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## H.E.L.P. in Action

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# H.E.L.P. in Action

By Shannon Kelly

On September 16, a group of Andrews University students and community members went to Martin Luther King Academy in Benton Harbor to kick off the second annual Human Empowered Life Project (H.E.L.P.). Founded by MDiv student, Carlisle Sutton, in the fall of 2015, HELP seeks to encourage literacy and instill values of responsibility and integrity in young people to help them escape a vicious cycle of poverty.

## Background:

HELP was inspired by Sutton while he was sitting in a church planting class. When the professor shared statistics about the poverty in Benton Harbor, Michigan, only 15 miles away from Berrien Springs, he was shocked. “How is it possible for Benton Harbor to be so close and have so many needs?” he asked himself. “Most people don’t recognize the need that is out there... On the list of 101 cities listed within the U.S. with the most individuals living below the poverty line, Benton Harbor is number 2. Over 48 percent of the population [is] living in poverty. That, for me, is crazy.” Sutton decided to use sources from Andrews University to help “improve and empower the lives of the people.” In collaboration with some friends and colleagues, the HELP program began to take shape.

## The Structure:

The total number of volunteers has grown from 35 individuals last year, to 118 individuals this year. The majority are Andrews University students, but other community members are also on board. The volunteers commit to 4 hours of service every month - 2 hours every other Friday afternoon – in which they go to schools in

Benton Harbor (Martin Luther King Academy and International Academy) - to do reading activities with first, second, and third-graders. They are divided into groups: one group for first-graders, one for second-graders, and one for third-graders. Each group is then divided into smaller teams who disperse to different classrooms with their assigned grade level. Each week, the team reads a new story to their class, encouraging literacy. Following the reading, they engage the students in activities relating to the story, such as word association worksheets and coloring pages, as well as identifying the moral of the story, the main characters, and other elements. This helps to encourage focus, attention, and critical thinking in the students.

## The Children:

In the fall of 2016, HELP volunteers read and work with a total of 330 second and third graders. Beginning in January 2017, first-graders will be included in the mission, upping the total number of children to about 620. Sutton said that almost 92 percent of the school children live below the poverty line, most of whom come from single-parent homes and struggle with behavioral or concentration issues. He shook his head as he recalled a time when a child walked into school wearing paper taped around their feet for shoes. He mentioned another case in which a first-grader’s mother was only 18 years old and in prison. “We often, I think, dismiss individuals because we look at them and we say... you’re hard, you’re tough, you’re difficult to deal with, and I don’t want to have to deal with that. But I think if we were to stop to say... *why* are you difficult? What is going on in *your* world? I think that all our frustration would melt, and I think we would just want to hug these individuals,” Sutton said with conviction. He smiled as he noted that within a matter of weeks, there is a noticeable difference in the

children's participation and self-confidence levels. This is partly achieved by constantly telling the students that they are smart and capable people. Sutton recounted the watch words from his primary school: "It Can be Done." He said that ever since, he has always felt like he could do anything.

HELP strives to instill the same confidence in the children of Benton Harbor. "I think that if we can inspire these kids with the vision that they could do it, that there's nothing in this world that they cannot achieve, that great things will happen."