

The lights dimmed and the speakers in the fellowship hall boomed “Who let the dogs out!” The loud music kicked off our annual Branches’ Youth Christmas Party, which this year consisted of a formal dinner and dance. All of the kids dressed up in button-downs and khakis, which not all of them own (we had to take some of the kids to a free store to get nice clothes), and were waited upon by Kendall United Methodist Church members who decorated their fellowship hall and threw us a party.

It was an absolute blast! The youth talk about that night like it happened years ago. “Remember when we went to that church...” It happened a week ago. It was amazing to see the youth dance like mature adults (leaving room for the Holy Spirit ☺ - if you don’t know what that means, ask me later), eat using proper etiquette (we coached them beforehand about which fork is used for what), and politely asking other teenagers, who didn’t have a dance partner, to dance. We even used sparkling grape juice to toast to serving the Lord for another year. It was definitely a highlight thus far!



The youth and I on the night of the dance. Don’t we look great?

We use parties such as this one to build interest in the youth group at Branches and to provide more opportunities to build relationships with the kids. You can’t really make an impact on anyone’s life if you don’t take the time to get to know them.

A few weeks ago, I came to the church yard sale. As I was getting out of my car, two youth girls, Gerdeline and TT, came up to me and said, “You can’t leave.” I replied, “I’m not leaving. I just got here.” “No,” they said. “You can’t leave in August (when my year commitment is fulfilled).” “Why not?” I said. “Because we like you and it feels right when you are around. You can’t leave until we graduate (they’re in 9th grade).” What an incredible thing to hear!!!

I sometimes paint a rosy picture of life down here because I like to focus on the positives. But this same Gerdeline who said such nice things to me, was not allowed to go to the Christmas Dance because she was suspended from school. Last week I had to kick three high school students out of Bible study because they were being so disrespectful.

The work down here is challenging, but it is necessary. This is where I need to be.