

EDITORIAL

Adventist Community Services:
Serving 'Til the End!

FEATURE

Darkest Days and Highest Praise

NEWS

This is God's Pantry

INFORMING MEMBERS SINCE 1988

Memo

JANUARY 2024

**EVEN THERE YOUR
RIGHT HAND
SHALL HOLD ME.**

PSALMS 139:10



Some of the deepest blessings could come only
when I was broken enough to receive them.



Adventist Community Services: Serving 'Til the End!

When some think of Adventist Community Services – Disaster Response, they may think only of the Dorcas society of yesteryear. But the truth is that the Adventist Community Services (ACS) of today has grown and matured into a multiple service personal ministry that meets community needs while directing them to Jesus Christ.



Chelli Ringstaff

Meet Joyce Stevenson, who spent many years working in Ithaca's school districts. After attending a GYC conference with her daughter, Stevenson felt a deep call to ministry and was impressed to dedicate her retirement years to the Lord's service. When she retired, she was asked by her local church family to serve as the director for Ithaca's Adventist Community Service center—and she said yes!

Stevenson began her ministry by using Ithaca's already established clothing closet, however, from her experience in the school system, she knew that there was a huge need that was mostly unnoticed. Using her connections within the school district, she began a program to ensure that students who needed clothing could receive them. Stevenson also ensured discreetness so that students were not

embarrassed but excited to go to school in nice clothes!

This is just one story of many that are using their talents and gifts to make the community a better place while showing that we are a church that cares; we're a church for community members to be a part of.

Adventist Community Services has adopted Mark 10:45 as a model text: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Service centers and leaders all over Michigan serve tirelessly and selflessly to their communities, not expecting anything in return.

Alarming Statistics

This is the time to serve. The 2020 Census showed that 1.337 million in Michigan live below the poverty line—that is 13.4 percent of Michigan's total population! Conditions, unfortunately,

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MICHIGAN
Memo

have not improved since 2020. It is estimated that Michigan food banks fed 20 percent more families in 2022 compared to 2021. Twenty-seven percent of Michigan's children are fed with assistance programs. These statistics are alarming, and that is why we are needed in our communities. This opens the door to planting a seed in the hearts of many. It is an opportunity to share, through neighborly kindness, that Jesus loves them. We can make God's love real by meeting basic human needs.

Michigan is blessed to have over 70 ACS centers across the state, and these centers have been busy meeting the needs of their communities. We have distributed millions of pounds of food, clothing, bedding items, and personal care items. Our goal, however, is to be more than just a food and clothing distributor, but rather, to be the "hands and feet of Jesus" following His method, commonly known as Christ's Method Alone. "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them "Follow Me" (*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143). As we serve with disinterested benevolence, we embody Christ's Method to meet their needs and then introduce all who come through our doors to Jesus Christ.

Members give thousands of hours of service, greeting and mingling with those who may never cross the threshold of the church on a Sabbath day, but who freely come to receive help during some of the worst times of their lives. People who enter our centers are not strangers: we know them by name, we pray for their loved ones, and they know that they can trust us. Through food items packed into a bag or box, ready to be placed into their cars, or through school clothes given to an excited student—every moment of ministry shows that we are a church that cares.

But is that it? Is giving out clothes and food enough to follow the complete example of Christ for soul-winning? It is not. Food and clothing are temporary solutions to a bigger problem—the answer to that problem is Jesus. As we work in our communities, we see that people need Jesus now more than ever.

We have many wonderful centers staffed by volunteers who work tirelessly to share Christ in their communities. There is not enough time or space to mention all the work that is being done across Michigan, but an especially inspiring story can be found at the Ionia ACS.



They provide food and other necessities and bring in local community students to help. This offers an opportunity for both students and clients to come in contact with Christ. Williamston church holds a free BBQ, thanking first responders, and Ann Arbor ministers to the refugee communities. The Upper Peninsula has centers helping their communities in whatever way is needed. Big or small, centers across Michigan are using the talents God has given them, and they are able to meet the local needs of their community and introduce them to the Lord. Working with ACS is a beautiful process of "connecting to the church to the community," says Dr. Sung K. Kwon in his book *Burst the Bubble*, which focuses on community outreach (p. 6). We have been commissioned to reach the world by demonstration of our care and love for those who are our neighbors.

When you are a volunteer or leader of Adventist Community Services and Disaster Response, you are a part of a family, a family with a goal to minister to the community. Those who are committed to the good of others, acting as the hands and feet of Jesus, will find the most loving and personal ministry-focused teams to serve alongside.

