

## ASP Commissioning 2015

### “Youth Mission”

#### Rev. Alida Ward

Next Saturday 222 people get on 4 buses and 7 vans.

We will go exactly 522 miles south to Roanoke, Virginia, where those 222 people will get into 31 vans and head into West Virginia.

And over the course of the next week,

those 222 people divided into those 31 work crews will fix 31 homes.

Pretty amazing stuff.

Actually, 221 people. *I'm* number 222, and I'm not actually in a crew --

what I'll do all week is drive from site to site and see what's happening.

It's a lot of fun -- I get to see all the different home repair projects that are folks are working on all week -- and they're all great, and needed,

but each year there are some particularly memorable projects that lodge in memory.

One was the mile-long ramp.

Well, that's what the crew called it.

Bill was the man they were building it for.

Bill had become confined to a wheelchair, and now he literally couldn't get out of his house.

Cause the front door to his house was high off the ground;

you got to it by climbing a precarious staircase of cinderblocks.

How was Bill supposed to manage that?

So he just didn't go anywhere -- if he had a doctor's appointment,

he had to get the strong young man down the road to hoist him up and carry him out.

So our work crew was tasked with designing and building a wheelchair ramp so Bill could get out of his house.


The kids' first reaction? How hard can this be?

Why would we need a whole week to do this?

Right? You just take some wood, put one end at the door, put the other on the ground, and whammo, you got a ramp.

Their adult leaders had to point out that poor Bill, if he came out the door and hit a ramp built like that [*almost vertical*], well, whammo would be about right.

This isn't a slippery slide we're making, they said, And Bill is not looking to set speed records on the way down. He just wants to get out of his house -- safely.

So they sat and they measured, and they looked up what the slope of a ramp oughta  be, and they started designing.

And what they created was the mile-long ramp.

In order to get Bill safely, slowly and gently out of his house, in order to keep the slope from being too steep, this ramp ended up having to go something like this all the way down the hillside in front of Bill's house.

Because just to make it trickier, he *was* actually on a hillside.

Let me tell you, by the time I came and visited this crew, at the end of the week, this ramp was, I swear, longer than the typical bunny slope at a ski resort.

It went like this .... then it curved this way ... then around this way, and eventually, *eventually*, you reached the ground.

In terms of length, you'd have a shorter trip across the GW bridge. I swear.

And was it ever beautifully made. The crew had just finished putting on a railing when I got there, sanding it down so no one got splinters.

And I got to be there when Bill, for the first time, rolled himself out of his door and onto his ramp.

And then, ever so gently, began easing himself down to the road.

And when he got there, he burst into tears, and so did the whole crew.

*Do you know how long it's been, Bill said, since I've been able to come outside on my own?*

I said the GW bridge had nothing on that ramp,

and you know, bridge is the right word, actually.

It wasn't just a ramp our crew had built him.

It *was* a bridge.

It was a bridge for Bill from the dismal confines of his home to the world he'd missed.

But it wasn't just *his* bridge.

Building that ramp meant that everyone on that crew had crossed from one place to another themselves --

they were no longer the same people they'd been on Monday;

they had crossed into Bill's world, fallen in love with him,

and by the end of the week nothing mattered more to them than him.

That's what mission work is. Youth mission, any mission.

It's the creating of bridges, building connections that span from one person's world into another.

And it's the crossing over of bridges,

willing ourselves to leave behind what we know

and walk across the path into what we don't.

I often tell people that on ASP we're not just building homes,

we're building relationships --

and another way of saying that is that we're building bridges...

and crossing them, too.

From Connecticut to West Virginia,

from comfort to poverty,

from life in the 'burbs to life in the hollers.

We cross those bridges and we meet people "where they are and just the way are" and we are not the same.

There is a whole lot that has to change in our world to keep another Charleston from happening.

But it will all begin with the building of bridges.

People hate what they don't know --

hate the ones they don't know --

and so most surely the work of love begins with knowing.

It begins with bridge-building.

And that's why we do mission.

Yes, to fix houses.

Or fix meals, or whatever it is we're called into.

Yes, to do something meaningful, something holy.

But more than anything else,

it is to create a bridge from you to me,  
from us to them until there is no them, only us.

And those bridges may take a long time to build,

and they may have to be a mile long,

curving and winding every which way in order to get from there to here  
from them to us

but there is no more important work.

That's what we do. That's *why* we do.

Not just to fix houses.

But to fix the world. Truly.

Amen.