



Mission Trip Reveals Mission for Life

It was January 2, 2010, when my life changed forever. I was my family watching *Up*, when my dad got a phone call from my uncle telling him that my cousin, Trent, had been diagnosed with brain cancer. I was young and my mind could not comprehend what this meant. My thoughts were bombarded with images of IV drips, bald heads, chemo pills, and hospitals. Would that be my family's reality?

I grew up in Portland, surrounded by family, faith, and friends. From the very beginning, I was an intelligent and social child who thrived inside and outside the classroom. I loved to read, play with my sisters, create, explore, and imagine. My Catholic education at St. Patrick School served me very well, teaching me about the faith that I was born into and how to see the world and God's people the way God sees them. My childhood was quiet, sacred, happy, and full.

We are and always have been, as tight-knit as any family could be. Aunts, uncles, and cousins galore, we use every reason in the books to get together. I knew that Trent's cancer diagnosis would be no exception. I see so clearly now that God used that diagnosis to bring our family even closer, giving us something/someone to rally around and pour our strength into.

For three years we stood by Trent as he underwent surgery, sports, and tried to remain engaged with his life. For two and a half of those years, I was thoroughly convinced that he held that brain cancer in the palm of his hand. He could overcome

this; I had no doubts. He was the picture of health, except for his bald chemo head. I remember walking with him for miles and miles at the Relay for Life; we dreamed up a future in which we'd own our own practice: I would be the doctor and he would be the child life specialist. Together, we would

However, right before my senior year of high school, Trent's condition began to rapidly deteriorate. Before we



Morgan plays with one of the children that she met during a mission trip to the Dominican Republic in the summer of 2016.

knew it, he was bedridden and doctors were no longer talking in years, but months or weeks. There was no longer mention of the future, just past and present. There was no longer joy, but forced smiles and bloodshot eyes. The stroke Trent had endured caused him to lose all ability to communicate and he could no longer eat. My naive faith told me that would NEVER allow my cousin to die. Nobody told me, nobody prepared me

for what could be coming next. How could they have? On January 12, 2013, Trent died early in the afternoon. I still remember everything about that day. It was an unseasonably warm winter day; I was in a Grand Valley sweatshirt and jeans. My parents were frantic as we left my house. My father drove 80 miles per hour on the backroads to get to my aunt and uncle's house. I remember not understanding the rush, only knowing that something was wrong. I felt the pit in my stomach grow heavier as we got closer; a 20-minute drive took

just nine minutes. As we pulled into the driveway, I remember “R.I.P. Trent, you will be missed.” Everything went blurry and I couldn’t breathe. No, no this couldn’t be happening. Not only was he gone, but we didn’t even get to say goodbye.

Despite the beautiful community I was surrounded by, I was angry at God and that anger became something that I carried with me for years to come. God was not my friend, God did not have mine or my family’s best interests at heart, God was not holding me through this pain. If good people had to die in order for God’s plan to be accomplished, then I wanted absolutely nothing to do with this God. My heart was so heavy. Meanwhile, people moved, on and I felt as though I would be left behind if I did not join them. So, I moved on, too, toting a broken relationship with God. I didn’t need him now. He and I were simply acquaintances.

Right in the middle of all of this, I began Mass one day during my junior year of high school. I do not remember what the sermon was about, nor the songs we sang, but I do remember that I felt this unexplainable pull somewhere deep inside me. I remember not understanding why, but knowing that I was being called to be a sister. It’s as though God just put this neatly packaged idea right inside the walls in my head. I spent the rest of high school and most of my college years trying to throw this package right back over the wall.

This became a daily struggle that I hid for several years. I went through the rest of high school telling others and myself that I would go to college for a pre-medical degree and go on to become a pediatric oncologist.

When I went to a Steubenville youth conference the summer before college, I felt God calling so strongly that it was all I were waging against me was exhausting. Mass every Sunday consisted of me praying that God would let my mind rest that week. I told no one, kept my head down, and pretended like

I started college at Aquinas. I went through classes, loved going to parties, and spent countless hours studying and enjoying my time with friends. On the outside, everything looked perfect. It honestly felt perfect(ish) on the inside too. I had friends galore and I was on a path that I believed would make me happy. But all along it felt like there was still

something missing.

I couldn’t get a grasp on what was absent until the summer friends and I were set to go on a service learning trip to the outside of my comfort zone. I was heat and the unknown. But I also had this nagging feeling that there was something bigger at work.

My heart was not prepared for how completely it would be malnourished that they couldn’t even I handed vitamins to families who could not provide a scrap of food for their kids. We spent a day hiding and seeking with preschool children who were aching for someone to play with. We embraced life and those who were living it with us. The entire trip was soaked with grace, not a stone left unturned.

I knew something had changed; the would not be the same person returning.

I remember thinking that this was it, mission work had changed my life so that’s what I’d devote my heart to. I was in the middle of convincing God that this was indeed the path for me and that nothing else would make me happy when I heard

a distinct voice in my head that said, “That’s not enough, and you know it.” My heart skipped a beat. How could that not be enough? Of course, I knew what God was referring to and I knew this was something that I could ignore no longer. I could not keep trying to throw the box back over the wall; my keep this up. There in that middle seat of the sixteenth row, I said the meekest, most timid “yes.” I felt like I was going to vomit. What did this mean? Where was I going? How on earth was I going to tell anyone? I wanted to take it back almost immediately. But, something inside me told me to keep going. Keep exploring the possibilities that this could bring.

Women who were influential in my life:

—**My mother, Tammy Bengel.** She taught me that having a good sense of humor is crucial to human connection and an essential way of tapping into our relationship with God. She modeled to me what a strong and independent woman looks like. My voice is to be loud and my arms are to be held wide.

—**Erin Martin.** She taught me so much more than middle school English, she also educated me in the area of independence and determination. She always encouraged me to be completely and wholly me. She fueled my desire for knowledge and was another model of a strong and independent woman.

—**Jennifer Hess, PhD.** Dr. Hess was one of my professors at Aquinas. She is the most intelligent woman I have ever met, and is a fierce advocate for women in sciences. She also fueled my desire for knowledge and gave me the tools to succeed not only as a student, but as a citizen, an advocate, and a human being.

