



# Mission Trip Reveals Mission for Life

*Individual faith journeys are not short, sweet, simple stories. Each is different and each is complicated by factors that are mostly unseen by the outside world. Last summer Morgan Bengel (????) made the decision to join the religious life as a Dominican sister. To many, her decision seemed like a sudden change from the path she'd been on to become a pediatric oncologist. Little did they know that God had been calling her since her middle school days. Let her tell you the story!*

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.

It was January 2, 2010, when my life changed forever. I was sitting in the living room with 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, benefit walks, cancer ribbons, and hospitals. Would that be my family's reality?

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 after surgery, attempted to stay in school, struggled to play 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 finally cure this disease that claims so many lives before they can truly be lived.

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 God would fix this; God 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 at 12:30 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 driving 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 in the driveway, I remember checking Twitter and seeing a dear friend's tweet that read "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 to sense God calling me. I was sitting in 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 could do to not lose my mind. The constant battle my thoughts 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 everything was fine.

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 of 2016. I had just finished my junior year at Aquinas, and my friends and I were set to go on a service learning trip to the Dominican Republic. It was my first time on an airplane, first time out of the country, first time truly going outside of my comfort zone. I was terrified, mostly of the bugs and the 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 shattered. I held children who were so malnourished that they couldn't even pick their heads up off my shoulder. 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.

Tears filled my eyes as our plane took off toward the United States. I knew something had changed; the Morgan who left the United States 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 arms were getting too tired. I was exhausted from trying to 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. So I resolved to make my life the answer to God's question, whatever that would mean.

It has been sixteen months since I said yes for the first time. I still have to say it every morning, and some mornings I say no instead. But it's as though my life is now in high-definition. Bright, vivid color. It's as though I've come up from a long time underwater. Those walls in my mind have started coming down. Brick by brick, I have become more myself and I have created the space in my heart for more authentic relationships. I have released the grip on who I thought I should be, who people told me I should be. I've realized that to be who I am is the greatest gift, and I'm so excited to share this gift with the world.

*These excerpts are a very condensed version of Morgan's faith journey. To read the entire story, visit the alumni page of the school website and click on Morgan's Story, or use your smart phone to scan the code. Morgan wants young girls to know that a vocation as a sister isn't as scary as you think it's going to be. There's a lot of change involved, but if this kind of life is what gives you joy, the change will be manageable.*

*God's ONLY plan for you is for you to be in a relationship with Him. There is no road map of your life, He trusts you and asks that you partner with him and walk the road together.*

