Fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. I need your help.

Many people can count on one hand things they consider to be life changing events:

- Graduating from high school/college
- Marriage
- Children
- Discovering one's own faith
- Surviving a terrible illness or accident

This evening I wish to share with you one such event that changed my life last August and with a bit of good fortune maybe to change each of your lives this year.

So, lend me your attention for a few minutes and let's begin our journey this evening.

Early last summer at Prentiss Church of God where my family attends. A young lady spoke to the congregation requesting assistance for Royal Family Kids Camp. Guess what, I ignored her. Two or three weeks later she again made the same plea to the congregation. Once more it fell on deaf ears and I ignored her. A month or so went by and yet again another request was made. This time though something was unusual her words where different she spoke with heart and explained that they had enough money for kids to attend camp, however, not enough counselors and without the required number some kids would be denied from coming to camp. Needless to say her request tapped so many feelings of sentiment. I prayed and I prayed during that church service that if it was God's will to let me know. To be honest, I don't really remember what occurred next but by the time I made it home from that mornings service I knew I was destined for camp.

Little did I realize what I had signed up for. You see Royal Family Kids Camp is not like most other camps. It is a camp for abused/neglected children. You just don't show up and be a counselor, you are interviewed by three different people of various backgrounds, you are finger printed, then voted on by the committee. If you are approved then the training begins; it covers what to say, how to handle certain situations, and believe it or not even how to hug. Because the kids you work with have been abused you are not allowed to hug from the front. You MUST hug the side. This is one of the hardest things to do especially when a little fell 'a comes up and grabs hold of you desperate for a little bit of love.

I feel obligated to confess due to the training and from what I had overheard from counselors who did it the prior year I had thoughts of backing out at one point. To be a grown man I was afraid - What if I messed up? But, God had other plans and before I knew it August seventh was here.

Camp was here and I was assigned to two campers to be their counselor for the week. What a week. The average rundown for most counselors is a little bit like this:
Day one - Campers are quiet and stay to themselves mainly. They want to know the schedule and when would they get to go to the pool.

Day two - Campers warming up to counselors - More playing

Day three - Campers feel secure - Opening way up about feelings and feeling comfortable.

Day four - Some campers now staying to themselves they realize tomorrow they go home

Day five - Harder for me then the campers to say good bye

Day six - Camp ended yesterday - I'm miserably sick with emotions ruling my day

Does the camp make a difference? Let me take a moment and read a couple of statements the children wrote at the end of the week.

Camp statements:
Camper: "It is fun and it is very good for a child to express themselves and people here are very nice. And if I could come next year I would come and enjoy every moment of the week."

Camper: "The most thing I like about this camp is how nice these people care here. Y'all feel like family to me. I love you. And I hope I can come next year."

Dear God statements:
Camper: "I love you God and sometimes I can hear you when you talk to me. I love how you keep me safe."

Camper: "Please let this camp go up to 12 years old. When you are in heaven can you reserve me a ticket. Thank you for this week and food and water. Please help my mom and dad do good on drug test so I can come home."

Camper: "Thank you for helping me through the hard days. Thank you for dying on the cross and forgiving my sin"

Camper: "I love you"

One special incident that occurred between me and a camper came about on a Wednesday night when several of the campers were taking their baths before bed time. Due to my type "A" personality the boys liked me being the bath house counselor - due to their backgrounds they needed to feel safe.

That night two of the boys got into the discussion if the Devil was real; after much bantering back and forth one little boy (Dominique) who had disregarded me all week stuck his head out the shower curtain and expounded "Cousin Stephen is the Devil real?" I explained that yes he was and why. The next thing I know the little boy stuck his hand out and made the "I love you" gesture in sign language and asked "What does this mean - I say you show it to the other cousin Stephen. Is it a bad sign?"
I explained that no it was not a bad sign that it was a short hand version for the words "I love you" (I learned from my mother in-law) and that I showed to cousin Stephen D because he is my real cousin and that I'm proud of him for being at camp and that I do love him. Just before bedtime Dominique just keep looking and smiling at me.

The next morning Dominique ignored me while we were at camp. After lunch the bus arrived to take the campers back to church for the social workers to pick them up. All the cousins and campers were at the church and waiting not talking too much - too many thoughts racing thru everyone's head. For only a week it is amazing how close you can grow to the kids.

Dominique's social worker arrived and needed assistance with luggage (She was picking up approximately 4 or 5 of the kids). As you can imagine emotions were running high and there were watery eyes. I was purposely trying to stay busy to not be affected. Dominique sat in the back of the van and I had told him goodbye. When I turned my back to walk away I heard a knock on the glass and there was Dominique with tears streaming and the hand gesture of "I Love you" pressed firmly against the glass.

To answer my question - yes it does make a difference to the campers but it can to you too! I pray I have that memory till my dying days.

The actual Facts about this are:

- Annually, 3.6 million cases of child abuse, neglect or abandonment are reported in America.
- One of these victims dies every six hours due to that abuse. That is four kids a day!
- You my friends can make a difference
  - Be a counselor - Volunteer a week of your time
  - Sponsor me to buy supplies - I need to raise $2,600 dollars before July. I'm half way there now.
  - Or best of all Sponsor a child - Camp costs $500 per child - Between now and July there are 18 weeks that would only be $27.77 a week to set aside. That is cheaper than one night out a week for and your spouse.

One final thought I wish to leave you with. I want to read the Starfish story by Loren Eiseley (Eyes Lee) to you.

Once upon a time, there was a wise man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach before he began his work.

One day, as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself at the thought of someone who would dance to the day, and so, he walked faster to catch up.
As he got closer, he noticed that the figure was that of a young man, and that what he was doing was not dancing at all. The young man was reaching down to the shore, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean.

He came closer still and called out "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?"

The young man paused, looked up, and replied "Throwing starfish into the ocean."

"I must ask, then, why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" asked the somewhat startled wise man.

To this, the young man replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

Upon hearing this, the wise man commented, "But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and there are starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!"

At this, the young man bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, he said, "It made a difference for that one."

This is why I need your help - Help me to make a difference for one!

I have brochures in the back if any one is interested in knowing more about Royal Family Kids Camp or if you'd like to volunteer or be a sponsor please see me after the meeting.

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Thank you for your time tonight.
Sincerely, Stephen Wright