Sitting on the Steps

As Executive Director of The House, I have had the privilege of working closely with the National Spokesperson for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes “One way to Play” drug free program, and he is also a Founder of The House and our Chief Visionary, Steve Fitzhugh. Steve knows how to minister to youth. He has spent numerous hours educating not only me, but staff on how to work with youth and communicate effectively to them in their language.

We have had discussions about the “hang.” Young people just hanging around The House—not forced to do anything—but encouraged to participate. We even have some that will just hang outside on our front steps. As I left one evening, I heard a few students talking, “Are you coming in The House?” “No, I’m not going in The House,” replied DJ. He comes in at times, hangs around a group of guys—he’s their leader. DJ’s attitude is up and down. There are small groups of youth in Anacostia that will just “hang” outside the doors of our House.

Another evening, I saw Rick who was suspended for a week for cursing, sitting on the steps begging to be let in by one of our staff. It just so happened that it was the night of one of our “Life Sessions”; Bible studies—in their language—where students learn more about God and how to live. Rick wanted to come in just for a Life Session! Of course, we made an exception. It’s why The House is in the community of Southeast, Washington, DC. Rick started talking to me about “working the block.” That means, standing on the corner selling drugs. We went back and forth on this topic. I was explaining to him about the destruction one would be headed for if they chose or continued in this life style, while Rick thought that “hustling” a little can help you survive and make it in life. Two weeks later, he was shot; fortunately for him, it was not fatal.

Rick’s way of thinking is typical of many of the youth we see not only in Southeast, but that come to The House from other parts of the city. Our assignment and vision at The House is to transform and empower the lives of inner city youth and their families through Christ, by giving them hope, a productive future, and a changed community. Watching some of the students that will just sit on the steps reminded me of what King David said in Psalms that he “would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God then live the good life in the homes of the wicked.”

As I thought about Rick and see youth just hanging around on our steps, I think about the youth that are hanging out on the streets with no where to go. One of our goals at The House is to provide a place for youth, even if it may only mean that they are just sitting on our steps.
Joy in My Heart

Andrea Counts and Shannon

If you were in the staff offices of The House one afternoon, you would have heard Shannon say that she had a great day at school. When asked why, she said “I have joy in my heart because of the Lord.” She then shared that students are not supposed to talk about God in school, but she did anyway. This is Shannon’s second year at The House. She comes faithfully and is a member of our Supreme Court. It has been so rewarding to watch her grow and mature. Shannon is just one of the many young people that we see come to The House that have a change of heart.

Not only do we get to see this joy in the hearts of some of our students, but also in the lives of the students that have gone through our program and come back to visit. This is another way we measure the impact we have on our students—their joy.

The Xperience

“We don’t believe just because of what you’ve told us . . . NOW we believe because we EXPERIENCED Christ for ourselves! Man, that dude is REALLY the Savior of the world!”
John 4:42  Everyday People Version

At The House, we want our young people to Experience Christ for themselves. Or, shall we say Xperience him. The House is launching the initial components of The Xperience, a church for youth. Included in our youth church will be components that satisfy the needs for a mass service, one-on-one discipleship, evangelism and servant leadership. In addition, the Xtended Family is one of the components of The Xperience. The Xtended Family are seeker sensitive small groups that focus on 1) building quality, supportive relationships with students in a small group setting and 2) encouraging and equipping students to walk this journey called life as followers of Christ Jesus.

“We want to build quality, supportive relationships with our students,” continues Eric Kellum, Director of The Experience. “We have done a pretty good job in letting our kids know about the good news of Jesus Christ in large group settings; however, we don’t get to know what they need from Christ or what they need to strengthen their specific walks.”

“Small groups give us more personal time with fewer students that we don’t really get when we deal with the students at large,” explains Andrea Counts, Program Specialist at The House and leader of the Xtended Family small group called The Believers. “I’ve connected so well with my small group that we do activities together outside of House hours. Members of my group even go to church with me on Sunday.” “I love the Xtended Family,” exclaims House student Keith. “It gives me a place to belong and share my problems and it really helps me out in my relationship with God.”

