

Beach Reach van rides lead to professions of faith

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SOUTH PADRE ISLAND—It isn't Haley's first time at South Padre. So, the college student from Nebraska thought she knew the reason why the vans provide free rides, anywhere on the island, during spring break.

"It's about your religion," she said.



Students from BSMs engaged their peers in about 9,700 gospel conversations during Beach Reach. (BGCT Photo by Neil Williams)

A student from East Texas nodded. That's it—sort of, she said. And as she began explaining the purpose for the "Jesus vans," a gospel conversation unfolded.

That conversation was one of nearly 10,000 similar moments during Beach Reach, the annual effort led by Baptist Student Ministries to reach college students for Jesus.

Every March, as tens of thousands of college students flock to Texas' Gulf

Coast, looking for a party during spring break, hundreds of other college students are there, as well, volunteering to serve, hoping to show the love of Christ—and to help them come to know him, too.

Joe Osteen, director of Baptist Student Ministries at UT-Tyler and one of the coordinators of Beach Reach, calls it a “concentrated gospel opportunity” and a “strategic moment in the rhythm of college life.”

From March 4 to 17, when most colleges and universities were on spring break, 1,017 Beach Reach volunteers from BSMs and churches across Texas and several other states provided 17,765 safe rides. They had 9,670 gospel conversations and prayed with 7,229 people.



Of the 183 college students who professed faith in Christ during Beach Reach, 49 were baptized in the Gulf of Mexico. (BGCT Photo by Neil Williams)

As a result, 183 college students professed faith in Christ, and 91 more prayed to recommit their lives to him. Forty-nine students were baptized in the Gulf of Mexico.

“The light shines brightest where it’s darkest,” said Reid Burkett, director of the BSM at UTSA. “They’re so open to hearing about Jesus.”

Beach Reach is a massive operation. During the two-week period, teams of

volunteers from Texas Baptist Men served 18,737 free pancakes during very late breakfasts in the parking lot of Island Baptist Church and in the wee hours of the mornings outside one of the island's most popular bars. They also served first responders.

Each day, teams of Beach Reach volunteers hit the beaches, too. But instead of soaking up the sun, they helped clean them and spread out looking for opportunities for evangelism.

Boarding the 'Jesus vans'

But there's never such a concentrated gospel opportunity as in the van rides. They're known as "Jesus vans"—sometimes affectionately, sometimes derisively, but very few of the spring breakers will turn down the offer of free rides anywhere on the island.

Many make use of the service by calling a central hotline and reaching a call center set up in a second-floor classroom at the church.

Most rides last only a few minutes—a half hour at the longest. Early in the week, many spring breakers don't know what to make of the vans filled with peers who are eager to talk. But as the week goes on, meaningful moments occur.

"Sometimes it's a spring breaker's fourth, fifth, sixth time on a van, and they're ready for a spiritual conversation," Osteen said. "Or sometimes on a Wednesday night, they'll say, 'OK guys, why are you doing this?'"

One night, BSM students from UT-Tyler squeezed into the van dubbed "Orange VANta." Part of Beach Reach tradition involves nicknaming the vans and decorating them. There's "Apollo Ele-van," "VANtom Menace," "VANimal Crackers" and so on.

Driven by Amber Bader, associate director of the UT-Tyler BSM, "Orange

VANta” traversed the island’s streets from 11 p.m. until a little after 1 a.m., picking up spring breakers and dropping them off. Most often, the spring breakers were headed out to find a party. On their way, they were introduced to Jesus. Many were open to listening.

“It’s a little weird, but spring breakers are here to meet people,” Osteen said.

‘Because Jesus is the ultimate gift’

Around 11:15 p.m., Haley—the student from Nebraska—and some friends climbed into “Orange VANta.” They were headed from their rented condo to Louie’s, one of South Padre’s most popular clubs.

Becca Langley told Haley the vans were at South Padre because of the relationships the BSM students have with Jesus Christ. She explained that they hoped Haley and her friends could have the same relationship.

“We do it because Jesus is the ultimate gift,” she said.

Macy Weatherford, a sophomore from UT-Tyler, asked: “Would you consider yourself a believer?”

“I don’t know,” Haley said. “I’m more wishy-washy. When times are tough, I pray.”

A few minutes later, she asked: “How do you know when you’re saved? How do you know when God knows you?”

Meanwhile, in the back, Alex and Eli were talking with Derek, one of Haley’s friends.

“There’s this big hole in your heart,” Alex said. And the conversation continued, street by street, until the van pulled to the side of the road

about a block from the club. But Haley wasn't ready to get out just yet. For another five minutes, she asked questions.

Finally, her friends said, "It's time to go."

But first, Macy asked: "Can we pray for you?" And the van grew quiet as she asked God to protect the students from Nebraska and to show them the truth of who Jesus is.

'An amazing opportunity to share with people'

In the moments afterward, the BSM students debriefed. Whether the students listened or seemed more interested, like Haley, gospel seeds were sown. And for more than 40 years, that has been the overarching purpose and goal of Beach Reach.

"It's an amazing opportunity to share with people," said Elija McClain, a UT-Tyler senior. "I have a heart for God, and it's one of my earnest pleas for people to know Christ."

Before arriving on the island, the teams of Beach Reachers went through five weeks of training in evangelism. And before climbing into the vans each evening, the Beach Reachers gathered at the South Padre Island Convention Center for worship and a brief message. Osteen reminded the volunteers conversations might be difficult.

"Those hard conversations remind us why we do what we do—because our world is broken," he said. "We serve an evangelistic God. He is a God who pursues."

