

Put a board in their hand & tell them about the Middleman

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A new world opened for John Barnard on Christmas morning in 1985, when he received his first skateboard. Three years later, he found his entire identity, purpose and community in skateboarding.

Skateboarding is a subculture complete with clothing, magazines, music, lingo and values. Barnard describes skateboarding succinctly as “a celebration of irresponsibility.” Teenagers find a home in the “no coaches, no rules” world of skateboarding. They find belonging.



John Barnard, founder and executive director of Middleman Ministries

‘Two roads diverged in a yellow wood’

Skaters are always looking for a new place to ride, especially a place that wasn’t made for riding. This hunt leads them to places like churches, whose parking lots, sidewalks, stairs, railings and planters are skateboarding heaven.

In 1988, when Barnard was in 8th grade, he and his friends found a slice of heaven near his dad’s house at Park Place Baptist Church in southeast Houston. Some men from the church made their way toward the group of teenagers, who started gathering their things to leave.

Skaters are used to being pushed to the margins. Not even strip malls want them and post signs to prohibit skateboarding. Everywhere skaters turn,

authority says, “No.”

To the teenagers’ surprise, Barnard recounts, “They should have told us to go away, but they told us to come inside because the basketball court was smoother.”

That day, instead of rejecting the skaters and sending them away, those men took a different path. They took a risk, represented the church and invited the outsiders in.

Later that year, when Barnard was invited to Disciple Now at Park Place, he went.

Barnard gave his life to Christ in 1988.

Eleven years later, Lake Heights Baptist in Austin called him as their youth pastor. He later served as the youth pastor of Graceview in Tomball, First Baptist in Brenham and First Baptist in Bellville.

While still with Graceview, God gave Barnard an idea. Just like the men of Park Place had given their gym to him and his friends, he would give skateboards away so he could tell other skaters about Jesus.

He bought the first 10 boards on eBay, scribbled “Middleman” on them and gave them away out of the trunk of his car. He told every person who received a board about Jesus.

‘Yet knowing how way leads on to way’

After 17 years as a youth pastor, Barnard sensed God calling him to a new ministry. He and his wife—who happens to be the daughter of a former Park Place music minister—found a home in Waco where they could build a comprehensive ministry.

“Ministry has to have a Swiss army knife mentality” to be able to do what’s needed when it’s needed.

Part of their ministry is providing a sanctuary for those needing one. Another part is restoring vintage vehicles and travel trailers. One trailer—originally built in Fort Worth—is a mobile photo booth named the Texas Photo Bomb.

The guiding principle of the Barnards’ ministry follows what John saw exhibited by the men of Park Place. He saw that they held the church property as something given freely to them by God and as something they were to freely give.

“We started by giving away. We’ll end by giving away,” Barnard said.



“Creativity is consistent with God. God didn’t make [things] just to be practical. He made [them] to be beautiful.”

Middleman Ministries gives away skateboards and Bibles, among other things. The [popsicle board](#) artwork is created by Middleman, finished in Brazil and printed in China. The boards are 7-ply, cross-grained, Canadian maple pressed and cut in California. Each board costs \$18 shipped. They are distributed to mentors, who give them to skaters with an explanation of the gospel message in the artwork.

The NIV [Bibles](#) feature the Middleman helmet logo on the outside covers and a message from Barnard on the inside covers. They are \$6 each with shipping. In 2018, Middleman gave out over 300 Bibles, presenting each one to an individual, along with an explanation of the gospel.

“Jesus is the Middleman. He hung between two thieves, and he is our Advocate between us and God the Father.”

A ministry like Middleman requires broad support, and the Barnards have found that support in at least five churches and the North American Mission Board. These partnerships demonstrate what can be accomplished when Baptists and other followers of Christ work together.



The mobile skate park is equipped with nine elements for 75 kids.

Graceview encouraged the Barnards to take Middleman full time and continues to provide support. First Baptist in Bellville, Calvary Baptist in Lubbock, and Park Lake Drive Baptist in Waco also provide support. The North American Mission Board provided the trailer Middleman uses to take its skate park to churches and camps.

A mission team from a fifth church, First Baptist in Malakoff, built the board shop at the Barnard home. Plans for the shop include teaching skaters how to make their own boards.

‘I took the one less traveled by’

Skaters are used to being treated as “less than.” Skateboarding fills a void in them. In light of how they are generally received, skaters aren’t likely to attend church events. So, Middleman goes where skaters are and encourages churches to do the same.

To go where skaters are doesn’t require a church to build a skate park but to be a positive presence in the community and to utilize existing skate parks. If a community does not have a skate park, then a church might consider building one in the community.

Another reason to go where skaters are is that skaters who follow Christ are often indistinguishable from other skaters and therefore have not

always found a place of belonging in the church. Middleman seeks these skaters and teaches them to be disciple-makers where they are.

In addition, Middleman is locally based. “Our ministry is where our mentors are,” Barnard said, which includes Corpus Christi, Galveston, Austin, Killeen, Johnson City, Tenn., and Dumplin, Tenn.

In addition to mentors, Middleman relies on volunteers to help with [Skate Camp](#) and the [mobile skate park](#). The camp and park bring the ministry of Middleman anywhere, including churches and summer camps. Volunteers can be any age and level of ability—meaning they don’t have to be skaters.

‘And that has made all the difference.’

John Barnard once found his identity in skateboarding. He now finds his identity in Jesus Christ and embodies Christ in word and deed among those cast off by society. All of that might have been different if a group of men from the church hadn’t invited him in.

Headings are from Robert Frost’s poem “[The Road Not Taken](#).”