We are excited about where the Lord is leading us with The Xperience. We believe that it is long overdue for us to challenge our young people to step into a deeper level with Christ, by providing a spiritual community that enables them to effectively live out their faith.
The Spring Retreat

The following day students took a hike that depicted the generic setup of life as we know it. All of the students took the same initial path where they found signs with a variety of messages of influences that they may have heard all throughout life; this path was called Influence Road. At a split in the path, students had to choose whether they would take a path called Mai Way (sounds like “my way”), or a path called Reliance Way. Symbolically, Mai Way represented the path to hell, while Reliance Way represented the path to heaven; there were interactive activities along both paths to support the theme of the retreat about making wise choices.

“When I first did the hike, I thought I wasn’t going to make it,” explained Anacostia senior, Anthony. “But after I climbed the mountain, it actually felt good at the end. It changed my life. I had faith while I was climbing, and I knew I was not going to give up until I made it to the top.”

“The retreat was very spiritual,” commented Eraibaín, a seventeen year old junior, who was determined to make the steep hike to Reliance Way despite the fact that she was dealing with the discomfort of a knee brace. “I got closer to God than I already was. I learned more about myself. I developed stronger relationships with other students that I still have now after the retreat.”

Each morning students had quiet time to pray about life and purpose. “The quiet time really helped me” stated sixteen year old junior, Ricardo. “It helped me release some issues that I’ve been holding in for a long time.”

In late March, The House held its annual spring getaway. This year’s theme was “Life and Purpose.” Retreats are strategic opportunities where we take inner city youth out of the city and expose them to a quiet place that has become The House’s home away from home. There are no distractions from cell phones that ring every five minutes; CD players that play nice beats laced with immoral lyrics into their mental psyche; no PS2’s; or the latest, raunchiest video on BET or MTV.

We create moments where young people can quiet themselves, and appreciate the beautiful scenery of nature, as well as engage themselves with provoking thoughts (and even conversations) with nature’s awesome Creator.

Our goal was to provoke our youth to grasp the concept that they were born with a specific purpose from God, and as we go through this journey called “Life,” it is our responsibility to make wise decisions that will bring us closer to fully understanding this purpose.

The retreat started with a bang. Our Activities Manager, Chris Chiles, brilliantly conjured up creative obstacles that took our youth through a “birthing process.” Upon their ‘arrival on earth’, the students received an ID chain with their individual names and the words, “My Purpose” engraved on it, symbolizing the truth that each student was born with a specific purpose.
Key Speaker – One of our Own

Our Banquet Coordinator, Nia Bagley and Banquet Chairman, Jeff Palmucci, Don Brazelton, and Kevin Fitzpatrick did an outstanding job of managing this year’s 2006 Annual Spring Banquet. We received many compliments about the program and flow of the evening.

What also made it a night to remember is that Steve Fitzhugh, a Founder and Chief Visionary of The House was the keynote speaker. Steve speaks throughout the country and at many churches, including McLean Bible Church twice a year. So those of us who have heard him speak expected to be motivated, encouraged, and uplifted—and we were!

Raised by a single mom who struggled with alcoholism, Steve shared how hope was important to him as he navigated through personal hardships. His parents divorced when he was young. His oldest brother forfeited a promising collegiate football career by abusing alcohol and drugs, succumbing to a brain hemorrhage induced by cocaine abuse. The loss of his mother and brother was difficult for him to bear. His only sister is an invalid in a nursing home in Ohio. She has been incapacitated by a severe case of multiple sclerosis enhanced by marijuana abuse since 1990.

Steve met the Lord at the age of 12. He became a standout high school athlete, accepted a college scholarship from Miami University at Ohio and upon graduation signed with the Denver Broncos. The same hope that Steve found is the hope that The House offers to students through our program and through Christ.

Each year, Lon Solomon, Senior Pastor of McLean Bible Church—a partner and also a Founder of The House—reminds us of what the students and staff at The House have seen in Steve, a man of integrity and sincerity about his Christian walk. Steve’s character is consistent with what he believes and he stands firm on his strong convictions.

Steve closed the evening with a presentation to Mike Smith’s (a former student of The House) mother. Mrs. Smith received a gold framed album for over 500,000 lives impacted by Mike’s rap “Lord Will I Last?” Unfortunately, Mike was found dead three days before his 19th birthday. At The House, we don’t always experience success or see some of our youth live their life to the fullest. Our fundraising banquet’s purpose is to not only allow our donors to see our progress, but also to remind them that their support is desperately needed in the community we serve—the inner city of the Nation’s Capital.

