

PETER EDWARD BURCH
PROJECT COMPASSION

“What Project Compassion does is amazing!”
—Mrs. Tara Ryan, Councilmember, Highlands, New Jersey

Unimaginable

In the summer of 2012, I was considering ways to make my history classes at The Charles Finney School¹ more interesting and meaningful. My students were, of course, going to learn about the past; however, I also wanted them to impact the present and, in so doing, shape the future. After all, the chance to impact the Stone Age is over, but the opportunity to impact the Modern Age is now—and it is necessary. I was optimistic about some of my ideas, but could not have imagined serving beside my students on five mission trips to help a New Jersey community recover from one of history’s most devastating hurricanes. Nor could I have imagined a day in June when Finney students delivered five pasta dinners to suffering families: to a family evicted from their home, to a father whose mother had died, to a mother who had lost her son, to a wife who had lost her husband, and to a family who had been victimized by the Boston Marathon bombers. Unimaginable in August 2012, yes. But not in August 2013, because I had seen it all happen during the breathtaking first year of Project Compassion.

Project Compassion

In the course of my doctoral studies through the School of Education at Andrews University in Michigan, I read over John Dewey’s philosophy of education. Dewey, sometimes called the father of modern education, said that “the mere absorbing of facts and truths is so exclusively an individual affair that it tends very naturally to pass into selfishness” (2013, p. 1). Dewey’s insight into the self-orbiting and stupefying tenden-

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cies of memorization and testing illuminated the following concern I had regarding my teaching outcomes: The “mere absorbing of facts and truths” about history was not sparking a spirit of compassion and servanthood in my students. So, inspired by Dewey’s insight and my Christian faith, I launched Project Compassion on the first day of school in September of 2012. The mission was to put into action one of Finney’s core values—compassion—which Mike VanLeeuwen, the school president, defines as “reaching out to those in need by offering both spiritual and tangible support in service, both locally and internationally.”

The week before school started, Hurricane Isaac ravaged the Gulf Coast, leaving behind over two billion dollars of wreckage. So, on the first day of school, after dispensing with the customary introductions and textbook distributions, I broke with custom and asked my students for some of their money. “Our first act of compassion,” I announced, “will be a donation to the American Red Cross’ relief effort in the Gulf region.” As a small red bucket made its way from one perplexed student to the next, I shared one of the guiding principles of Project Compassion—*doing something is greater than doing nothing*. Echoing Mother Teresa, one of history’s greatest leaders, I said, “If all you have is one penny, then give it, because it is not how much you give, it is how much love you put in the giving.” We mailed off a check for \$17.53 to the Red Cross: Act #1. Project Compassion at The Charles Finney School had begun.

Acts of Compassion

Linking the learning of history to compassionate outreach was not difficult. I began by taping quotations from important historical figures on the white board. For example, “Those who are the happiest are those who do the most for others” (Booker T. Washington), and one of my favorites: “No one ever became poor by giving” (Anne Frank).

The next step was to design a homework assignment that linked the past, present, and future. Here is an example of how that worked.

- *First Step:* Global history students were required to list out the challenges faced by the ancient Egyptians (the past).
- *Second Step:* Go online and discover challenges confronting modern Egyptians (the present).

¹The Charles Finney School is a private, nondenominational, Christian, K-12, college-preparatory school in Penfield, New York. Finney promotes an environment that provides an opportunity for students to “Do Something Greater” in study, vocation, service, and life.

- *Third Step:* Propose an act of compassion to directly address one of the challenges discovered (the future).
- *Fourth Step:* Put compassion into action.

One student learned about the plight of young Egyptian women forced to work or live in “Garbage City,” a wretched slum near Cairo. On her recommendation, we donated \$2 to Global Compassion’s outreach to the city. Based on other students’ research, we supported UNICEF’s work in Syria, mailed a box of pens and pencils to a school in Uganda, and sent letters of encouragement to persecuted Christian pastors in Ethiopia. The students were learning the “facts and truths” of history, but they were also reaching out and touching history with acts of compassion. Dewey (1973) emphasized the importance of touching history in writing about the “educative value” of history:

When taken simply as history it is thrown into the distant past and becomes dead and inert. Taken as the record of man’s social life and progress it becomes full of meaning. I believe, however, that it cannot be so taken excepting *as the child is also introduced directly into social life.* (p. 448, emphasis added)

Road Trip

A desire to reach out locally resulted in Project Compassion’s first Road Trip. The students proposed dozens of acts of compassion. On a chilly Saturday morning in early spring, my minivan was loaded with six students and donations for thirteen different organizations. We delivered diapers to Compass Care, books to CDS Monarch, food to the Webster Community Chest, soup to Rochester Soup Kitchen, and toiletries to the Open Door Mission, to name a few. The Breast Cancer Coalition of Rochester noted our visit in the spring edition of their newsletter, *Voices of the Ribbon*:

[The Project Compassion team] had given careful thought to some small items that a woman diagnosed with breast cancer would find comforting and selected some cozy pink flannel pajamas and soft, thick socks to donate. We will share them gladly and know that this lovely gift will be enjoyed and appreciated. . . . It’s all part of Finney’s goal to “*Do Something Greater*” (Road Trip, 2013, p. 29).

The road trip was educational and a lot of fun; but more important, we were helping others to help others and, in so doing, infusing the world with a measure of compassion that it would have otherwise been missing. Our study of history was not drifting “into selfishness”; it was being imbued with meaning and relevance.

