

July 2019 UPDATE

ROBIN'S NEST: A REFLECTION (as seen by Pastor Joel of Riverview Baptist in St. Paul, MN)

About 25 years ago I went on my first trip to Jamaica. I went with my dad and one or two others through a ministry called Project Increase which seeks to bring the gospel to the people of Jamaica. We spent our time leading a Vacation Bible School program for kids who lived in a rural area out in the bush. Over the next few years I would return to the island three additional times for the same purposes.

One of those latter trips was with a woman named Michelle Robinette, who like me, first experienced Jamaica on a short-term mission trip. Michelle's experience was different from mine, however, as she was deeply impacted by the poverty that exists in the country - especially among children, many of whom simply lived on the streets. Michelle followed the call of God and opened a children's home on the island, conveniently named "Robin's Nest" in relation to her last name. I was privileged to accompany Michelle to the island when she made her permanent transition there.

Twenty years later, and Robin's Nest has distinguished itself as the most reputable children's home on the island of Jamaica, although Michelle has since retired and handed over the reins to other directors. Riverview has been in partnership with Robin's Nest ever since its inception, and we decided it was time to go back to Robin's Nest and get a taste for the ministry that happens there. I was part of a 15-person team who went for a total of seven days just a couple of weeks ago. It was a tremendous opportunity and privilege to see all that God is doing on one particular mountaintop on which is located a campus that 26 children call "home."

The purpose of our trip was to assist with the ministry of the Robin's Nest Children's Home in whatever ways we could, through physical labor, interacting with kids and assisting with childcare, and whatever else would come up. Our team accomplished these goals, and much more, during the week we were there. But I had some other questions I wanted answered; other reasons for traveling to Jamaica

1. What happens at Robin's Nest? Our Missions Committee at Riverview is very active in staying in touch with missionaries that we support. Oftentimes this is accomplished through visiting with missionaries when they are home on furlough or for a home assignment. It's common at Riverview to have missionaries with us, telling us about the gospel work they are doing in other parts of the world. But Robin's Nest is a bit different: there are no regular missionaries associated with Robin's Nest. Rather, there are people who have volunteered to serve as directors of the children's home for a period of time. This makes face to face communication somewhat challenging, as the directors of the home aren't necessarily missionaries that we have any formal relationship with. Needless to say, although we partner with Robin's Nest as a church, sometimes we do not know too much about what is going on down there.

This trip afforded me and the rest of our team a first-hand experience of the ministry that takes place there, and we were very encouraged by what we saw. Robin's Nest is home to 26 Jamaican children who are constantly cared for, ministered to, and discipled by the two American directors and the 30+ Jamaican staff members. These 26 children, who at one point in their lives, were abandoned for whatever reason by their natural parents, are constantly taught and reminded that they have been created in their Father's image, that they are valuable, loved, and cared for. Our team got to have just the smallest (about one week) opportunity to reaffirm this message to these kids. And the children receive an education (including Christian education) that they would most likely otherwise be without, a home to live in, and people who love and care for them on a daily basis.

Perhaps what impressed me most about Robin's Nest is the organization and structure that exists there for the ministry to these kids and the staff members to be efficient and effective. The directors, Janet and Kevin Krusmark, have drawn upon their lifetimes of business and professional experience to make Robin's Nest an example of efficiency and excellence in childcare, ministry, and management, not to mention providing employment opportunities for more than 30 local Jamaicans. Janet and Kevin serve as missionaries in their own right. They have volunteered their time and energies to serve the Nest in their retirement years, and have put their years of management, business, and Christian living experience to work efficiently. The facilities and campus in general are clean, well-organized, and arranged to encourage maximum efficiency when caring for the daily needs of 26 children, aged 2-14.

After having observed how Robin's Nest functions, I am convinced that it is this attention to detail that makes Robin's Nest such a "successful" children's home, and why it is the highest rated children's home on the island of Jamaica. Having personally seen the condition of other children's homes on previous trips to the island, I am thrilled that our church has

partnered with Robin's Nest to provide such high quality and God-centered care to these children and to the Jamaicans employed by the Nest.

2. A second question I had before going on this trip was about the nature of short-term missions' trips in general. Many people in the Western world have (rightly) questioned the effectiveness of short-term missions: is it really cost effective? Does any lasting change exist once a team has left? Would it be better to send the money spent on short-term missions' trips to indigenous Christians so they could do the ministry rather than flying in Americans for significant money to do the same work? I think these are important questions, and ones that Christians should spend time thinking about. I wanted to see for myself if it was "worth it" for our team (and our church) to spend a significant amount of money to send 15 of us to Jamaica to work at Robin's Nest.

