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Laws of Life Essay Contest

CINCINNATI, OHIO

on COMPASSION

“Judge not lest ye be judged”

THE DAY HAD BEEN HOT AND DRY, but it was a cool evening that greeted the inmates as they drove onto our worksite. The crickets were chirping noisily, and I could hear the parched summer grass crunching under their feet as they made their way across the yard. A cool breeze drifted by, chilling me in my tank top and shorts, so that I went to grab my sweater out of the van.

The cool evening was a relief from the sweltering days of summer in Greenbrier, West Virginia. My light sweater was just warm enough, and comforting. I had been working on a Habitat for Humanity house for the past five days under the burning afternoon sun. On this day, though, our group had taken an afternoon trip to a Cold War bunker made for the president because of threats of nuclear war. We normally worked from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, and 2:00 pm to 6:00 pm. Instead, we worked from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, and were returning to work the evening shift from 5:00 pm to 9:00 pm. This time happened to be the period that a group of female inmates normally worked. Because we worked different hours, we had never encountered the women before.

My friends and I watched them disdainfully as they disembarked from their guarded van and lit up their cigarettes. I coughed on some sawdust as we began to talk about the ladies. We continued to work quietly on the inside of the house. We knew that someone was working outside of the house on the other side of the wall from us, but had no idea who it was. I had just finished hammering in a nail in record time when we heard someone calling to us.

“Hey, you there,” we heard her smoke-laden voice with a New York accent, “could you come out here and give me a hand? I’ve never been good with hammers.” She laughed huskily. We joined in daintily as we peered around the corner. Stephanie and I stepped outside and noticed, to our surprise, that our friend Caitlin was already talking to the woman. They were having a totally normal conversation! I wriggled my toes around in my shoe as I nervously introduced myself to the woman. I found out that her name was Lisa.

The time passed quickly once we began to help Lisa. We taught her how to hold the hammer correctly, walked her around the worksite, showed her where everything was, and, most importantly, introduced her to all our friends. She became more and

more friendly as well, introducing us to her friends. The sun began to sink into the velvet folds of night as we got to know her better. When we asked, she even put out her cigarette:

“I’ve been trying to lose Mr. Ciggy for a while now, anyway.”

It soon became clear to us that she wasn’t a classic Disney villain, out to get the good guys. It turns out that she was just someone like us, who tended to land the hammer on her thumb more than anywhere else.

The lesson really hit home with me when we said goodbye. It was in the full black of night by this time. A mosquito buzzed by my ear and into the headlights of the school van that was waiting for me. As Lisa was leaving, she said something deeply important, though seemingly insignificant. With so much feeling that I could almost see tears in her eyes, she said, “Thank you.”

Lisa and her friends got into the van and it drove away. I watched the van until it turned the corner and drove out of my sight.

My friends and I walked away feeling rather sobered. During the bumpy ride back in the school van that smelled like sweaty socks I contemplated the day. I could see that Lisa’s words were more than just a flippant thanks. She was thanking us for treating her like the real person that she was, instead of like an escaped convict from an action movie. Although I felt guilty for laughing at her at first, I was proud of myself for having taken a step forward. It seemed ironic that I thought it would take hard work at Habitat for Humanity to teach me about giving; yet all it took was a brief encounter with one ordinary woman. God’s law says, “Judge not lest ye be judged.” I learned a great deal about this law that night in West Virginia. Seeing someone through the eyes of kindness instead of condemnation opened my heart to the truth that we are all loved by God. This lesson continues to help me become the kind of person that I need to be if I profess to be a Christian. After all, who wants to follow a man whose followers reject those most in need of His compassion?

Amanda recently won an award for her commitment to community service. She hopes to continue her mission work, perhaps serving as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity.