

# ROCHESTER YOUTH OUTREACH

Dear Friends,

1/17/07

We are writing you this newsletter to inform you of what God is doing in Rochester among not only the youth, but the families and communities in which they live. This is our attempt to reveal to you how God is working in the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward of Rochester, the demonstration of His power through miracles among the youth, and the growth of this ministry.

*“Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin.” Zechariah 4.10a*

In our short time working in the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward, we have begun to appreciate the beauty of this idea; the Lord rejoices over the beginnings of a labor in His name, and for Him. Through the successes and the struggles involved in this ministry, we have seen how He is guiding our efforts, and glorifying his name!

This past summer, His Branches and Grace Family Medicine did a community needs assessment in the 19th Ward. The aim of the survey was to determine the status of healthcare access for residents in the neighborhood. It became apparent in talking with the community that keeping youth off the streets was foremost in many minds. The increase in violence this summer fueled many of those sentiments. High rates of STDs, teen pregnancy, abortion, gang participation and drug use have, in many people's minds, taken over the area.

Independent of each other, the Lord placed a desire to help at-risk inner city youth and their families on our hearts, and after seeing this great need we could not walk away. With the Lord determining our steps, we set our eyes on the goal. The result is this ministry: Rochester Youth Outreach. It is an after school program aimed at attracting youth ages 10-18 which meets each Thursday from 2-9pm in the back of His Branches. Our goals are the following:

- Provide a place of refuge from the streets. We want the young people we serve to make themselves at home with us! We keep our doors open as long as possible each week, to send a solid message that we are here to stay, and we love them!
- Meet material needs. We provide a nutritious meal every week for each youth. We take nothing home with us and make sure that kids' needs are met for the week as well. They are encouraged to take food home. Teens provide suggestions for what is served. This past week alone, we fed 25-30 youth!
- Provide mentoring and positive role models. We want to encourage and validate each one who comes through our door! We seek to establish solid friendships with each and every one, and through these friendships to effect positive change in their lives. Our phone numbers and contact information are given freely to each one, and they are encouraged to call whenever needed.
- Meet spiritual needs through a committed relationship to Jesus Christ. As Christians we know that true contentment and purpose can only be achieved through a living and active love relationship with Jesus. In all our actions we seek to be a witness to the Living God, speaking of God's love for the youth and when we have enough volunteers we have youth appropriate devotionals. We also take them to church occasionally and encourage regular and active fellowship with other Christians.
- Provide homework help and tutoring. A primary goal of ours is to empower the youth to realize their true potential, and enable them to succeed. We are actively seeking out more volunteers to help us, and hope to expand this portion of our outreach through recruiting education majors and volunteers with this talent.

January 11<sup>th</sup> marked the eighth week of the after school program. During these two months, the Lord has provided for us again and again in so many ways! His Branches generously donated the use of a space perfectly suited for youth ministry. The main conference room is used as a general community center (a space for board games, food, indoor games, and devotions). The back area provides many functions. The cubicles are used for individualized activities like tutoring and homework help (and they are great hiding spaces for hide-and-go-seek!). We have begun to make contacts with local churches, particularly Word of Life Fellowship on Post Avenue. We are in the process of negotiating the use of their facilities as well, which include a gym and computer lab. We are recruiting volunteers from Elim Bible Institute, Roberts Wesleyan College, and neighborhood churches as well as interested individuals.

It has been our consistent prayer these past weeks that every youth who comes has been sent by the Lord. God has truly moved among them, as we have seen many begin to trust and confide in us. Many have been open to discussing spiritual and personal issues. Two weeks ago two of God's beloved children came to trust and rely on Him. This was a very special and powerful time for us. Each week we see God's provision as our food is multiplied to feed everyone who walks through the door. We always have just enough.

Over the past eight weeks, a transition from strangers to friends to family has occurred. Over games of Scrabble and bowls of macaroni and cheese, we are able to share ourselves, and the kids have responded tremendously. One young woman (13) was able to share with me (Jess) about the recent loss of her father. I was able to empathize with her because of the recent loss of my sister. She told me stories about the things she keeps from her father - his old clothes and a watch that doesn't work, a ring that's too big, and pictures of their times together. We spoke of the comfort these things bring as I showed her the cross that adorns my neck from my sister. It is these commonalities, these things ordained by God, which He has chosen to bring us together. Each night as the program is ending we make it a point to walk each child home to ensure safety and to meet parents. Last week I put my coat on to walk two

girls home. Two of the older boys, 17 and 14 asked me if I was leaving. Thinking they wanted to know if they had to leave as well, I told them they could stay with Greg until I returned. Quick to interject, they replied they wanted to walk with me because it was dangerous to walk alone. Quicker still, they put on their coats and followed me outside! Such loving behavior is one example of how we are becoming family with our kids, and how God is continuing to move in our midst!

We can always tell when we are late, because an alarm sounds- his name is Max. Max (12) was the first youth we befriended, and he is faithful to come each week, often beating us there (and then yelling at us for being late ☺). The fact that Max cares so much about us being late means we must be doing something right. Jacanna (18), another faithful young woman is always happy to come and fellowship with us and other youth. Her happiness is often reported to us through her parents who say that she can't wait until Thursday so she can see us. We have begun to strengthen our relationship by worshiping the Lord with her, and deepening the relationship with her family. As her friends it is our hope to speak into her life, and encourage her on her Christian journey.

As an organic entity is born, grows, and multiplies we believe that this is what the Lord has established for His kingdom. It is our vision to see this ministry grow as well. We hope to serve a larger population of kids, and increase our ability to help meet felt needs. We desire to incorporate more volunteers into the program (in fact this is a dire need). Many kids have pleaded with us to be open on more than just Thursdays, and we would like to open at least one more day a week. Also with more volunteers comes the ability to offer more specialized activities such as a woman's Bible study, a men's group, more in depth tutoring, music lessons, and sports and game tournaments. It is also very important to us to meet material needs. In order to do this, we would like to collect season specific clothing for the kids to take if needed. On more than one occasion, children have requested these things from us. We would also like to offer more food as well as general hygiene products: tooth brushes, shampoo/conditioner, lotion, and soap. One of our hopes is to instill in the youth the idea of constructive and destructive activities: that good, clean fun is ideal, rather than negative and risky behavior. In order to show them this, we desire to participate in fun activities outside of the program. I mean, everyone loves bowling!

We understand that it takes a village to raise a child, and we long to see positive social change ushered into these areas of Rochester. In order for this program to be successful long-term we recognize that we need to partner with the community. We are actively seeking out ways to network with local churches, businesses, and existing youth programs.

We need your help!

1. Please pray for us! Pray that God would move in mighty ways in the community and the lives of each child! Pray that His Spirit would be poured out afresh, and a renewed hunger for Him will arise! Pray that He would strengthen us for the work He has for us!
2. PLEASE COME HELP ☺ We have a tremendous amount of wonderful kids, who desire your love, and would greatly benefit from knowing you! If you have a gift that we haven't talked about, we are eager to talk to you. Call or contact one of us if you want to help.
3. Financial or material contributions, if you feel so led!

- Clothes
- Hygiene Products
- Food and drink: We serve dinner and snacks so anything along these lines would be greatly appreciated!
- For financial contributions make checks payable to "His Branches, Inc.", then write "Rochester Youth Outreach" on the memo line and send to:

His Branches  
340 Arnett Blvd.  
Rochester, NY 14619

Donations are tax-deductible, and receipts are available upon request.

We thank you for taking the time to read this letter!

Blessings and Love to you,  
Gregory Lewis and Jessica Speares  
~ Affectionately known by our kids as Mr. G, and Miss J ~

To reach us:

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**“When I think of the wisdom and scope of God’s plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and earth. I pray that from His glorious, unlimited resources He will give you mighty inner strength through His Holy Spirit. “ Ephesians 3.14-16**