Upcoming Spring Banquet, May 2007
7th Annual Golf Tournament

We were blessed this year with a beautiful day for the 7th annual House Golf Tournament. The event was held September 20th at Whiskey Creek Golf Club in Ljamsville, Maryland, a favorite of many of the regular attendees.

This year 15 sponsors contributed from $1,000 to $10,000, and a number of individuals paid a $250 entry fee. In addition, 17 participants donated items for our silent auction. Approximately 100 golfers joined in the festivities, including an 18-hole scramble, numerous golf skill contests, the silent auction, and a time of fun, food, and fellowship. At the day’s end we heard comments that this was the best tournament to-date.

We are pleased to report that proceeds, after covering all expenses, totaled about $40,000. These funds go directly into The House program for the youth of Anacostia.

Mark September 19th as the date for the 2007 8th annual tournament at Whiskey Creek Golf Club. We hope to see prior participants and attract a number of new golfers. Spread the word!

Steve Fitzhugh (center) and golfers.

A High School Mother

It would be perfect if we could see all our students graduate; attend college or some other career track preparation; get married and then have children. As we all know, reality is not perfect. One of our high school students told us she was pregnant. She was equally hurt to share this news with her young mother. It was a very difficult time for Erin who knew she was not wanted as a child.

But Erin decided that even though the road would be hard and that she was no longer welcomed at home, she would keep her innocent unborn child.

Erin found a family member to take her in until the baby was born. She was looking for housing where she could take care of her child and stay in school. We encouraged Erin, loved her, treated her out for a special evening with her mom, supported her, and prayed for her.

This past summer, Erin gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She has stopped by The House to show off this little bundle of joy that’s so full of life. You can see how much she wants to be there for her daughter. As Erin is holding her little girl, she smiles. She is back home with her mom and she shares how much her mother loves little Jessica. Erin is excited about the parenting class she attends and excited about going to school. It was Halloween when she stopped by. When Executive Director, La Wonda Harris asked Erin what her plans were for the evening, she said “I’m taking my baby to church tonight.”
Fall Retreat Continues to Give Students Hope

With a theme, Back 2 the Future, The House’s annual fall retreat took place at Covenant Village. “The purpose of the retreat was to get the students to return to a place where they had hope or wanted to hope for things,” commented Chris Chiles.

The theme for The House’s 2006/2007 school year is H2O (Hope 2 Overcome). We are looking to encourage our students to find hope in Christ and in themselves to overcome the challenges in their lives. Many students that we work with don’t have hope. They’ve been disappointed so many times that they begin to think “what’s the point.”

The retreat was successful in accomplishing that mission with over 25 students attending. All of the students in attendance made a commitment or recommitted their lives to Christ by the end of the retreat! “God is doing something amazing at The House,” says Eric Kellum. “Young people want God and they are realizing that they need Christ now!”

Activities at the retreat included a haunted house, an urban virtual game of Life, a workshop on identity, a message at campfire, significant times for small group sessions and quiet time. There were other wonderful things that took place at the retreat, but the following letter written by a senior will probably sum up the effect that it made on the lives of the students:

House Staff,

I want to thank you for the opportunity to experience the retreat. Before coming to The House, I was interested in getting to know God for myself and I was ready to abandon my past and pain and devote my life to God with the help of Jesus.

Before going on the retreat, I felt my past trying to creep back up on me. Those feelings of hurt, pain, stress, depression, suicide, anger, lust, doubt, etc. were trying to invade me once again. I WASN’T HAVING IT!

After leaving the retreat, even though I wasn’t at my physical best (I felt a little sick), my soul was happy. I don’t remember the last time my soul felt like that. The retreat gave me the encouragement I needed to continue with my walk for God. I felt so good that my throat was sore from singing all week! Literally! I want to once again thank you for the opportunity to experience the retreat. I look forward to the next one and I’m determined to strengthen my walk with God. May God bless you!!!

Sincerely,

J.R
Football, Thanksgiving, and a Reality Check?  
- A Volunteer’s Perspective

It had been two years since I last played in The House’s Student/Staff Turkey Bowl. As I sat in Washington, DC traffic on my day off and on my way to the game, I asked myself, what’s a 48 year old, single, white dude doing driving into Southeast Washington, DC to play football with inner city students, half my age? Am I crazy? I’m going to break a leg, pull a muscle or something worse. Then, a quiet thought popped into my head “You are doing My will.” What a blessing, to be doing my Father’s will.