We are commissioned to serve God and His people, to bring them to a fountain that will never run dry. That is the beauty of ACS. We have a large group of individuals and families needing our help, and by helping them, by following Christ's method, we will see "true success in reaching people." Together as a church we can help to hasten the coming of Jesus by mingling with those we serve, just like Jesus did while He was on this earth. 🙏

By Chelli Ringstaff, Director, Adventist Community Services and Disaster Response

Darkest Days and Highest Praise

Some of the deepest blessings could come only when I was broken enough to receive them.

I recently overheard a friend sharing about the “worst day of his life”—a day of tragic loss—and it led me to ponder what mine might be.

Would it be the day in late December 2022 when I tried to walk across my doctor’s office heel-to-toe and cried because I nearly fell trying to do so? Would it be the day I received an MRI report saying that I had a brain tumor? What about the day of my brain surgery on January 16—learning when I woke up that my tumor was not benign, as had been supposed, that I most likely had some form of lymphoma, and that my surgeon had severed two of my cranial nerves to more fully remove the growth and “buy time” for our unborn child? Would it be the day when another MRI revealed that I had a new, second tumor elsewhere in my brain? Or perhaps my first day of chemotherapy as I drove away from my week-old baby with plans to accept poison into my body? Or the night during my autologous stem cell transplant when I wondered if God had allowed me to experience more than I could handle?

Even as I briefly pulled each of these painful experiences out of my memory, I decided to tuck them away again and simply admit that 2023 has been the worst year of my life.

It’s in our nature: our “worst” experiences are the days (or months or years) that we dread most, relive most, and muse on most. We hope they will never come. We insulate ourselves against them. We long for them to be over when they do, inevitably, overtake us. We yearn for no lasting inconveniences. We measure our lives after them by how long ago they occurred,

or by the ways in which they have changed us. We think of them as dark days that must be overcome by the light of healing, the light of joy, the light of freedom.

When I consider the events of the past months, I sometimes find myself humming the tune of a less-familiar hymn, “As Water to the Thirsty,” and remembering several snatches of lyrics: “As strength that follows weakness. . . like peace that follows pain. . . as sleep that follows fever. . . as freedom after bondage.” Weakness, pain, fever, and bondage have become familiar to me, and it is certainly easy to get stuck there—in mourning for all that I have lost. But these lyrics are calling me beyond my suffering. They are pleading with me to acknowledge that strength, peace, sleep, and freedom are far sweeter to me now because I have wallowed in their opposites, and that my experiences, dark as they have been, have given me a deeper appreciation for what God has done.

Because of Primary CNS Lymphoma (PCNSL), our internationally-spread family has been drawn in closer and tighter—both physically and emotionally. My husband and I—our daughters, too! —have collectively had months surrounded by loved ones from far away. Because of PCNSL, my quiet, stay-at-home-mom life has been upended and turned into a public testimony of God’s goodness—reaching corners that my previous twelve-year teacher voice could never have touched. Because of PCNSL, my habits of scripture memory have been revitalized and have provided me with an

arsenal of verses—most notably, 2 Timothy 4:17-18—with which to defend me against the enemy’s attacks. Because of PCNSL, a craniotomy, and my resulting handicaps, I have been reminded that God looks at my heart, not at my half-paralyzed face, when He’s searching for beauty, and that He can extend this same grace, through me, to others.

It is thus that I can begin to see how the most difficult days in my life have actually made my life better, because they have taught me to depend more completely on God for my sustenance and empowerment, and because some of the deepest blessings could come only when I was broken enough to receive them.

I also know for certain that the positive impact of my scrape with PCNSL will not stop here. I long to fully realize what this means when I meet my Savior, hear His perspective on my story, and experience what it is like to be released from a body that continues to decay and perish.

Because of the silence in my left ear due to a severed vestibular nerve, I know I *will rejoice* to once again experience surround sound at the second coming of Christ. Because of the discomfort and balance issues caused by my impaired left eye, I joyfully anticipate the day when I know I *will blink* normally again. Because my face is half-paralyzed, I know I *will delight* in the restoration of my smile and see it reflected in the waters of the river of life.

Because of the worst year of my life, because of PCNSL, I long for heaven more. I long to touch the leaves that provide for the healing of the nations. I long for the hurts of this world to cease. I am no longer comfortable staying here, when I know that God has something much, much better in mind for me.