To be honest, the first couple of days of work at the Nest didn't do much to encourage me that it was "worth it." We did mostly menial tasks that presumably could have been done by anyone, let alone Americans who had flown more than 2000 miles to do them. But as the week went on it became apparent that our team wasn't there to perform some task that only we could do, but rather to support the overall work of the Nest in any way we could. More on this in a minute.

Also, a large part of our time at the Nest was dedicated to interacting with the children there and supporting the staff members through our presence. While these interactions were special and fun, it was clear that any relationships we made with the kids most likely wouldn't be lasting. After all, we would be leaving in just a few days, with no indication of when or if we would ever return. Could the brief times we spent with these kids in just a few days really be that impactful? I wasn't so sure.

Then, on the last night of our stay at Robin's Nest, we had a debriefing meeting with Janet and Kevin, Robin's Nest directors. What they told our team during that meeting completely changed my outlook and answer to this question, at least as it concerns our church's mission trip to Robin's Nest.

Janet and Kevin shared with us that we were but one of 32 short-term mission teams who either had been or would be at Robin's Nest in 2019. My first reaction to this news was that our physical labors and relational interactions were an even smaller drop in the bucket than I had previously thought. But then Kevin framed our time at the Nest like this: as children, most of us have parents who love us and care for us, and they demonstrate their love and care for us by talking to us, playing with us, feeding us, clothing us, sheltering us, and so on. The same is not true for most, if not all, of the children at Robin's Nest. Although we were just one of 32 teams during 2019, we were able to fill a vital seven days of telling these kids that they are loved, cared for, and valued by God and us. We were able to help with their care, talk to them, provide for them, and so on. If we weren't there, those seven days would be devoid of that message being poured into those kids' minds and hearts. It was important for us to be there; it was important for us to serve them; it was important for us to tell those kids that they are loved and valuable. And not only that, but they are so loved that we are willing to spend our hard-earned money and travel 2000 miles to tell them so!

Then, at the close of our meeting, Kevin read from Philemon 1:4-7:

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Kevin explained that this scripture was fulfilled in our time at the Nest. Through our willingness to come to the Nest and work and love on kids, Kevin and Janet praised the Lord because of the love and faith that we had toward Jesus and for all the saints in Jamaica, certainly through our gifts and donations and partnership through the church, and also through our physical presence. They explained that their prayer for us was that the sharing of our faith on this trip would become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. They explained how they had derived much joy and comfort from our love, and that their hearts had been refreshed through us.

If this is true, and I believe that it is, then it didn't matter if our team did menial tasks that were "beneath" us; it didn't matter that there was some downtime when we could have been working or doing things but instead spent that time hanging out with kids; it didn't matter that our skills weren't utilized to their fullest potential. It became clear to me that the purpose of our trip was to give Janet and Kevin and the other staff at Robin's Nest joy and comfort from our love, and to refresh their hearts in any way that we could. And as a result, God is glorified, and we (our team) have a fuller knowledge of all that is ours in Christ. That was the purpose of our trip.

Earlier in the week my son James and I volunteered to paint some signs on the Nest property that are actually part of an historical marker. The signs had gotten rusty and weathered and were clearly uncared for by whoever had erected them several years previous. Jamie and I volunteered to paint the frames the signs were in and to do some minor repairs on them to get them looking nice again. It was this kind of work that I had previously thought was menial and "beneath" me. Not to mention, one of the signs seemed to be located on a nest of fire ants that wouldn't stop biting my ankles! Why did I fly 2000 miles to paint signs and get bit by fire ants? But Kevin's message to us the night before we left put my sign-painting into perspective. If my painting these signs enabled the ministry of Robin's Nest to function a little more smoothly and with a little less trepidation about all the work that needed to be done, then it was worth it. In fact, I'd paint as many signs as they had if doing so would give the people at the Nest joy and comfort in the ministry that God has for them to do.

This was the fifth overseas short-term mission trip that I have been on in my life, and I have a confession to make: the best day has always been the one going home. Each time I have returned home, I have longed for nothing more than sleeping in my own bed. Put simply, I am not an overseas missionary (at least not yet). But for now, I can encourage the hearts of those who are, and I can give them much joy and comfort by my presence and support of their ministries. This is what we did at Robin's Nest.