

Providing Hope to the Least of These

Haleh Kersten shares her experience with LWML and as director of LINC Austin.

It was like a gut-punch. I was seven years-old, and by now, that feeling shouldn't have felt new to me, but that soul-wrenching feeling of loneliness was crushing, desperate through my bones. As the years drew by, the feeling was familiar, but fear stopped accompanying it. I found this determination, even in my early years, that loneliness was something to conquer. I did not know how yet, but it was a mission for me to force it out of my soul and alleviate it in others. Then in February, just after my fifteenth birthday, I was introduced to Jesus for the first time, and baptized one year later at St. Stephen's Lutheran Church. I write that, as though, it was an ordinary event in my life, but the reality is it was, for a girl like me, greater than any gift I could have imagined. It was like taking an unencumbered deep, clean, fresh breath for the very first time. For the first time in my life, I found hope. I felt the arms of a loving, comforting Father that squelched those life-long feelings of loneliness. Jesus rescued me. He became my comfort, my courage, and illuminated a path as He held my hand and walked gently and compassionately with me. During this time, I found great solace in **Psalm 40:1-3a**.

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. (NIV)

I am filled with gratitude and wholly humbled to be a child of God. The emotion that loneliness invokes in you is not something you forget; it leaves a residue in your life. The gratitude I feel for the hope I found in my Lord, also raised in me this warrior to live boldly for Him. I feel compelled to share Christ's unconditional love, His comforting arms, His grace and mercy.

Through the years, Jesus continued to light the path. He asked me to trust Him and I worked hard each day to listen. Several verses resonated day after day, and year after year.

Matthew 28:19: *"Therefore GO and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (NIV)*

Matthew 25:40: *"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (NIV)*

1 John 3:17-18: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." (NIV)*

As I prayed on those verses, key phrases stood out: GO!, the least of these, and share Christ's love in actions. I wanted and needed to be obedient to Him; I wanted and needed to find my calling to alleviate the kind of loneliness I felt as a child.

In time, I found my calling. I have been blessed and humbled to serve those whose loneliness I understand, and whose desperation I remember. I have the honor of serving individuals experiencing homelessness in Austin. I have the privilege of going to those I serve. I walk the streets, the underpasses, and the alleyways. I sit on the cold pavement to share a hug providing comfort, hold a hand of someone feeling lost and scared, offer a prayer asking God to share his grace and mercy to those at the very end of their rope, sit in the hot sun and laugh and cry as we share stories. I have the honor of being the hands and feet of Jesus to many that feel forgotten, offering hope. Most of the time, hope is enough, it was for me.

Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us even as we hope in you (Psalm 33:22).

Hope in Jesus redirected my path in life. I was lost and broken, but Christ held me close to Him, taught me to be obedient in love, He forgave and made me whole, and He took my brokenness showed me how to use it to bring hope to the least of these. Hope in Jesus sustains us, it humbles us, and compels us to act, it compels us to take what we have to give and give it joyfully. My prayer daily is that I never tire from sharing love and compassion, because Jesus never tires from showering me with His grace and mercy. And this is why I feel so connected to LWML's mission.

It is in the arms of the women beside me that I am able to continue to reach those who were like me. It is in the tireless compassion and the servant hearts that I have found a home in LWML. I find strength and am reminded daily that there is support in your prayers and your encouragement. Over the years, LWML has helped move LINC Austin forward through its remarkable giving. The Mission Goal endowment will be a lasting legacy to help organizations like LINC Austin to be the hands and feet of Christ to provide hope to the least of these.



Additional Bible studies and information about the LWML Texas District Endowment Funds may be found at lwmltxdist.org/endowments-lwml-texas-district or requested by email to endowment@lwmltxdistrict.org.