

# REACHing Out With Both Hands

■ by Bev Stout

A tattered piece of what was once a pair of Tommy Hilfiger jeans lies rejected on the sidewalk alongside candy-bar wrappers and an old, empty Styrofoam cup. My imagination goes wild trying to figure out what sort of event might have brought them there.

Empty liquor bottles, probably bought at the "party store" across the street, are scattered like lawn decorations throughout the grass, standing as remnants of last night's, or maybe last week's, bad habit.

The houses of the neighborhood appear as if they are shrinking into the ground, shingles crooked, shoulders sagging, as if they are losing the ability to carry their burdens.

This is what my eyes focus on as I step out of the vehicle that has taken me to downtown Benton Harbor, Mich. for my first trip with AU out-REACH (Andrews University out-Reviving, Empowering, and Changing Hearts). But that is only for a moment because before I know it, a child I have never seen before leaps onto my hip with a big smile spread across her face. It's time to play.

AU out-REACH, formerly known as Benton Harbor Street Ministries, has been making a difference in the community of downtown Benton Harbor since the fall of 1996 when six students became determined to win the city for Christ. Inspired by a sermon on service given by Pastor Dwight Nelson at Pioneer Memorial Church, Heidi (Towar) Martin, William Hurtado, and four

friends decided to meet together at 3:00 pm in the lobby of Lamson Hall. From there they drove the 12 miles to a town known for its drugs and violence and started knocking on doors, offering to pray with the people inside. The group had such an awesome experience that they decided to invite more people to come along the following week. The word spread all the way

to Pastor Nelson, who decided to announce from the pulpit that there was a group meeting at 3:00 pm in Lamson Hall with the intention to minister to the people of Benton Harbor. The turnout was incredible, and AU out-REACH was born.

Since then, AU out-REACH has grown into something much bigger than just knocking on doors, even though that is still a major component of the ministry. An average of 100 vol-

unteers meet every Sabbath at 3:00 pm in the Lamson Hall lobby, ready to get on the bus that will take them to Benton Harbor where they can choose from approximately seven different ministry opportunities.

There is a place for everyone in the ministry of AU out-REACH, whether you can give a Bible study, play the violin, or carry a child on your shoulders. The old-



"A child I have never seen before leaps onto my hip with a big smile spread across her face. It's time to play."

est of the programs is Street Ministry, where volunteers choose a street and go knocking from door to door, giving Bible studies and praying with people. Usually those involved with this ministry will “adopt” a family that they befriend and visit regularly.

Trailer Park ministry, which reaches the children in the Orchard Grove trailer park. All of these programs provide volunteers with the opportunity to build positive friendships with the children of Benton Harbor through songs, stories, crafts, and games. In addition,

---

**“We also want them to feel loved in a community of believers.  
I know that by God’s grace we will see this happen.”**

---

There are four different children’s ministries volunteers can pick from: Buddies Forever (the second oldest ministry), R.O.C.K. (Reaching Out Connecting Kids), El Ministerio de los Niños (a relatively new program tailored for Spanish-speaking children), and

a puppet ministry presents shows to the various children’s programs several times each semester.

One of the three original programs, the nursing home ministry, gives volunteers the opportunity to interact with over thirty elderly residents of a local

## A Caring Class

It’s hard to say who benefits more from their time spent together—the kids at Martin Luther King Elementary School or the Andrews elementary-education students enrolled in EDTE420: Literacy Intervention Strategies.

AU students taking the course spend a good part of their class time working one-on-one with selected students in Benton Harbor who need more structure and guidance in their reading development. Once the Andrews students learn to evaluate and assess reading problems in young children, they take their show on the road—to Martin Luther King Elementary School—to apply their learning in a real-school environment.

But it’s not just about the Andrews students. The primary-grade children selected to work with them receive close attention, develop friendships with their AU mentors, and improve their reading skills. Stephanie Rockette, MLK principal, says it’s a great relationship: “Our kids love the attention they get from the Andrews students, and their reading is improving. We’re so grateful to Andrews for working with us.”

Through the experience, AU students gain valuable practice in developing strategies that can improve litera-



*Tatiana reads to Andrews student Alisa Greene at Martin Luther King Elementary School this summer.*

cy skills. They observe their students’ concepts about print, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension, among other things.

