of the auto industry). Our group was able to develop more insight into the city, and they seemed to enjoy it.

When evening rolled around, we had dinner at Cafe Sonshine, the restaurant started by CDC to create more employment opportunities for people in their neighborhood. The food was so delicious, and we could all taste the love that Janine, a community member and recent owner of the restaurant, cooked into our food. When we came back to our apartment, Doose spotted what she screamed was a “rat,” which actually ended up being a tiny mouse that evoked many exclamations and laughter from our group until we finally caught it in a cup and released it outside.

Our Monday consisted of organizing Restoration Warehouse, a resale garage of donated items for people in the community to purchase for cheaper prices. We were able to walk there from our apartment since it was right down the street, and spent our day unpacking donated items from boxes and organizing them on the shelves. It felt like a great accomplishment. After dinner that night, Mark Van Andel came to our apartment to talk with us about the idea of “white privilege.” What an eye-opening discussion for our group.

Tuesday’s main task consisted of starting construction on a hoop house right outside of Peaches and Greens. The market will be able to use it to grow fresh produce in starting this summer that they can later sell. Fortunately we had Tim, a pastor from the church I grew up in, help us in building the hoop house because he has years of construction experience. We couldn’t have done it without him and I was thankful he was willing to give his time for us. We did not get as far as we expected on the building that day, but we learned a lot and were able to more clearly set goals and tasks we would have to accomplish over the next 2 days in order to finish the structure.

We had a delicious Mexican dinner created by Hollie and then headed to Mexican Town for La Gloria bakery. Coconut macaroons? Oh yes. We were going to have devotions at a coffee shop right in Mexican Town but it was closed, so I looked up Great Lakes Coffee to see how late it was open and fortunately it was open until 11pm. So we parked down the street from it and started walking toward the entrance. Right before we went inside, I made everyone huddle up in a circle. We were worried that there wouldn’t be enough room for us to sit because it looked crazy busy, so as we were gathered I jokingly said, “Alright here’s the game plan. We’re gonna walk in there like we own the place and stare all those hipsters down.” Seth didn’t fail to jump right in: “And if they make eye contact with you, just keep on staring!” “Yeah,” I added, “and if you make any motion it should be this one...” I proceeded to jerk my thumb over my shoulder with an intimidating face as if to say, “Get outta here.” We all started laughing and as I was explaining what we would discuss in small groups for devotions that night, a random guy walking by joined our huddle and said, “Hey ya’ll! The Lord is good! All the time! And all the time...” We boisterously finished, “He is good!” What an unexpected display of the vibrant life in Detroit!

When we got into Great Lakes Coffee, I knew it was going to be the perfect place for our devotions that night. We divided up into 3 groups and took inventory about our relationships: family, friends, significant others, and reflected on if they were glorifying to God or not. After getting to know quite a bit more about one another's lives we were able to pray for each other. It was such a meaningful time.

Wednesday and Thursday mornings consisted of working more on the hoop house. When the project was dwindling down by Thursday afternoon, we sent some group members inside Peaches and Greens to help with food preparation so they had work to do. The finished hoop house was a quite a splendor to behold. Being able to start and finish a big project like that was rewarding for our group. We also helped out with two different after-school programs CDC runs in the afternoons: tutoring for middle and high school students and enrichment arts programs at for children at the elementary school. Even though it was fun for us to work with kids, I don't think we were able to be very helpful. I would weigh out the pros and cons of serving in that capacity before doing it again with another group. There weren't enough students for us to work with at the tutoring program, and at the enrichment arts program I felt like we may have been stepping on the regular volunteers' toes.

Another activity I would carefully think about before doing again was a tour of the Renaissance Center (the GM headquarters) that we went on Wednesday afternoon. The best part was riding the elevator to the top of the building and getting to see a breathtaking aerial view of the city. That was my main point for taking our group on the tour, but we had to walk through an hour of rather boring descriptions about the building before we even got to that part. I would say overall it was a worthwhile experience, but I would thoughtfully consider how each group specifically would benefit from that tour in the future.

The Friday morning we spent at Earthworks urban garden and Capuchin soup kitchen was one of my favorite parts of the week. The majority of our group started with a tour of the gardens and a few people stayed behind in the soup kitchen to attend an AA meeting for members of the community. The garden tour was enriching and eye-opening for us. After learning about the powerful mission Earthworks has in the community, we were able to participate in weeding, compost sorting, and various other gardening tasks throughout the morning. For lunch, we were privileged to see everything come full circle in a delicious lunch at the soup kitchen made from fresh ingredients grown in the gardens. While we were eating we had the opportunity to talk with members in the community who came for the meal. It was an all-around wonderful experience.

In the afternoon we spent our free time exploring the Detroit Institute of Arts before heading to Greektown on the People Mover. We enjoyed some authentic gyros for dinner at a Greek restaurant after stopping to listen and sing along with a street performer who was playing guitar. Greektown is so alive at night: what a great scene for everyone to experience. And course we had to pick up some pastries from the Astoria bakery on our way back to our apartment.

Packing up and cleaning our apartment on Saturday morning was bittersweet. I think most of us were ready to go home and sleep in our own beds again, but none of us were ready to leave the tightly knit community we had formed. After everything was loaded in the van, we drove to Belle Isle where we could view the whole city skyline from a distance. We took time to pray for Detroit and thank God for the incredible week we had. Standing amazed at how much each of us had grown and learned throughout our trip, our hearts were grateful. We headed back to Grand Rapids with a new vision for community, for what sustainable friendships look like, and for ways in which we can live out a life of service wherever each of our paths take us.

### **{Experience}**

**Seth Regan**  
**Detroit Spring Break Trip Participant**

Em,

Thank you so much for asking me to write something for your project. I did it because I believe in you, Detroit, and how this volunteer house will make peace. Remember that :) "Close the distance."

Peace,  
Seth

**"Why We Need To Look To Detroit"**  
**by S. Alton O'Regan**

A few weeks ago I had a conversation with my neighbor about what we each did over Spring Break. She said hers was uneventful: family, home cooked meals, homework, relaxing, the usual. I didn't play my vacation up either: I stayed in Detroit with some friends all week. I was immediately met with surprise: "Why? Was it an alternative spring break or missions trip?" she asked, because no one in their right mind would dare spend more than ten minutes in *that* city without some 'revitalizing purpose'.

The truth was she was right. My friends and I did go to Detroit through a program called Spring Break Mission Trips organized and led by Grand Valley State's Campus Ministry. Avoiding the term "mission" like the plague, yet knowing this person wanted a label for what we did, I called it a "learning-service trip," emphasizing the first half of the title. I then explained we traveled to Detroit to learn about the city, its history, and some of the wonderful things *already* occurring there, and that we briefly lent a hand where we could. Despite my best efforts to downplay my friends and I's role in city, the response I received was this:

"Wow, that is so great of you. That city needs a lot of help."

This was not the only time I listened to non-residents of Detroit crown me for my courage and nobility for daring to enter and "serve" the decrepit crap-hole that the Motor City is portrayed to be. Even those who already knew where I had gone and with whom always, without fail, confronted me with the question, "What did you do?" which actually meant, "What did you do *for* Detroit?" These pathetic perceptions of the city are the result of the unending negative media coverage it receives, that, when not telling horror stories of murder and political corruption, pities Detroit like an abandoned child, helpless and feeble, crying out to be rescued by someone, anyone. No one can tell you the whole story of why Detroit is the way it is—how one of the most powerful and wealthy cities in the United States came crashing down in what seemed like seconds—but everyone has an opinion. What almost everyone (outside of Detroit) *will* tell you is it is a lost city, it can no longer help itself, and that to look to Detroit for wisdom (beyond just what *not* to do) would be a foolish and grave mistake.

I would like to tell a different story. Instead of sharing tales of "revitalization" and the great service my friends and I did for Detroit (which would inevitably be overdramatized and, frankly, not true), I want to tell about what Detroit taught me. There I was given fresh, empowering wisdom that speaks of the present like a golden opportunity, not a heap of shameful evidence screaming of past mistakes. Although there are dozens of lessons Detroit and its people have taught me, I will focus on the one I have seen most absent in my own life: the importance of community, what it is, and how it is formed.

As we entered the cramped 1-bedroom apartment myself and nine others would be living in for the next week, my immediate thought was how were we *not* going to be sick of each other by the time we left. Up until this point we had frequently talked about what it means to live in "intentional community," using the term more as a punch line than as an actual way of life. Looking at the living room floor—which served as our bedroom, closet, dining table, studio and general lounging area—the only intention I

had was to make it a point to get outside and far away from my new housemates as much as possible. 'Me time' was not something I was going to sacrifice.