I got out of my truck, and looked around, there I was, in Anacostia Park, right next to the river. It was getting late for football, about 3 o’clock. The sun was setting. It was cold and the wind was blowing right through me. “Rick, glad you’re here!” It was Damo, one of the students I befriended. We have kept in contact over the years. He’s now 24 and affectionately calls me “White Chocolate.” He’s come a long way in his young life.

Damo has never won any of the previous five Turkey Bowls, as a student or after graduating, and playing several years on the Staff team. He called me a week earlier to play; I was determined not to lose my first game, and to help Damo bring home his first victory. We were not disappointed.

With Damo at quarterback, he led the Staff team to victory, for the first time in two years, 26-0. The Staff’s defense was smothering, recording four interceptions, with two returned for touchdowns. Being the old, slow white guy, I played the offense and defensive lines. It was a sweet victory. There were calls that the staff cheated! But, the students say that whenever we win. I wonder if there is some truth in that?

I walked to the sidelines after it was all over, completely exhausted and bruised. I recognized two faces from the past, Jerome and Sleepy, both former House students. I hadn’t seen them in over two years, we chatted briefly. Little did I know how the night would end up for them.

Shortly after the game was over, Steve Fitzhugh invited me over for Thanksgiving dinner, at Anacostia High School. The House was sponsoring a feast for the students, teachers, and administrative staff. The food was great, as was the student entertainment (poems, songs, raps). Chris Chiles was a mean DJ. Big John, former student and staff member, made an appearance as well. His smile is infectious. We greeted each other with a bear hug!

After I got home, I reflected on the day, as I nursed my jammed finger and bruised body. The phone rang, it was Eric Kellum, a House staff member. Eric said that Jerome and Sleepy had been shot just after our football game. My heart sank. Were they OK? Alive? No one had any details. Once again, it brought me to my knees for the youth in Southeast DC.

Note: Jerome and Sleepy’s wounds were not life threatening.
Billy Graham was once asked what he thought was one of the worst sins. He said, “racism.” In the spring of 1995, Promise Keepers theme was “racial reconciliation.” A group of men from McLean Bible Church (MBC) decided to attend the first Promise Keepers. They also wanted to start a dialogue, build a relationship, and partner with an African-American church in Washington, DC and invite them to Promise Keepers.

Some of the members of this group included Richard Schacht, Will Townsend, and Jeff Bollin. Richard Schacht (Dick) also decided to take the lead in this new ministry of Racial Reconciliation. After a member of MBC contacted Southeast Christian Fellowship Church (SECF) where Rickey Bolden was the Pastor, a dialogue began. About 70 men from both churches went to Promise Keepers. And from that, a core group decided to have regular fellowships that included picnics, bowling, and meetings.

Dick along with Lon Solomon, Rickey Bolden, Steve Fitzhugh, and Ron Johnson started a series of breakfast meetings to share a vision of what would later be The House. Dick took on the task of meeting with Rickey and Steve at SECF to develop a mission and vision statement, and a strategy of what they wanted to do.

With his wife Patti at his side, Dick started reading a book called “Rebuilding the Wall.” It was about racial reconciliation between two churches that merged—a white church and a black church in Chicago. Dick says that he did not understand why he was being called into the ministry of racial reconciliation but knew he had to follow God’s lead. And with the support of Patti, they both walked through this journey together and were very involved with The House.

Dick knew this would be tough. However, as a retired corporate executive, Dick was used to catching the vision, dealing with mergers, conflicts, and pushing things through until completion. They knew that they were being part of taking back another of God’s territory—Southeast, Washington, DC. Dick and Patti says that it has been an amazing experience to see what God is doing and to be a part of it. They would do this all over again because “it’s about the kids, their hope and their future. Our marriage mission statement is first, to pass the torch of faith on to our grandchildren and second, give back to our local community first. We want the same opportunities that our children and grandchildren have for the people in the inner city.”

As Dick retires from The House Board on December 31, 2006, (first as Chairman and for the past five years as Treasurer), we want to thank him and Patti for their labor of love and commitment. Dick & Patti Schacht are living out I Thessalonians 4:9 (NLT) “But I don’t need to write to you about the Christian love that should be shown among God’s people. For God himself has taught you to love one another.”

Thank you both for your love and service!