

Tacoma: Deep conversation in a mall food court

January 25, 2019

On our fifth day in Tacoma as a student missionary team, three of us—Emilio, Carlos and I—were tasked to walk around the mall and find a person we could engage in a meaningful conversation. After some wandering around I ended up at the food court and saw all sorts of people there. But out of the 200 or so people in there, a young woman in a bright yellow hoodie eating alone at the end managed to grab my attention.

Not wanting to look like a complete weirdo staring at people at the mall, I went and bought myself a Coke and sat at the table next to the young woman in the yellow hoodie. After a few moments, I mentioned that I was a Texan looking for some local attractions or food hotspots in the town. Next thing you know, Haleigh was listing her favorite spots.

Then she started to apologize about her social anxiety, telling me how she felt so awkward around people at times. Since she opened up to me, I started to tell her about how I often struggle with the same thing. I reassured her about how well she was acting toward me, a stranger from Texas. Honestly, I couldn't even see her social anxiety. Haleigh began to smile more and kept on talking for a bit.

Our visit came to an end when she had to go back to work at a store nearby. Before she left, I told her I was a missionary in the city and asked how I could pray for her. Again, I noticed her smiling back at me again. She asked me to pray that she “continues to live a blessed life.” Such an interesting choice of words.

Back to the mall

The next day rolled around and I was praying for Haleigh and praying to see her again before I left Tacoma. Sure enough, around 2 p.m., the whole team decided to go to the mall to pass out Christmas



flyers for Discovery Church's Christmas event the following week. I passed out a bunch of flyers and had some bad luck with the crowd for the most part, with some people cursing or throwing the cards back at me. It was disheartening, but I prayed to find some people in need of Christ. God blessed, I was able to pray for four people back-to-back.

About that time, I saw Haleigh sitting alone again in the same yellow hoodie. Once she spotted me, she welcomed me over. We talked for a while, and then another student missionary, Emilio, joined us in the conversation, getting acquainted with Haleigh. After all, evangelism is all about the relationships with people unknown to us but known to God. Emilio began to ask Haleigh about her church background, if she had any. She told us how she attended church for some years, until she and her mom moved to Washington during her middle school years and then they stopped.

She changed the subject and wanted to learn more about us. After a couple of minutes of casual conversation, I noticed the clock timer for her phone read 10 minutes left on her break.

Sharing a personal story

Seeing this, I felt like I needed to share my testimony with her. That is something I don't do that often, but right then, God was telling me to share with her.

I asked Haleigh if I could share some personal info on my past and how that led me to follow Christ. She was intrigued and told me to go for it. I told her about how one parent loved me and modeled the church, while the other became abusive toward my family, and especially toward me. I told her how all this led to me to become abusive to others and how much I hated people and God, which only led me to become isolated and sinful. I felt alone in the world. After my mom had me baptized when I was 14, I went on a vendetta against God and became an atheist.

But this was all too much for me. Twice I remembered how I tried to kill myself, but twice God prevailed. So, I prayed for hours a day for days, then weeks, then months for a God who I thought probably too busy for me. Then one day when I was 16, I decided to embrace this world of God and Jesus. And who have guessed that I not only was saved from abuse, but also was saved from my own desires and sinful heart. And ever since, I can see God in every little detail in life. When I felt alone in the world, he saw me and gave countless lifelines. He saw my future when I didn't want one.

Suddenly, Haleigh told us so much surprising stuff about herself, only God could have predicted what was to come. This sweet and amazingly kind person became such a bitter person, started to cuss a lot and was just so full of such raw, pent-up energy. This was a desperate cry for help. Her anger not against us, but her own past, just like me. She just began to reveal to us how she had an abusive stepfather and how her grandparents hated her for being half-Mexican. Then she told us how she left the church because she was gay and felt persecuted by the church and by God for how she felt at the world.

Sadly, her phone buzzer went off, a reminder that she was to go back to work. Emilio and I wanted to say something for Haleigh to take to heart. So, I told her that she only needed to take away one thing from our encounter. I told her how much the depths of God's love cannot be explained—how despite any past, present or future feelings toward God, he

will always have room for you, whenever you're ready. No matter what, no sin is too great for Jesus. Jesus is the only sure cure for a broken heart.

She stared back for a moment and went on to tell me how much she loved me for praying for her. She was joyful that someone was willing to go help another person in need. Then she gave me her contact info and left.

Emilio and I were so dumbfounded. We felt like God was helping us, just as much as he was helping her. Here are three main take-aways that I received from this encounter. One, share your testimony more, because there are others who have similar stories and need to know that they're not alone in the world. Two, this was only possible because we built trust at the beginning of the relationship. Three, stop being so surprised by the acts of God. He is all-powerful and has big plans for everyone, so get used to it.

I'm still praying for Haleigh to come to see the full glory of God, to stop hating herself and the world, so that she may see all this glory around us at every moment.

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