There are two problems with the belief people are going to let you down and therefore you have to distance yourself from them. Firstly, by distancing yourself, physically, intellectually or emotionally from others, you eliminate valuable opportunities to engage with and learn from those with different perspectives and skills than yourself. This is often unintentional and unavoidable. The reality is we cannot be closely connected, or even neighborly, with every single person, despite what cell phone companies will tell you their latest products will do for your social life and dwindling friend count. However, when we intentionally separate ourselves from those nearest to us, we lose lifetimes of experience, wisdom and skills that others bring to the table. While our culture preaches the value of independence and self-sufficiency, the truth is isolation ultimately cripples the individual.

The second problem with distancing yourself from those around you is this: separation makes oppression much easier. This statement can be flipped around to say something similar: it is very difficult to harm someone you are close to. This is the truth I was most confronted with while in Detroit. A few weeks prior to leaving for the Motor City, I met one of the other group members for the first time, and within the first thirty seconds of meeting him, I knew I was in trouble. As I confessed to another friend later that night, he reminded me of the kids my friends and I (to our shame) made fun of in high school, and I knew if I wasn't careful, those old habits would return. After eight days of eating, singing, playing, cleaning, working and praying—living—with this person, I came to respect him so much that not only can I never envision myself harming him, physically or emotionally, I know I would fight for him if anyone else did try to. Because the physical distance—and in effect, the spiritual distance—between this person and myself is closed, I now want to defend him whereas before, at best, I wanted to ignore him. This person and I are not best friends; in fact, there are still some things he does that irk me when I'm not feeling especially patient. But respect and genuine appreciation transcend petty and superficial differences, and because of this, peace now flows freely between him and I.

I share these stories to shed light on the citizens of Detroit who are putting to practice this idea of "closing the distance" between themselves, their neighbors *and* the natural world. With less than half the population size it supported at the peak of its success, Detroit is largely unoccupied, the result being those citizens who remain are often geographically isolated, trapped in an urban food desert that is void of new (or old) businesses and appears to be empty of fresh opportunities. But as many Detroiters have shown, this is not the truth! Budding life and endless opportunities *do* exist in the city's abandoned lots and vacant buildings, and is visible in the urban gardening movement sweeping the city. Today, more than 1000 "urban farms" exist in Detroit, some under the guidance of organizations or non-profits like Earth Works and the Black Community Food Security Network, while others are simply cared for by families and their neighbors. By cultivating the land they live on and growing their own food to

consume, share and sell to local markets, these urban gardeners are practicing what Edmundson, Lupinacci and Martusewicz (2011) call “revitalization of the commons.”

The “commons” in this case refers to the non-monetized natural resources—air, water, land, seeds, etc.—that were once freely shared, but have been largely privatized in our increasingly globalized world. However, the “commons” also includes the traditions, practices and knowledge that are used and shared by communities to care for one another, wisdom that is being lost as western globalization continues to push aside and suffocate centuries-old indigenous practices. Urban farmers in Detroit are learning (or, more likely, *relearning*) the importance of crop rotations, which species of foods grow in certain climates, and the shared knowledge and joy resulting from intergenerational living. All of this is the result of people making the decision to close the physical distance between themselves and their neighbors. Once the physical distance between them has been eliminated, the spiritual and intellectual barriers that have separated them begin to come down, resulting in shared wisdom, skills and resources, and also what geographers WinklerPrins and de Souza (2005) call an “economy of affection”: the networks of trust, support and reciprocity, as well as the non-monetized relationships of exchange, that sustain and empower communities.

One does not have to look to far, or at an urban farm, to see how the commons are being revitalized in Detroit. Reciprocal relationships and interdependency can be found in the most common of neighborhoods. While there, my friends and I were able to have a delicious homemade dinner with a community member [Mark Van Andel] from where we were staying. For the past five years he and his family have been living in Detroit’s Central District, the result of their decision not to join the “white flight” movement that has resulted in much of Detroit’s population loss and a drastic reduction in city revenue. He described to us how simple it is to live in community and build reciprocal relationships. When his wife and him are making dinner, he said, and they are missing an ingredient, they don’t go to the nearest supermarket or grocery store to buy it. Instead, they walk across the street, knock on their neighbor’s door, and ask for what they need, whether it be a stick of butter or a frying pan. As a result, whether or not their neighbor has what they asked for, their neighbor understands they can also ask them for help whenever they’re in a pinch. The type of community that has resulted between his neighbors and his family, he shared, is not based on charity or any “savior mission”, but rather on the shared understanding of and desire for interdependence.

