

Women in International Mission

Erin McKinney: Weaving Life's Tapestry

by Ana Gobledale

What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

—MICAH 6:8 (ERIN'S FAVORITE BIBLE VERSE)

Have you ever felt propelled through life, felt that unexpected events resulted in things just falling into place? When asked about her call to international ministry, Erin explains, "I didn't think I was called to international mission work. However, one thing leads to another and now I'm finding myself in a much longer commitment than I ever thought." As you read about this young woman's life, from Ohio, to Chile, Mexico and then the Dominican Republic, consider how God works in our lives, weaving the threads of our experiences into a vibrant tapestry. Consider how God, no matter which thread we follow, invites us to always do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. May Erin, whose guiding hope is "to be a faithful and helpful servant of the Lord in whatever that may entail," inspires you to look afresh at your own life tapestry.
Ana

CHILDHOOD & YOUTH



Numerous threads weave together to create Erin McKinney's life tapestry. Three prominent ones are church, camp and family. Erin grew up in First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kent, Ohio, where her father was minister.

"Growing up in the church was very influential to my faith and my passion for social justice..., spending summers [at Camp Christian] with many wonderful people sharing the same faith but coming from a wide

range of backgrounds and ages... My parents were an incredible example of holistic living, a positive loving relationship, and how to connect my faith with social issues around the world. This very much influenced my path toward international mission."

A Disciples youth mission trip to Washington D.C. and New York City helped Erin connect her faith with social and political issues. "I left the week feeling as though I could have done more and that our group barely skimmed the surface of the underlying problems: poverty, racial prejudices and social issues. I began to realize that I came from such opportunity and privilege." She continues, "The small mission trips are huge and very important to personal faith development...What began with youth mission trips grew into an international passion once I learned more of the world."

Through contacts in the Disciples, Erin's life became interwoven with women working internationally through Global Ministries* and other international missions. "Hearing their experiences and seeing how it impacted their lives really drew me to international mission, too."

Erin's college double-major in international studies and Spanish combined "all of my passions, politics, social justice, and different cultures. Then you add my faith to the equation and international mission work just seemed to be perfect." She spent two summers, through Disciples Home Missions, working on an Indian Reservations in Washington and Texas. Then after a mission trip to the Shalom Center in the

* Global Ministries is the common international witness of the Division of Overseas Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Wider Church Ministries, one of the four covenanted ministries of the United Church of Christ. Global Ministries and Wider Church Ministries can help you hear the voices of our international sisters and identify ways to walk with them. The program Global Mission Partners can connect your conference with a woman serving overseas. People-to-People Pilgrimages can help you plan an international mission trip to one of our partners. The web site can connect you with stories and articles about women's concerns around the world (<www.globalministries.org> or go through the UCC home page).



Erin with some of her Dominican friends.



Andes Mountains of Chile with Global Missionary, Elena Huegal, Erin knew she “had a calling to take action through more mission work, even though at the time I had no idea what that would entail. After that everything just started to fall into place.”

WORKING ON THE BORDER

Following college graduation, the threads of doing justice and loving kindness thicken in Erin’s life. Directly following college graduation she headed to Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries (SWGSM), a Disciples Mission center in South Texas through a Disciple Volunteers-in-Mission internship. The year was “a tremendous growing and learning experience, the perfect stepping stone to the work I’m doing in the Dominican Republic; my Spanish improved and my understanding of how to work in a cross-cultural, international setting was enhanced.” Erin considers one reward of her work to be “seeing the transformations in people as they are empowered and also seeing a transformation in myself as I’m touched by every person I encounter.” Another reward is “discovering and seeing hope amidst some of the most hopeless situations.”

Erin explains, “There’s often no quantitative proof that you are making any impact of change in horrible situations of poverty. And more often than not the problems seem much bigger than humanly possible to solve. It can be discouraging, frustrating and lonely.

However, I’ve learned that is the reason I depend on faith to get me through and that God is greater than any of the problems we encounter. One of my favorite quotes is:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world...Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

— MARGARET MEAD.

I feel that’s a big part of what international mission work is about. There is no one answer to poverty, but there are many small ways to make change.”

SERVING IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC TODAY

Now Erin serves as a Global Mission Intern in the Dominican Republic with Caminante, an organization working with street children impacted by the child prostitution industry and the drug trade. While she mentors and works in the after-school program, she often feels that, “my most important role is simply spending time with people and building relationships.”

Spiritual disciplines strengthen Erin in her ministry. “Prayer and meditation in the morning, especially if I can be outside in nature, always brings my mind, body and spirit to peace before beginning the day. I also have a daily devotional book that I read before going to bed to re-focus spiritually at the end of the day.”

SEEING GOD FACE-TO-FACE

Throughout her life and now her work at Caminante, God's presence provides the central thread of her life's tapestry. Erin relates an experience of meeting God face-to-face while building a new home for a poor family in Mexico. After the mother became partially paralyzed, the father left her alone to raise 3 children. Erin writes, "Their home, the size of a tiny shed (10'x 10'), was falling apart from termites, cockroaches and rotting wood. The roof was made from scrap wood, tarp and plastic with many holes. I saw the biggest spiders of my life fall as we tore down the structure. The little girls giggled at my fear of the spiders bigger than my hand, as they chased them with a hammer. Although the family was surviving on very little, all sharing a tiny bed in this one room house, they were very happy and friendly.

"Two weeks later after a solid concrete foundation had been built, a volunteer church group came from Dallas to help build the new house. The family walked from a relative's house every day to help with enthusiasm. Soon all of the neighborhood kids were around wanting to help as well. I saw God the entire week as we built the house: in the family we were building the house for, in the 14-year-old son who proudly took over the electrical hook-up, in all of the neighborhood children that helped or played soccer with the volunteers. God was apparent in the church group volunteers who came down to help but left with so much more, learning from the family new perspectives and appreciation for life and best of all new friends!"

WALKING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD

Through our prayers, letters and worship, we can weave the threads of our lives together with those of Global Ministries missionaries around the globe. The next time you sing, "Walking in the light of God," (#526 *The New Century Hymnal*; #442 *Chalice Hymnal**) remember Erin. This is her favorite hymn because, "It's upbeat and makes me excited and enthusiastic about worship and enjoying the Spirit. It's also a great song because it is often sung in different languages and I feel it connects people across cultures." As you sing, feel connected to the Dominican Republic and our church's mission and ministry there and around the world.

Ana Gobledale has served our church through Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and Australia. She currently serves as Interim Co-Pastor at Kirkland Congregational Church UCC in Washington.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the primary threads in your life tapestry?
2. When have things "just fallen into place" in your life?
3. Looking forward in your life tapestry, what thread would you like to enhance?

Prayer Points

- For Erin and the people she encounters in the Dominican Republic through Caminante.
 - For single-parent women and their children around the world
 - For church work groups helping to build homes
 - For Global Ministries staff in Cleveland and Indianapolis, and serving around the world.
- A devotional book that Erin recommends is "Soul Weavings a Gathering of Women's Prayers" edited by Lyn Klug*

Action Opportunities

- Locate the Dominican Republic on the map. Learn three things about it and its neighbor, Haiti.
- Write a letter of thanks and encouragement to Erin McKinney, or another Global Ministries missionary.
- Choose a mission project and fire up your congregation to make a difference!

*This hymn [as mentioned in the article] directly relates to the mission Caminante, for the word Caminante means "to walk the path" in Spanish, representing the children walking through their different paths of life and the staff walking alongside them.