Disaster Relief Station

Our first act of compassion was in response to Hurricane Isaac, but it was Hurricane Sandy that radically redirected much of the effort of Project Compassion. In late October, one of the most destructive hurricanes in American history came ashore in the Northeast. Before Project Compassion had organized a response, another storm, this time a Nor'easter, growled up the coast, bringing more wind, more rain, more flooding, more destruction. During the Nor'easter, God impressed on me the need for Project Compassion to go and serve the victims. We made contact with Mrs. Tara Ryan, a great leader who had just been elected to the town council in Highlands, New Jersey. She invited us to come and see the damage and serve the needs of the refugees. So Project Compassion's first mission trip was to Highlands, which was "almost obliterated" by Hurricane Sandy (Applebome, 2013, p. 1). We sent out an e-mail requesting items to help keep people warm in the regional refugee shelters. Within a week, the front half of my classroom was filling up with blankets, sleeping bags, coats, gloves, hats, and scarves. The students of Room 256 were now taking notes and discussing history in a temporary disaster relief station. By entering into the flow of history as actors (not mere memorizers) we had, in effect, invited history to make a claim on us, which it did. The result was the transformation of a classroom into a temporary disaster relief station.

Beautiful to Behold

On Friday, November 9, 2012, eleven willing servants met at Finney, prayed in the parking lot, and departed for ground zero of Hurricane Sandy. Project Compassion's first mission trip had begun. On the trip down, I said to one of the students, "You know this is what schooling should be like, right?" He did not hesitate to respond, "Amen, Dr. Burch."

After dropping blankets off at Café Volan in Asbury Park, we drove to Highlands, where Mayor Frank Nolan, his wife, and their four children were living in the refugee shelter. Tara Ryan met us and prefaced our tour of the damage by saying, "When you see the mounds of debris, it's the insides of people's homes." Every home and business in downtown Highlands had been invaded by the Atlantic Ocean. "I knew it was bad," remarked one of my students, "but I didn't know it was this bad."

We sorted clothes and toiletries in the gym at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church. In the basement of Our Lady, we met Valery, who had lost two homes but was leading the food distribution effort.

Reflecting later on the experience, another student noted that “everybody was helping each other out instead of doing their own thing.” She was right and it was beautiful to behold. Our last stop was Jesus Fellowship Calvary Chapel, where the basement had been transformed into a grocery store (except all the food was free). Before departing for home, we promised Tara Ryan that we would return as soon as possible.

To Educate Is to Redeem

On Christmas Eve, we returned with a moving van packed full of gifts from God. In five weeks, the Finney family and local churches had donated six complete bed sets (including linen and pillows), five dressers, two dining room tables, two microwaves, a couch, a refrigerator, two televisions, and stacks of smaller donations that we wrapped in the colors of Christmas and presented to two families in Highlands whose homes had been burglarized by the Hurricane Sandy. The mother of one family said, “Peter, when you reached out to me, I was amazed and shocked and crying. Thank you all for coming and touching us. God does amazing things.” My daughter, also my student, remarked, “Knowing that you care brings smiles to their faces and brings you pure joy and happiness.” We were living out one of the core beliefs of the School of Education at Andrews University—*To Educate Is to Redeem*.

Since the Christmas trip, Finney’s Project Compassion has completed three more relief and recovery mission trips. In April 2013, we served at Comcast Cares Day, where Mayor Frank Nolan officially recognized Project Compassion at a ceremony attended by NBC’s Today Show, the CEO of Comcast, and New Jersey’s lieutenant governor. And Tara Ryan sent me this email:

Just a few days after the destruction of Superstorm Sandy, while we were still reeling, the members of Project Compassion came to our town and started helping us put it all back together. Even more important than the hard work that the group completed, was the team’s good will, compassion, prayers, and the willingness to listen to each heart-broken resident they met, which went a long way in helping Highlands recover. Dr. Burch and his team decided that they would help one family at a time, replacing destroyed personal belongings and household items. Then, they decided to do more, to actually work to rebuild and renovate destroyed homes and a business. Five Highlands families have benefited from the AMAZING work and dedication offered by Project Compassion. Actually, the entire town has benefited, since the positive actions of the team affect everyone who hears of the work they have done. I have personally benefited, by being shown the goodness and kindness that still exists in this world, after my world was almost destroyed.

Tara Ryan's reflections reminded me of another observation of Dewey (2010):

I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth. I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God. (p. 371)

God wanted to do something greater than improve my teaching strategies. God revealed to me yet again the dignity and divine aspects of my calling as a teacher. Project Compassion has become an unpredictable and amazing confluence of the study of history and God's ongoing redemption of history.

I wrote a short parable in an attempt to represent lessons learned during my first year leading Project Compassion at The Charles Finney School: A man carrying gifts walked through an open door to serve someone in need. As the man presented his gifts, he looked beyond the person in need and, behold, a new open door appeared and there stood another person in need. And so the man carrying gifts walked over and presented more gifts. For many, many years, doors kept opening and the man carrying gifts kept presenting gifts to people in need. And great was the man's rejoicing, because he never ran out of gifts or people to give them to.

To date, Project Compassion has completed five mission trips, two road trips, and a total of 125 acts of compassion. Project Compassion's journey is kept up-to-date with videos and photos at dosomethinggreater.com. If you would like to schedule a Project Compassion presentation at your school, church, or organization, contact Peter Burch at 585-766-4180, or by email at peterandholly@gmail.com.

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