

Please Don't Leave

By Tracy Rusiniak

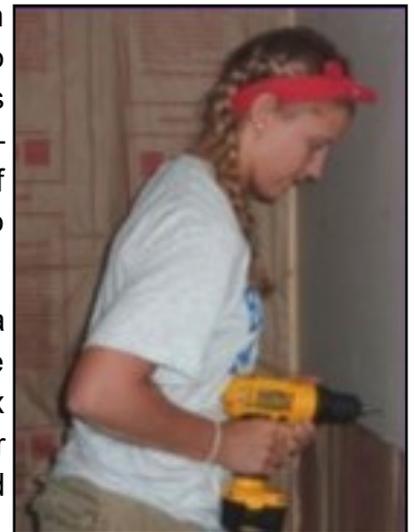
From the book **Chicken Soup for the Soul My Kind of America**

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others. ~Mahatma Gandhi

I'd done it before, and so I had no reason to believe that this time would be any different. I was sure that when I returned home from my mission trip, as always, I'd bring back nothing more than some mud on my boots, a hole or two in my jeans and, of course, a lot of great memories. Little did I know that this time it was going to be different.

The summer before my high school graduation, I went to West Virginia with others from my church as members of the Appalachia Service Project. Our goals included refurbishing the homes of those in need, and where we were heading, there was no shortage of need. Along with volunteers from several other churches, we arrived at our destination much like an invading army in miniature, and we arrived ready to do battle. The tools we brought from home would serve as our weapons as we prepared to wage war against an all-too-familiar enemy—substandard living conditions. Our mission was to make the homes of those we served warmer, safer and drier, and with only five days to accomplish as much as we could, we were anxious to get started.

My group was assigned the task of rebuilding sections of a home that had been damaged by fire. No sooner had we parked on the home's dirt driveway than we saw an excited little girl, no more than six years old, standing in the doorway of the family's temporary trailer home. Shoeless and wearing dirty clothes and the biggest smile I'd ever seen, she yelled, "Ma, Ma, they really came!" I didn't know it then, but her name was Dakota, and four more days would pass before she'd say another word near me.



Tracy installing drywall in Dakota's soon-to-be bedroom

Behind Dakota was a woman in a wheelchair—her grandmother, we'd soon learn. I also discovered that my job that week would be to help convert a fire-damaged dining room into a bedroom for this little girl. After meeting several more family members, we got down to the business of making a difference in their lives.

Grabbing our tools, we went to work. Walls were torn down and replaced. Hammers and nails, saws and electric screw guns, drywall prepping and painting—we moved at a fast pace. Over the following days, I noticed Dakota peeking at us every now and then as we worked. A few times, I tried talking with her, but she remained shy and aloof, always fluttering around us like a tiny butterfly but keeping to herself.

By our fifth and final day, however, this was about to change.

Before I went to work on her home on that last morning, I spoke for a moment or two with the grandmother. I was especially pleased when she told me how much Dakota loved her new room—so much, in fact, that she'd begged to sleep in it the previous night, even though it wasn't

quite ready. As we talked, I noticed something I hadn't seen before—Dakota was hiding behind her grandmother. Cautiously, she stepped into view, and I could see that just like her clothes, her face was still dirty. But no amount of soil could hide those bright blue eyes and big smile. She was simply adorable. I wanted so much to hug her, but respecting her shyness, I kept my distance.

Slowly, she began walking toward me. It wasn't until she was just inches away that I noticed the folded piece of paper in her tiny hand. Silently, she reached up and handed it to me. Once unfolded, I looked at the drawing she'd made with her broken crayons on the back of an old coloring book cover. It was of two girls—one much taller than the other—and they were holding hands. She told me it was supposed to be me and her, and scrawled on the bottom of the paper were three little words that instantly broke my heart: Please don't leave. Now almost in tears, I surrendered to the impulse that I'd suppressed only moments before—I bent down and hugged her. She hugged me, too. And for the longest time, neither one of us could let go.

By early afternoon, we finished Dakota's bedroom, and so I gladly used the rare free time to get to know my newest friend. Sitting under a tree away from the others, we shared a few apples while she told me about her life in the hollow. As I listened to her stories about the struggles she and her family endured daily, I began to realize how frivolous various aspects of my own life were.

Suddenly, things like deciding what to wear on a Friday night or which wannabe celebrity was starring in the latest reality television series seemed trivial. I refocused on my friends, family and faith, all because of one special little girl living in the mountains of West Virginia.

I left for home early the next morning. I was returning with muddy boots and holes in my jeans. But because of Dakota, I brought back something else, too—a greater appreciation for all of the blessings of my life. I'll never forget that barefoot little butterfly with the big smile and dirty face. I pray that she'll never forget me either.

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(Note: Photos not published in book)

the backstory:

With my kids, Michael and Tracy, and along with members of our church, we spent several summers refurbishing homes in Appalachia. The experience, as you might have guessed, inspired me to write a few pieces—two of which, *My God Moment* and *God's Answer* were published in separate Chicken Soup for the Soul books, (to read them please visit my **“in books”** page).

But as it turned out, I wasn't the only member of the family who'd one day write about their own Appalachian experiences.

It was time to purge some files from my computer—specifically those belonging to my kids—files that for one reason or another I'd ended up with. I copied and saved them just in case they wanted whatever it was that I was about to delete!



A rare photo of Michael, Tracy & me one year in Appalachia and on “Tattoo Tuesay” (hence the tats!)

And then I saw Tracy's college admissions essay from a few years earlier.

Reading her words brought me back to Appalachia and to the place where Tracy had been a part of a team that transformed a fire-damaged section of a home into a bedroom for an adorable little girl named Dakota. (Michael and I did some work there too in our capacity as floaters—volunteers who went from one jobsite to another as needed.)

After reading her essay, I immediately saw its potential. I began editing her words—deleting some, changing some others—tweaking the piece into what I thought could one day become a good Chicken Soup submission—something that after having several published pieces with my Soup friends I'd learned a little about!

Afterwards, I showed Tracy what I'd done. We then added a little more description, expanded some parts and suddenly, we had a pretty good piece ready for publication.

Changes aside, Tracy's caring and compassionate nature were obvious in her original work—something that I felt needed to be shared beyond the Montclair State University admissions office, and fortunately, it was.

Please don't leave was previously published in a magazine for youth ministry pastors and enjoyed an even wider circulation after it was posted on their website. And of course, this piece is now one of the 101 stories in the book, **Chicken Soup for the Soul My Kind of America**.

By the way, if you check the writer bios in the back of the book, you'll see something else (besides Tracy's info,) that I'm very proud of: alphabetically, Tracy's name follows another contributor to this book—that would be me, (with my piece, *Serving dinner to friends*).

Two stories by two writers from one family in one Chicken Soup for the Soul book....

Now how cool is that!



The volunteers from The Packanack Community Church the year Dakota moved into her a new bedroom. That's Tracy standing in middle row to the right of center-blond hair over her left shoulder. Michael is sitting front row-right with sunglasses, and that's me standing left-back row with sunglasses and bandana.