

The Hard Places Community: Reflective Paper

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The Hard Places Community was founded by Alli Mellon, who now serves as the Executive Director, in February of 2008. She had been overseas on several short term mission trips and returned wondering what to do next, as she realized that a short term trip simply would not do enough. Therefore, she created the Hard Places Community, with the vision to bring hope to the hopeless in the darkest corners of this world.

As Alli leads at the forefront based in Phnom Penh, the capitol city of Cambodia, her brother, Drew Mellon, serves as the stateside director- he fundraises, communicates, advocates, organizes, and carries a torch of passion that has been fueling a fire right here in Jackson, Mississippi. As I served as the Public Relations intern for the Hard Places Community, I saw firsthand that Drew wears 4 different hats at any given moment. Drew is a husband, the manager at a local retail business called Swellophonic, a worship leader at Fondren Church and the stateside Director of The Hard Places Community. His life is busy, but he manages well.

In working with Drew, I saw many of the underlying struggles and victories of doing nonprofit work indirectly, but directly, involved with the cause. One would think Drew would be less passionate about the Khmer people and their troubles because he simply is not there, however, Drew is a true advocate for them and his passion is wholly evident. I learned from him how to fight for people I could not reach out and hug. I learned that I do not have to be *right there* to make a huge impact. I learned all of this through a little event called Dine Against Darkness.

Dine Against Darkness is a limited light dinner experience meant to illuminate child sex trafficking. The event was held in Jackson, Miss., on November 8, and was the main task as my time serving as the intern. The goal of Dine Against Darkness is to bring awareness to the tragic reality of sex trafficking and to raise money that will fund the salaries of the 44 Cambodian men and women serving at The Hard Places Community. It begins with a cocktail hour and auction, a time for guests to mingle socially but also to bid on awesome items that were donated for this

purpose. Music was playing, people were laughing, and it truly was the happiest time. This hour was juxtaposed with the next portion of the evening where guests walked into a dimly lit room, had a seat at their table, and then every light was shut off at once. To go from happiness to utter darkness made guests aware, which helped them to truly hear the presentation before them.

Dinner was served in the dark, Alli and Panha- the head social worker- spoke on what was going on in Cambodia as well as how The Hard Places is fixing it, and people were asked to donate.

Over \$28,000 was raised in one night in small town Jackson, Mississippi. And I got to be a part of it. I spent hours this semester writing bios of the people and organizations who would be involved in making Dine a huge success. I spent days driving back and forth to business all over the city to ask and collect items for the auction. I planned a trip to Cambodia, for which I fly out on Saturday, to see firsthand the work that I have been supporting from Mississippi and also for which I fundraised entirely, bringing more awareness to the cause and to the organization. I did a fundraiser and awareness campaign with Laguna Social Tribe at Mississippi College, with the goal of further showing the girls what their philanthropy means while raising money to fund the salaries of our overseas friends- it raised over \$280 that I will be taking to the staff on Saturday.

I spent my semester working with new faces for a new cause and loving every minute of it. I also spent my semester problem-solving, as I realized pretty early on that the work alone for Dine Against Darkness would not amount to 160 “billable” hours to complete my internship. So I had to get creative, generate work for myself, and get the job done. At the end of the list of lessons learned this semester is learning how to manage time, juggle too much on one plate and keep a good attitude. This semester was difficult, mostly because I say yes to too many things. With school, an internship, two part time jobs, a small business, church, my social tribe, my friend group, a relationship, and occasional time for me- it has been a task to not become overwhelmed. But my work at The Hard Places Community was rewarding. To see Dine Against

Darkness come to life, with people from all over Mississippi and several other states coming together to support the cause, I'm thankful for the opportunity to play a small part in making it happen.

God has created in me a passionate spirit that seeks justice for the mistreated soul, and this organization fits right into that. I could see myself in the future working on the front lines in Cambodia, but I could also see myself working in the details over here- helping in the process of creating a stronger framework that allows for self banking and financial handling, bigger events with a more widespread target audience, and awareness brought farther into the states outside of Mississippi. It is impossible to know right now if The Hard Places Community is where I will work in the future, but it has taught me plenty in my time as an intern and holds plenty more to teach in the next three weeks that I will personally be there.