

FOCUS – Beyond the barriers

by Captain Amanda Reardon
My son Kyle is a student at Columbine High School. That's right, *the* Columbine High, where three years ago two students murdered twelve students, one teacher, and themselves. Many have speculated about the environment at Columbine and what role it may have played in prompting the heinous deeds of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. As a person who visits there regularly, I can't imagine lovelier students or a more pleasant public school atmosphere.

But it is true that a large portion of the student body is 'blessed' with quite a bit of spare cash. I am continually astonished at the birthday gifts their parents give them, the clothes they wear, the trips they take, etc.



As nice as these kids are, many of them are oblivious to the realities of many Americans. I love to tell the story of the time that Kyle's friends were ridiculing him for being "sheltered" because he isn't allowed to watch MTV. Through the ministry of the Army, Kyle has met a number of people outside of the suburban culture where we live. So, to his friends' taunts, he quickly retorted: "Have any of you ever met a prostitute? Do you know anyone in a gang? Do you know any homeless people personally?" "Well, no," they stammered. "Well I do. So tell me, who's sheltered now?"

My point is not "bring your kids to the Army so they can meet a gang member." I've been thinking about lives of privilege versus lives of hardship in terms of Christmas. I've been thinking of a God who left his lofty abode his life of "privilege" – to be with us. He did not just pass through this earth, as a suburbanite might hold his breath and drive through South Central Los Angeles. He impoverished himself to the point of becoming one of us. While in Heaven, he never worked for his supper, got stung by a bee, or even broke a nail. But one day he came here and experienced all the things we experience, big and small.

Despite the example Christ set for us, many Christians dabble in some mission of mercy, but never fully immerse themselves. Recently, a nice Christian lady whom I know asked if she and her children could volunteer at an Army soup kitchen. I began to tell her about our homeless overnight shelter when she explained to me that it was important for this soup kitchen to be in a decent neighborhood. As gently as I could, I explained that soup kitchens don't tend to be located in nice neighborhoods.

They need to be accessible to the people who need them. Although I appreciated the fact that she wanted to keep her children safe, I suggested that if she felt God calling her to help, she could trust him to take care of them. It is on this principle that so many Salvationists and others delve into inner city ministry. (There are also, of course, many Christians who live in unsafe neighborhoods and must daily trust God for protection.) But my friend did not seem willing to take the risk.

As a nation, we have learned to cross cultural barriers of race and gender. But we are very slow to cross the barrier of social class. God expects Christians to do this, and The Salvation Army is uniquely positioned to lead the way. By nature, many of our programs would throw together people of varied socio-economic position. And yet, even we Salvationists construct our own walls. Our own corps are sometimes segregated the men from the rehabilitation center are on one side of the chapel, the fifth generation Salvationists are on the other.

Last Sunday I observed two young teens in my congregation. The first boy lives in a nice home with two parents. He is always well dressed, with every one of his curly locks in place. The second boy is a bit unkempt and lives in a tiny, crowded home – which is better than the room in the shelter where he, his mother, and his many siblings used to live. The boys were conversing about like interests. These two don't perceive barriers. They are friends. And how much richer their lives are for that fact!

A teacher at Columbine High was discussing with me what an ideal Christmas gift would be for an impoverished teenager. She suggested a cell phone. I predicted that such a teen could not pay for the minutes. She then suggested car accessories. When I reminded her that not only would the teen not own a car, but his parents might not own one either, she realized her blunder and felt embarrassed. This kind lady was really trying. But she had a hard time understanding a lifestyle so different from her own.

As our Creator, God has always understood humankind fully. But I think it makes *us* feel better to know that he has been here. He has walked this earth. The King became a pauper, and it was there that he met us face to face. If Christ could do this for us, surely we can do it for one another. In the words of John Oxenham:

“In Christ now meet both east and west,
In him meet south and north;
All Christly souls are one in him
Throughout the whole wide earth.”

(TSA Songbook, #826, verse 4)
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