Perhaps the greatest learning on the Andrews students’ part is something parallel to intellectual attainment. As Douglas Jones, professor of education, assured his EDTE420 students, “Just by spending that hour a day with the little kids, giving them your attention and friendship, you’re modeling your values, showing your concern, and letting the kids know that language and literacy are important. It may not seem like much—it’s never enough—but for now, you’ve done a lot.”

nursing home. Volunteers put on a worship program filled with singing and a short talk. Afterwards, they spend time interacting one-on-one with the residents. Benton Harbor Community Change consists of two different components, the first of which is to help build community pride through clean-up and neighborhood beautification. The second focuses on con-

the riots broke out in Benton Harbor last summer, but the program didn't begin until just after they were over. This timing brought a lot of positive attention to the needs of the program. "God was ready for something like this to happen," Trynchuk comments on the time frame in which the program developed. Benefit concerts helped raise money, and instruments in good

**An average of 100 volunteers meet every Sabbath at 3 p.m. in the Lamson Hall lobby, ready to get on the bus that will take them to Benton Harbor, where they can choose from approximately seven different ministry opportunities.**



necting needy children with sponsors who can help provide them with warm clothing for the cold Michigan winters.

The Benton Harbor String Program is AU out-REACH's newest program. Inspired by a story in Richard Davidson's book, *A Song for Sabbath*, which told of a plumber who spent Sabbaths using his skills to help the less fortunate, Carla Trynchuk, professor of music at Andrews University, wanted to use her special talents as a violinist for service. Trynchuk got the idea to create a program that offered free music lessons to interested children who normally would not be able to afford them. The idea came to Trynchuk just a few months before

condition were donated to the program. Every week during the school year one viola, one cello, and three violin students of Andrews University spend their Sabbath afternoons giving lessons to the talented children of Benton Harbor, sharing their love for music.

The community of Benton Harbor has responded

positively to the program. Residents are familiar with Andrews University. Volunteers went out on the Sabbath just after the riots without any problems. During my visit, I noticed the ease with which volunteers interacted with the residents, who let them wander freely in and out of their homes. Marie Girven, senior accounting major and full-time accountant for the financial records office at Andrews



**Putting the street back in ministry:** AU students go door-to-door, sharing the gospel in Benton Harbor

University, says she has “gotten to see a lot of change” in Benton Harbor since she started working with the program four years ago. Girven was the director of AU out-REACH for the 2003-2004 school year. The change, however, hasn’t been instantaneous. While the residents of Benton Harbor are friendly, they are cautious. Girven emphasizes the importance of consistency and the building of relationships. “Most of the changes come through friendships and prayer. Probably the



“All of these programs provide volunteers with the opportunity to build positive friendships with the children of Benton Harbor through songs, stories, crafts, and games.”



most frustrating thing can be that change doesn’t happen fast enough, but it isn’t about us. God is planting the seeds.”

The influence of AU out-REACH extends beyond just the weekly Sabbath afternoon outings. New Plant Seventh-day Adventist Church is a church plant that grew out of the ministry of AU out-REACH and will be sponsoring an evangelistic series in downtown Benton Harbor this fall along with Pioneer Memorial Church. Clara Alcantara and Andrew Roquiz are this year’s AU out-REACH directors, and they plan to make the evangelistic meetings and the church plant their focus for the year. “This year we want as many people as possible from Benton Harbor to come and form a part of this church, and thus grow more in the knowledge of Christ,” notes Alcantara. “We also want them to feel loved in a community of believers. I know that by God’s grace we will see this happen, and this church will be filled with all of our friends from Benton Harbor, including the children.”

The first thing I noticed when I entered downtown Benton Harbor may have been the trash on the sidewalks and the dilapidated state of the buildings. But as the afternoon wore on, and as child to child passed from my hip to my shoulders to my back, I realized that there is a lot more here than just sorrow and dirt. In each child’s smile, in each laugh and small hand, I saw the hope and beauty of God’s love.

---

**Bev Stout** (MA '04) recently joined the staff of University Relations in charge of Media Relations. Bev was the director of Loaves & Fishes, an urban children’s ministry, at Columbia Union College and spent a year as a student missionary in Austria.

## Join the Alumni Network

AU out-REACH (formerly known as Benton Harbor Street Ministry) would like to start an alumni network. If you were previously, or are currently, involved in this ministry in any capacity (volunteer, leader, etc.), please contact us at [auoutreach@andrews.edu](mailto:auoutreach@andrews.edu). We would like your full name, years involved and areas of involvement. Thank you. May God continue to bless!