

It is 9:50 pm on Sunday. I just finished putting camper number #133 into the software system that will sort our campers into groups, as well as help determine who is supposed to do what when, with whom and how. Camp Oasis, an annual one week Christian camp for urban kids hosted by South Florida Urban Ministries, is the first week in April, during Miami-Dade County Public Schools' spring break. It is a camp that is planned and run by a team of a few faithful core youth workers and the volunteers that they recruit each year. When they asked if I wanted to be involved I jumped at the chance. I love camp, and I miss it like crazy! Alas, this is not Camp Hanover, and I have had my struggles with that, but it is a great opportunity for me to be a part of a different camp experience. This camp was created for the kids of South Florida by the people who work with them every day, and it is an experience that these kids might not have ever gotten otherwise.

There are currently three cakes in my oven. You see, I have a deal with my kids- if I forget their name more than once I owe them their very own cake... complete with their name in icing. Names are important, and taking the time to learn these kids' names means the world to them. BUT I now help lead a youth group on Thursday night (called KIX), a youth group on Friday nights (Branches), and on Sunday afternoon (Silver Palm United Methodist Church). On average that is about 80 teens a week, not including the elementary-schoolers I tutor on Monday and Wednesday. So yeah, names are important, and I am doing the best I can, but the cake system helps. It proves to the kids that I really am invested and I want to know them, and if I do happen to forget their name, you better believe I will remember it after making them their own personal cake. Plus they really seem to be ok with me forgetting their name if they get a cake out of it. In fact, this system has invited a weekly quiz at some of my youth groups... I'm not so excited about that.

Since I last wrote my job has changed, which explains why I have so many new names to remember. I am now the Director of Children and Family Ministries at Silver Palm United Methodist church, as well as a general intern at Open House Ministries. At the church I am in charge of things like Sunday school curriculum for all ages, coordinating quarterly family Christian education events, helping lead worship on Sundays, and leading youth group (among other responsibilities). Open House Ministries is a ministry that serves the community with an emergency food pantry and clothes closet, a thrift store, and an after school program. They also partner with a free health clinic and a youth ministry, sharing the same building with each ministry in an effort to work together in providing holistic ministry. There I am in charge of conducting an Asset Based Community Assessment Survey. The basic premise is that continually providing for a community without ever letting the community provide for you maintains the cycle of poverty (etc) by empowering those already in power and disempowering those already disadvantaged. The point of the survey is to see what each individual in the community has to offer in an attempt to find ways for them to actively assist in the ministry, nurturing their skills and talents along the way, and empowering them. I like my new positions because they provide an amazing combination of relevant, exciting clerical work and hands-on interaction with the local community.

In other news, Branches Band had its debut last Friday. That's right, I play guitar in a band. Calm down, I didn't say I did it well. I am still learning, though I have been learning guitar for about 10 months longer than our piano player has been learning piano. We have a singer, too, who can play guitar and piano better than either of us, but freezes whenever she gets in front of a crowd. We probably aren't going to win a Grammy anytime soon, but the Branches youth love that their worship is being lead by the people that work with them every week instead of CDs. Leading worship through music has been an amazing area of growth for me over the past few months.

My whole life there was never a question as to who could play this or that, or if we were able to have someone lead worship. There was always someone around who could play something. I never realized that access to instruments and music lessons was a precious luxury, not just a given. I am not very good at music, it just isn't one of the gifts that God granted me, but it is a discipline that I have embraced. One

of our constant struggles is to find a way for youth to plug in, a way to show them that they do have gifts and talents, and, in turn, hope. The challenge comes in funding and knowledge, both of which the non-profit world frequently lack. So my housemates and I took advantage of a free music ministry based in Miami and started learning new instruments. We were tired of worshipping to CDs that would inevitably skip, and tired of having one or two kids that just couldn't find a way to plug in. Now we are talking to the music ministry about bringing free lessons to our kids, since that would get them learning far faster than if they had to wait for us to learn enough to teach them. Keep your fingers crossed that everything works out.

It wouldn't hurt to keep praying, either. I do sincerely thank each of you for everything that you have done to help me proceed in this ministry, and I thank God for you. The experiences I am having are absolutely priceless. I have fallen head over heels in love with the youth of Florida City, which is fantastic and terrifying all at the same time. I know the challenges that they face when they leave our care each week. I know that we could spend all day every day with them and they would still have to go home to the ghetto at night, and it breaks my heart. So I look to God. I pray, and pray hard, that God would protect our youth physically and spiritually, that God would give them a never ending well of faith and hope and courage to dip into whenever they need to. I pray for resources, for Christ-like love, and for change. I ask that you join me in this prayer. That is one thing that we can all do to make a huge difference.

Thank you again for being my unending well of faith, hope, courage and support that I can always turn to. I don't get to tell you often enough, but I could not do any of this without y'all being so faithful and generous always.