Drawing from Revelation 12:10-11, he reminded them they "have compassion and mercy and kindness, but this is a [spiritual] war." And as

they shared the Good News, they were not doing so in their own power.

“We are in a battle in a strategic moment in the rhythm of college life, where darkness piles up on one island and thinks it has won the day,” Osteen said. “You don’t have what it takes. Jesus does. And so, you do have what it takes. It’s him in and through you.”

Then he prayed: “Lord, please enable these students to speak the gospel with great boldness. May all these vans with funny names be filled up with passionate praise and gospel witness. May our vans be filled with your Spirit.”

Bathed in prayer

As some of the students piled into vans, headed into the streets, others gathered at Island Baptist Church, which served as the nerve center for Beach Reach. Upstairs, a dozen students wearing headsets took calls and dispatched vans around the island, using computers to know which were available.

Many others pray.

“Beach Reach runs on prayer,” Osteen said.



During Beach Reach, an online prayer wall constantly updates with

real-time information from the vans, often tweeted using the hashtag #BRSPI23. It's displayed on a big screen in the worship center at Island Baptist Church, where students watch and pray over each new prompt. (BGCT Photo by Neil Williams)

He is referring not only to two weeks of continuous prayer in the worship center, as students take turns in prayer, but also the prayers of Texas Baptists and others during the run-up to and during Beach Reach.

During Beach Reach, an online prayer wall constantly updates with real-time information from the vans, often tweeted using the hashtag #BRSPI23. It's displayed on a big screen in the worship center, where students watch and pray over each new prompt:

"Picking up Cody party of 2!! Pray for gospel convos and open hearts! #brspi23""

"Eric is sharing the gospel with one and Elidia and Rebecca are discussing beliefs with the other. #brspi23"

"We had a party of three men—spiritual convo—prayers for the Lord to continue to draw them to himself"

"Parked and conversations are still happening #brspi23"

Lined up for rides or pancakes

It was a little after 2 a.m., closing time at Louie's, a block off Padre Blvd., the island's north-south artery. In various conditions, spring breakers

emerged from the bar, poured out onto the sidewalk and spilled into the parking lot across the street, where many got in one of two lines. Some wanted rides home; vans were lined up, waiting. Others wanted “midnight pancakes.”



Students at South Padre line up for a free ride on a “Jesus Van” during Beach Reach. (BGCT Photo by Neil Williams)

A misty rain was falling, but no one seemed to mind. As they waited in line, they talked with Beach Reachers. Burkett, the BSM director at UTSA, was coordinating the van pickups, but he also regularly engaged in long, deep conversations.

“It looks like a mess,” Burkett said. “But it’s a funnel. You’re funneling to gospel conversations.”

Jake Stratton, a sophomore from Sam Houston State, found himself in one with a student named Andrew, who was in the line for pancakes. They talked for 15 minutes before Andrew’s friends pulled him away.

“I’m not gonna lie,” Jake said. “That’s probably the most gospel-led conversation I’ve had tonight.”

And a few minutes later, Andrew texted Jake, hoping to grab lunch later.

Jake anticipated more gospel conversation ahead.

Earlier in the night, Jake bumped into some of his high school buddies as they were headed into Louie's. He said it reminded him of who he was before meeting Jesus, and it motivated him to share Christ with others whenever he can.

Early Wednesday morning, Lily Carnes, a junior at UTSA and a member of First Baptist Church of Castroville, was in the worship center at Island Baptist. She spent time praying for each member of her San Antonio-based team in the van "Bidi Bidi VAN VAN."

Around 2:30 a.m., she saw a tweet hit the prayer wall. Her van picked up six young boys at Subway.

She began praying: "God, you can totally bring every single one of them to salvation. Lord, let them accept you and want to follow you."

Leading peers to faith in Christ

Of the six boys, four were teenagers. One was 20, and one was just 11. In the van, they were joking around, seemingly uninterested in serious conversation. But Cesar Montoya, a senior at Baptist University of the Americas, spoke up.

"I want to share my heart with you," he told the boys in Spanish. "Suppose we had an accident right now and everyone died? There is a heaven and a hell. Where do y'all see yourselves?"

The atmosphere was suddenly solemn.

"I don't know," one of the boys said. "We have done many bad things, but we know about Jesus."

When they begin discussing the good things they've done, Cesar shared the gospel and explained from Ephesians 2 that salvation comes by grace through faith, not of works.

A few minutes later, he told them: "Y'all are in this van because you need to hear this. I want y'all to know Jesus. Do you want to accept Jesus?"

One by one, each boy prayed, professing his trust in Christ.

"It was word for word what I was praying for," Lily said. "It's incredible. I was just totally bawling. It's amazing!"

The boys literally changed directions. Instead of the beach bar that was their original destination, they were dropped off at McDonald's. Before leaving the van, though, they made plans to meet Cesar to talk again, desiring to know more about how he came to know Christ and how he follows Christ.

Seeing transformation happen

Similar stories of transformation unfold every year during Beach Reach. People pray. Students sow seeds. The Holy Spirit opens spring breakers' hearts.

"It's amazing how God works to show them there's a better option," Osteen said.

Also amazing are the ripples outward in the weeks and months after Beach Reach, when the volunteers return to their hometowns and their college campuses. BSMs regularly report an increase in people coming to Christ because of participants who return home with increased fervor for evangelism. Beach Reach often becomes Campus Reach.

"All these students come back to campus feeling different, talking different

and living different,” said Nathan Mahand, BSM director at Houston Christian University. “They have a burden for the lost.”

As @VANtomMenace, the twitter handle of the San Antonio BSM, tweeted as Beach Reach ended: “... please pray that we can take the gospel far and wide back home. #brspi23”