By inviting my friends and I into their homes, the people of Detroit—the same ones we were told need rescuing—revealed to us the depravity in our own lives resulting from the distance we had placed in between ourselves and our neighbors. But they did not stop there. Detroit—its people, its soil, its history, its spirit—showed us that to begin healing, we simply have to *close* this distance, remove the geographic space between ourselves and others, especially when the others are those we don’t understand or like.

The implications this simple lesson has go far beyond how to be a good neighbor. Much of the food crisis in the United States is the result of the physical distance between humans and the food that sustain us, resulting in the degradation of



what was—and still is by many indigenous communities—considered a sacred relationship. Violence can be avoided by practicing this as well. There is a reason militaries don't allow soldiers to live among the people they are fighting, and very deliberately, through their language and actions, dehumanize the "enemy". If they didn't, there is the possibility respect and understanding could grow between enemy troops, in which case soldiers probably wouldn't want to fight.

When we close the physical distance between ourselves and others—when we eat with them, play with them, work with them, grow food with them, walk, talk, laugh with them—we open ourselves up to endless opportunities to learn, grow and be enriched in ways that simply aren't possible when by ourselves. The resulting product is something so obvious, yet so often overlooked in a society that demands we consume more and more to be happy: our own enrichment, well-being and contentment with the things, people and lives we've been given.

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### My Response:

*When I first met Seth after he signed up for our Spring Break trip to Detroit, I could tell right away that I was probably going to learn more from him than he was from me. He would tell you otherwise, but that's how it happened. Just watching him process everything he experienced throughout our week in the city (he's always on the brink of discovering something epic), taught me so much about how many of my future volunteers will process the time they have in Detroit. His insights into community and "closing the distance" are truly revolutionary. His grounded, realistic views of how both he and those he was serving in Detroit were mutually benefitted during the week are ideas I hope future volunteers will grasp hold of.*

## {Experience}

### **Danielle Clark** **Detroit Spring Break Trip Participant**

Going to Detroit with Emily and the gang was a simple and profound experience. Our adventure in Detroit was organized and well developed with lots of room for flexibility. Usually schedule interruptions are overwhelming for me, but Emily was calm and quick to relieve any anxieties from changes in plans.

Volunteering within the city of Detroit was very memorable in terms of volunteer experience. Not only were we volunteering inside of the community, but we were allowed to involve ourselves with the very people who were making changes in the city. Volunteering was a holistic experience that allowed us to work hard, get to know the city, taste the amazing food that was being grown within the urban community and see the change that is taking place in such a broken environment.

My most memorable moment was when I was allowed to attend a community AA meeting at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. Seeing the hope of those who had substance abuse issues or were consciously making the decision not to use was so inspiring to me. I saw more life within that group than I had ever felt in my quaint suburban neighborhood on the West side of Michigan.

**My Response:**

*What I found interesting about Danielle's reaction to our trip is that her favorite moment was the AA meeting. That part of our day happened spontaneously; we had planned to all work in the garden at Earthworks but a few members decided to attend the AA meeting in the Capuchin Soup Kitchen (a partner organization to Earthworks) while the rest of us toured the greenhouses. I didn't get to witness the meeting, but it sounds like a powerful experience. I'm glad Danielle reflected about it, because it makes me more likely to include that meeting in a weekly schedule for volunteers in the future.*

**{What's Next?}****Remaining Questions**

Who will be on my planning council to partner with me in seeing this dream through to completion?

Which neighborhood would be the best place to plant myself as an intentional neighbor and establish my volunteer house? Which community would be receptive and diverse enough for my vision to work?

What would a program budget look like for the kind of organization I'm envisioning?

Would it be possible to partner with Citadel of Faith for promotion and funding?

Where will I be able to get grants and donations to get my house off the ground?

In what specific Detroit organizations will service from volunteer groups be mutually beneficial for everyone involved?

## Conclusion

Starting this September I have the privilege of being an intern for It's Your Move International (IYMI) focused on engaging with Detroit in meaningful ways through ministry. Throughout the course of the year I'll be able to make connections with other organizations in the city. I'll be able to grow in my knowledge of the Detroit and in my ability to lead others. And I'll be able to tackle some of the questions above as I continue to pursue opening this volunteer house. A tentative mission statement for my house would speak of a ministry that:

*...offers an invitation to engage in sustainable acts of service, learn about Detroit through cultural immersion experiences, and discover the joy of individual and communal renewal, all to the glory of God.*