

Resort missionary takes gospel message to Tahoe ski slopes_32204

March 19, 2004

Posted: 3/19/04

Missionary Debbie Wohler greets participants at a ski slope chapel service near Lake Tahoe. She serves as chaplain for six ski resorts in the area. (Gibbs Frazeur mPhoto)

Resort missionary takes gospel message to Tahoe ski slopes

By Lee Weeks

North American Mission Board

TAHOE CITY, Calif. (BP)-After more than two decades as a resort missionary in Lake Tahoe, Debbie Wohler remains as passionate as ever about the mission to which she believes God has called her.

“Often in Scripture, it looks like it's the small things—you know, the salt, the light, the yeast, the seed in the soil—that add up to big things,” said Wohler, who serves in the scenic resort area that draws 12 million visitors each year.



Missionary Debbie Wohler talks with a boy participating in the children's ministry at First Baptist Church of Tahoe City, Calif. (Gibbs Frazeur Photo)

“I think a lot of times we want to see the big things without having done the small things.”

Wohler is among nearly 5,200 missionaries in the United States and Canada supported by the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions. She is featured during this year's Week of Prayer for North American Missions, which focuses on "The World at Our Doorstep."

Among those at Wohler's "doorstep" in Lake Tahoe are children. Through First Baptist Church of Tahoe City, she helps with a before- and after-school program and other child-care services.

She also leads a children's day camp during the summer, and from Christmas through Easter, she serves as chaplain for six ski resorts.

"I wonder what God is going to do in these kids' lives, and they're still babies," she reflected. "They're barely walking, but I begin to dream and hope and pray for these children.

"Jesus said if you want to come into the Kingdom, that you need to come like a child," she said. "I actually think the best years are ahead because there has been a ton of seed planting."

Her face lights up as she talks about the children who grew up under her ministry and now are taking the gospel to places such as China, Yemen, Amsterdam, Africa, Mexico, Spain and Moldova.

"I want to raise a generation of people who love God and who serve God," Wohler said. "I want to teach them how to pray, minister and not be afraid to talk to people about Jesus and what's happened in their heart."

Wohler, who grew up in Fairfield, Ill., first came to Lake Tahoe in 1975 as a summer missionary while she was in college. After graduating from seminary, she served as a chaplain for two years at the Olympic Training Center in Squaw Valley, Calif., before returning to Lake Tahoe as a career resort missionary.

Tourists visit the area each year to play in the region's 600 inches of snow, to camp, boat or hike and bike around the lake's 72 miles of shoreline, or to gamble in casinos.

Each year, about 700 families participate in at least one of the children's ministries offered through First Baptist, which averages 125 in attendance each Sunday.

"Every church could be doing what we're doing," Wohler said. "We've taken care of their kids and loved their families. And as a result, we've seen moms and dads and boys and girls come to know Jesus."

"My goal is to strengthen the family so that the family can come to know Christ."

And God is using children to introduce their families to Christ, Wohler said.

"We're starting to get adults in our class for children about how to become a Christian," she said.

Despite the allure of this scenic resort town of 2,000 year-around residents, life for many in Tahoe City is far from idyllic, and much of Wohler's ministry is to local residents.

"It's very difficult to survive here financially as a working person," Wohler said. "Sometimes you have to work two and three jobs."

Many are transient, staying only two or three years because they can't afford to live in a place where the least-expensive house sells for \$300,000 and a gallon of milk costs about \$4, Wohler said.

Plenty of opportunities also exist to minister to tourists.

"What I've found is that when we genuinely love people and meet their needs, whether it's child care or skiing, or whatever their need is, they're

very open to a relationship with us and then a relationship with Jesus Christ," Wohler said.

International tourists also give her and her team of volunteers-along with summer and semester missionaries-an opportunity to make a worldwide impact.

"The world comes to Lake Tahoe, and that's why I'm here as a missionary," she said.

The fruit of her ministry comes through dozens of professions of faith in Christ each year-as well as the lives of volunteers and other ministry workers.

"We've been able to have a lot of influence on people who then leave and go to other places, so we kind of see ourselves as a training station," she said.

Wohler has learned to be resourceful in sharing the gospel in a place where there is always something entertaining to do indoors or outdoors.

"We try to do fun things with the kids because I really believe that Jesus used attraction rather than promotion," she said.

"I believe a lot of times the church gets stuck doing really boring things."

In the summer, Wohler leads the children in her child-care programs on hikes to see God's handiwork in waterfalls or beaches while basking in a beautiful climate that boasts 80-degree days with low humidity.

And in the winter, she takes the gospel to the ski slopes.

"Some of the best opportunities come after our outdoor worship service, when riding chair-lifts and while skiing around before and after the service, helping people who are having a hard time skiing," she said.

“Once people are exposed to Christians who are vibrant and passionate and loving and kind, they are open to hearing about the gospel.”

Wohler's earlier experience at the Olympic Training Center also led to another continuing ministry-sharing the love of Christ at seven different Olympic Games.

At the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, she sported a snowman costume as an opening to hand out Christian materials and share her faith.

She plans to attend the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece, in August. There, she hopes to strike up evangelistic conversations with people by displaying an Olympic torch like the one she carried through Tahoe City as part of the festive cross-country torch relay prior to the 2000 Winter Olympics.

“It requires a lot of energy to put yourself out there, to give yourself away to the high glory of God,” Wohler said.

“The hardest part is that the fields are white unto harvest, but the laborers are few.”

Still, Wohler said, she draws strength and inspiration for her work from the people God has called her to serve and from Southern Baptists who support her by praying and giving sacrificially.

“I have felt supported, and cared for, and encouraged beyond belief,” Wohler said. “And that makes all the difference.”

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