

ASP Commissioning 2013

Alida Ward

I'm going to start off with a little show and tell here -- I want to show you my most prized and precious souvenir of an Appalachia Service Project trip. This is a Chevy hubcap -- a very old hubcap -- rusted out and riddled with holes. If you stop by my office anytime, you'll see this hanging on the wall behind my desk, where everyone can see it. And if, like everyone else, you ask "why on earth do you have a rusty hubcap hanging on your wall?" I'll tell you what I tell everyone else: this hubcap, to me, represents everything the Appalachia trip is about.

The way the trip works, as you might well know, is that our 220 volunteers are organized into crews of 7, each one of them on a particular project for the week. Everyone's on a crew except me ... and what I do is drift from crew to crew over the course of the week, each morning I pick a crew to bless with my presence -- which really means one more body for them to squeeze into their van and one more mouth to feed at lunch, so it's probably not that much of a blessing, really.

One day in July of 2010, it was Mike Ruble's crew that I signed on with. And on the way out to their worksite, as we were bumping along in the van, I asked what we'd be doing that day. "We're digging footers under a house," they said. Now I have to tell you -- there are certain phrases on the Appalachia trip that just strike dread into the heart. Phrases that include words like "building a retaining wall" or "sheetrocking a ceiling" and, yes, "digging footers under a house". This means that you will be digging holes two foot deep while crouched in the fetal position under someone's floorboards. I thought of asking them to let me out of the van so I could run off and find a different crew to hang out with, but that seemed wrong, somehow, so I swallowed hard and hung tough.

When we got to the worksite, it turned out the house was built on a hillside, so the further back you went under the house, the smaller the space between dirt the ground and the house got; so, where they were digging, they had about a foot clearance to work in. So shovels were of course impossible -- we were digging two foot holes with trowels. I say **we**, but in fact there weren't enough trowels for me to have one. So I looked around for something to dig with, and under the house I found this, found this Chevy hubcap, and I dug with this while everyone else went at it with their trowels.

And so there we were, lying on our bellies, digging the best we could, spiders everywhere, and you know, after a while we just started getting silly. Someone said "yo

ho ho, we're digging for buried treasure, maties," and somehow that just struck everyone as the funniest thing they'd ever heard, and then someone else started singing the theme song from the movie *Holes*, "diggin up, diggin up holes" and we were hurting ourselves laughing, and then I hit something in my hole, thought it was rock or something, and I reached in and pulled what was clearly the jawbone of a large animal. ANd I said, "look, I found the jawbone of an of a donkey," only I didn't say 'donkey,' but I don't know if I can say what I said right here in church on a Sunday morning, and the kid next to me started laughing so hard he somehow flipped my hubcap full of dirt right into my face so I had mud right down my ear canals, and we were all laughing so hard that Mrs. Cline, sitting upstairs in her living room, she got up and came outside and peered underneath and said "lands sakes, what is going on down here?" And we all crawled out to greet her, and she looked at my face, and said "honey, you look like a coal miner," and then she looked at the jawbone I'd found and said "well, I'll be -- I wonder if that's the mule we used to have, she always did like to lie down under the house in the shade." Oh my God, said one of the kids, so it really is the jawbone of a -- donkey. And with that every last one of us, Mrs. Cline, too, collapsed onto the grass and laughed until we cried.

So I keep this hubcap on my wall. I keep it because it reminds of me of what was for me the perfect ASP moment -- a mud covered crew with sweat stinging their eyes, a home about to become a whole lot safer once those holes were filled with concrete, and a homeowner laughing alongside us. A perfect joy-filled ASP moment, when you could feel God's delight alongside your own.

But there's something else this hubcap reminds me of. It reminds me, every day, That you do what needs to be done with whatever you have available to you. That if all you've got is a hubcap instead of a shovel, that's okay. That God doesn't ask for perfect people doing things perfectly well, but for people of compassion willing to work hard with the gifts that they have. A hubcap is **not** the perfect digging tool. But it was all that I had. And that was okay.

Next week we are not taking 220 skilled construction workers. But we're taking what we have: enthusiasm and willingness, open hearts and open hands, love that we are ready to put into service. We are, all of us, Chevy hubcaps rather than shiny new shovels, but we will get it done because we love enough and care enough and will work hard enough. We give all that we can give with the gifts that we have. And that's all that God asks.

John Wesley, one of the great Christians of another time, once wrote this:

Do all the good you can.

By all the means you can.

In all the ways you can.

In all the places you can.

At all the times you can.

To all the people you can.

As long as you ever can.

That's what we'll do. In the towns of Oak Hill, Matewan, and Man, West Virginia, that's what we'll do. But you know, you don't have to be in West Virginia to do all the good you can. Every one of us, every day, is called to do the same: all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can. Whether next week finds you in Man or *Manhattan*, whether in **Oak** Hill or Greenfield Hill, whether in Matewan or ... all right, I ran out of poetic alliteration here -- whether in Matewan or -- Mill Plain -- the call is the same: all the good you can, by all the means you can, to all the people you can.

With whatever gifts you have, with all the heart you have to give, do all the good you can to all the people you can.

As for us in West Virginia -- well, we'll be doing the best we can. And hubcaps may be involved. Amen.