



Overcoming Challenges to Stay Focused

When we are faced with challenges in life, how is it possible to overcome them, and stay focused?

During the May 10th BELIEVES session, Melissa Ehrhardt, Administrator of 7 Bridges to Recovery Ministry (<http://7bridgestorecovery.org>), and Charles Plyler, an inspiring 13-year-old from The Lovett School who founded Homeless at Heart in 2015 to provide Valentine goodie boxes and cards to people who are homeless, shared their thoughts and engaged with those in attendance on this very topic of “Overcoming Challenges to Stay Focused.”



Born and raised in Florida, Ehrhardt became a believer as a freshman in college and went to Africa for nine months. It was there that she fell in love with Jesus and decided she didn't want to chase after worldly riches and fame. Though she thought she would ultimately live her life in Africa serving others, in 2009 God told her she would be a missionary in the United States and brought her to Atlanta. Since then, she has served as a missionary with 7 Bridges to Recovery seeking to serve and help the homeless with the love of Christ.

“Our goal is to end homelessness in Atlanta, one person at a time!” Ehrhardt communicated.

7 Bridges has a home for 105 women and children and a program for 25 men that have all been rescued from the streets. This includes a facility called The Garden, which Ehrhardt shared, was founded nine years ago.

According to the 7 Bridges website, The Garden is home to about 60 women and 40 children that have been rescued from homelessness or broken situations. It is God's hospital, a place where they can come and be healed. Residents are allowed to stay as long as they need to and are not charged rent. Bible study is three times a day and is mandatory for residents.

“You may or may not know, but there are 21,000 homeless people in Atlanta on record,” Ehrhardt said. “Yet, there are only 3000 beds available.”

In addition to providing a home for close to 130 people, 7 Bridges also serves over 1,500 meals a week, and engages in street ministry where volunteers, as well as the men and women in their program, continue to go to the streets multiple times a week reaching out to the lost.

While God opened Ehrhardt's heart and mind to serve the homeless who are seeking to overcome challenges and stay focused as described above, He did the same for Plyler in a different way.

In January 2015, when Plyler was 11 years old, he and his dad were attending an Atlanta Hawks game at Phillips Arena. After the game, as he and his dad were walking back to their car, when Plyler noticed a young homeless woman and her children asking for donations and gave her some money.

“I told my dad I wanted to get something like what I have and put it in a package for people,” Plyler recalled. “I felt like it would mean something because they don't get a lot.”

That encounter and moment ultimately led Plyler to found Homeless at Heart.

When Plyler decided that he wanted to make some Valentine boxes for homeless people since they didn't get to enjoy Valentine's Day like he does, his dad challenged him to get some friends to help him and that maybe they could do 200 boxes.

Within only 5 weeks, Plyler and his friends did more – distributing not 200, but 350 Valentine's boxes to the homeless (including socks, water, other goodies and a handwritten card).

"Next year we're looking to make and distribute 5,000 boxes," Plyler said.

"We'll work with partners like 7 Bridges, City of Refuge, and Atlanta Mission."

As Plyler and Ehrhardt go through their days and weeks serving others as they do, who or what is it that they turn to, to live out their faith as they do?

"Home at Heart isn't actually faith-based," Plyler said. "However, the scripture verse I think of a lot with the ministry is the story of Good Samaritan."

Ehrhardt commented, "In life, we run from pain and challenges, but if we accept the challenge are coming, we're better for it and faith grows."

And when it comes to faith and being inspired, it doesn't always happen just in one direction.

"I've taken part in the meal ministry that 7 Bridges leads. I participated, asked the homeless people their names, showed them brochures on the ministry, and asked if they had anything they wanted prayer for," Plyler stated. "One time I asked a homeless person if there was something he wanted prayer for. He simply said, 'I don't really need much.'"

Plyler said this stood out and impacted him.

Ehrhardt reflected in a similar fashion and said, "In Africa, there's so much joy. Here we have so much materialism that we don't think there's a need. We can actually learn more from them on faith than they'll learn from us."



Ehrhardt and Plyler both also indicated how prayer plays a role in overcoming challenges and staying focused in what they do.

"My dad and I pray together in the Homeless in Heart season," Plyler said.



Ehrhardt said, “For me, John 10:27 – ‘*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*’ – is a verse I recall often. One time I told God, ‘Lord, I’ve never been homeless. I can’t relate.’ God said, ‘It’s not about you, just focus on my love.’ Often if I ask God broad questions, I hear no answers, but if I ask yes or no questions, I hear an answer in the Spirit.”

Another aspect that the speakers touched on about overcoming challenges is how to engage with others to help them overcome challenges.

Ehrhardt said that overall people always need to hear hope.

“Most people on streets have just lost hope. For them, Jesus may already seem out of the picture.”

Plyler agreed, saying he tries to give pep talks, and then recalled encountering one particular man who was homeless who he spoke with.

“This guy I encountered said he wanted to be a garbage man, so I encouraged him to do it.”

Ehrhardt added, “The biggest lesson I am always reminded of is that we love since he first loved us. One man I’ve been working with, and have a relationship with is a heroin drug dealer. He’s a dad. He’s told me he doesn’t know how to get out of the cycle that his dad and grand-dad were also in (being on the streets and involved with drugs). After a while though he went and got a job at a car wash, but ultimately it didn’t provide for his child so he went back to the streets. When he told me about this he said, ‘Melissa, my kid starts kindergarten, and I don’t have a backpack for my child.’”

Trying to break the cycle like the dad Ehrhardt spoke about, has many challenges – one of those being the challenge for people like Ehrhardt and Plyler to maintain perspective in their organizations when faced with any situation. In different ways, they each referred back to God’s two greatest commandments as the source to find the way through.

“In any storm we can maintain peace,” said Ehrhardt. “If I can operate in God’s presence then the peace will be there. We try to manage conflict when it comes, and pursue excellence.”

Beyond Ehrhardt’s own personal efforts within 7 Bridges, Pastor 7 Wells, the founder of the ministry, always consults the Lord before making any decision.

“It reminds me of Matthew 6:33 – ‘But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’ The process of him doing this frustrates me sometimes, but I respect it.”

Plyler commented that sometimes after they give a box to a homeless person, they will go back and talk with them to see if the person enjoyed it.

“If you were in their shoes, what would you want,” he said.



With that, the session began to open up to dialogue with all the attendees, several of whom had volunteered with 7 Bridges before.

Natalie Grasso, Board Relations and Development Manager at the Woodruff Arts Center, said that her time volunteering with 7 Bridges was one of the best experiences of her life.

Elaine Szeto, Sales and Catering Manager for Hyatt Hotels, added, "I was there too and there was so much joy. We thought we were doing something great, but got so much more out of it."

Ehrhardt and Plyler were also asked what is it that they always need to have in supply to serve the homeless whom they serve.

Plyler said for Homeless at Heart there is always a need for Valentine's cards and socks – especially with their plans to grow from giving out 350 boxes most recently to 5,000 in 2017. Plyler said that when it's cold, he and his dad also keep blankets in the car to give to those on the streets they see when needed.

Ehrhardt said, "If you think about whatever you need in a day, multiply that by 130, and that's what we are faced with every day at 7 Bridges. There is always a need for underwear (new only), wipes, and Lysol spray."

Finally, the session wrapped up with one last question from Grasso.

"When it comes to giving one's life to Christ, extending the invitation to do this isn't something typically Catholic. How do you keep this going?"

Ehrhardt responded, "We're not called to make converts. Rather, we're to make disciples. So we will give a Bible out and say 'ask questions.'"