Although I wouldn’t feel honest in saying that I now consider 2023 to have been the best year of my life, I can bravely, and by God’s grace, say that 2023 has been the most meaningful year of my life—because the darkest days have been, and will continue to be, the cause of my highest praise. 🙏

By Emily Gibbs, Cedar Lake church



My last symptom to appear, beginning around Christmas, was paralysis and numbness on the left side of my face.

My skull-base craniotomy at Mayo Clinic on January 16 has required months of recovery.

“I am no longer comfortable staying here, when I know that God has something much, much better in mind for me.”

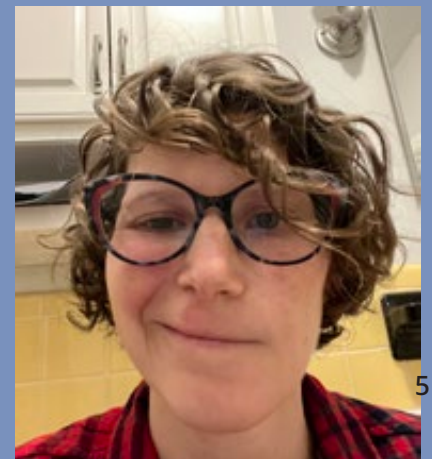


We were impressed to have Avianne Arlys dedicated less than 60 hours after her preemie (but perfect!) appearance on April 12.

After nine consecutive days of chemo followed by a rest day, I received my own stem cells back on August 4.



I still have a long journey ahead of me, but I have so much for which I am thankful.



“The food pantry also expanded their ministry to work with Native Americans in prison.”

This is God’s Pantry

Marshall food pantry can reach people groups often classified as difficult to reach, praying with them and distributing literature.



Left: Volunteers load a client’s car with enough food to feed their family a delicious holiday meal.

Below: Flo Howard and Dale Trescott pose for a photo after working hard to prep Thanksgiving meal boxes.



Marshall food pantry, at its roots, was a small operation, just serving a few families once a month. After two and a half years of operation, however, the pantry has expanded into a multi-faceted ministry serving several hundred families each month and reaching diverse people groups, as well as becoming a distinguished community charity.

It was a dream, in the beginning. The Marshall church was small. Lee Swegles, who leads the Adventist Community Services (ACS) center for Marshall, reports that on an average week 18 to 19 members attend. “The Lord kept speaking to us,” Swegles says, “saying that we needed to do a food pantry.”

Swegles and several other members began to lay the groundwork for a food pantry, and as they did so, they decided they weren’t going to “just hand out food.” Swegles and his team wanted

their pantry to also be a place where individual’s and families’ spiritual needs could be met. “We pray with everyone who comes through,” Swegles reports. “We strongly believe that this is God’s ministry and God’s pantry.”

After committing the ministry to the Lord, the ACS center’s outreach exploded. Initially, the center was only serving families once a month, but during the height of the pandemic, they realized there was much more of a need, and they opened their doors for weekly deliveries—a leap of faith due to financial challenges.

“We buy food boxes each week,” Swegles shares, “and once a month we get a fresh food delivery.” Each month the center distributes an average of about 150 boxes—reaching a significant number of families throughout their local community and praying with each one.

Operations have not always run smoothly. Several times, the pantry has run low on supplies.

Swegles shares that he and his team were beginning to worry that they would be forced to shut down.

"We reached out to a couple of organizations," Swegles says, and "that very same day" an organization pledged to feed 150 families twice a month, at no cost to the Marshall pantry. All costs would be taken care of by the generous organization.

"Not only did we walk out of that situation with the money," Swegles says, "but He brought us further [in our ministry]." The center was able to serve *more* families because they trusted in God by continuing to serve, despite financial uncertainties!

In addition to serving their average of 150 families monthly, Marshall ACS serves more families during the holiday season. "We have done this before," Swegles says, "up to 75 or 100 families." The families are given everything they need for a holiday meal. "When Thanksgiving hits," Swegles says, "they have everything they need to sit down with their families." The response to these meals is heart-warming. Many individuals have shed tears upon seeing the boxes, saying, "Our family wouldn't have had a meal if not for this." This past holiday season, the Marshall center was able to serve 500 families a "full turkey meal—with turkey, pie, stuffing, potatoes—everything needed for a holiday meal," Swegles shares.

The pantry can serve a significant number of families because of community involvement. Swegles shares that a local insurance company gave a large donation, as well as the owner of a local Hungry Howie's pizza. "We didn't ask," Swegles says, "they were just like, 'We want to give back, we may not be of your faith, but we want help.'" The pantry's ministry is noticed by the community, and the community wants to help.

Out of the 500 families who received a Thanksgiving meal, 200 were Amish. The pantry serves Amish families weekly. With every box distributed, Marshall pantry includes a healthy food sample and a recipe for how to make it. Swegles shares the Amish are especially interested in these, as many struggle with common health issues such as diabetes, weight gain, and heart disease. "The Amish are really big into the health message," Swegles shares.

In addition, many Muslim families come through the pantry's doors. The center has a small stock of literature written in Arabic which they include in the family's food box.

"We get to pray with them," Swegles says, speaking about everyone who comes through the doors, "but we also get to hand out literature, putting these tracts out there like leaves from the trees in the fall." The center goes through roughly 300-400 tracts a week.

Through their ministry, providing day-to-day needs, Marshall food pantry can reach people groups often classified as difficult to reach, praying with them and distributing literature. Every action is a seed planted in the heart.

The food pantry also expanded their ministry to work with Native Americans in prison. "We look up all the Native Americans in prison across the United States," Swegles says, "and we send everyone on our list a birthday card." Correspondence is also kept between some of the individuals, and the ministry has seen results. Prisoners requested Voice of Prophecy Bible studies, and a pastor serving the jail reached out and requested more. "Thirteen prisoners had these studies," Swegles says, "and he wanted 13 more. He wasn't even an Adventist pastor." The simple act of sending a birthday card expanded into something much more.

Swegles and his volunteers are not content with their ministry as it is now—they want to do more! "Right now," Swegles says, "we have a basket outside our sanctuary—we are just trying to get toothbrushes, toothpaste, and plain simple gifts for kids." Swegles explains that families come through their center needing more than food. When they gave a teenage girl a toothbrush, she began to cry. "She had been sharing a toothbrush with her siblings for over a year," Swegles says. Through prayer time, volunteers interacted with families in a more intimate setting, and were able to see the true needs and wants of each family.

"We take things for granted," Swegles says, "but we have poverty right here in our backyard. We are trying to be an example. No matter how little people you have in your church, you can move mountains."

"Adventists," he continues, "step up! People are hurting—God blesses us to be able to do it and He provides. You can't outgive God on any level." 🙏

By Judy Ringstaff, Communication



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CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

NATURE NUGGET

Three-toed Sloths

Recently, my wife and I spent some time in the tropical rainforests of Costa Rica, and we got to watch Three-toed Sloths! Picture this: upside-down hanging, slow-motion cruising through the trees—that's the sloth's everyday life. The hair on a sloth is not your typical fur – it's a unique ecosystem in itself. The hairs are hollow and split down the middle, so they hold a lot of moisture. This is home to tiny green algae, which makes the sloth's hair greenish in color. This color helps provide the sloth with effective camouflage in the green leafy tree canopy. As if this weren't fascinating enough, enter the moths! Sloths often have a variety of moths on their back. These moths provide another layer of camouflage for the sloth. In addition, the moths lay their eggs in the sloth's fur, and when the larvae hatch, they feed on the algae to keep it under control. When the moths poop, it falls to



the ground and helps fertilize the tree that the sloth is living in! This symbiotic relationship between the sloth and the algae and moths is a wonder of nature and shows us how intricate the web of connections is that makes the rainforest such a remarkable and interdependent ecosystem. In a world where everything seems to be rush, rush, rush, the sloth can teach us the power of patience and enjoying the here and now. It's like they have a secret to finding joy in taking it slow, reminding us that sometimes the journey is just as awesome as the destination! God wants us to slow down and enjoy His nature around us wherever we are! 🦥

By Dr. Gordon Atkins, Head Naturalist, Camp Au Sable
Photo by Dr. Gordon Atkins.

MONTHLY CALENDAR

January

- 12-14** Teen Snow Outing (CAS)
- 21** Personal Ministries Training Day (Office)
- 22-25** Ministerial Retreat
- 26-28** Father-Son/Man Camp (CAS)

February

- 3** PBE Area Level
- 11** VBS Workshop (Office)
- 16-19** CAMPUS Winter Retreat (CAS)
- 19** Office Closed (President's Day)
- 21-25** GLAA Home Leave
- 23-25** Teen Impact (CAS)
- 29-March 3** Rest and Renew (CAS)

*CAS = Camp Au Sable