

Children, Incubators,  
and the Essence of Things

by Ted Travis

A few mornings ago, I saw something I had not seen in all my years in Five Points. It was familiar, yet I'd never seen it here.

I saw a boy carrying a trombone.

I was stunned. He was halfway down the street and going the opposite direction; I was in-between meetings, making a brief stop at my house. He was almost out of shouting distance. But, despite the awkwardness, I called out to him anyway.

“Hey! Is that a trombone in your hands?”

“Yes.”

“How long you been playing?”

“Two years.”

“I played trombone for 15 years! Mine's in the back of my car. . . (silence) Well, good-bye.”

I haven't seen him since. Probably frightened the poor kid! But seeing him surfaced memories that go back some 35 years to another boy who quietly, almost invisibly walked daily through his inner-city neighborhood, carrying as if a permanent part of his anatomy a rectangularly shaped box that housed a brass instrument known as a trombone.

There are many factors that contribute to the essence, or primary focus, of a ministry. Certainly things like vision, divine calling and life's circumstances play a part. But because we are children before we are adults, I'm convinced that a major factor God uses in shaping the essence of ministries is the perspective of a child.

Often that perspective is obscured: we adults tend to be too busy or out of touch to consider the essence of things. But it's there. And if the ministry has been around for awhile, a close look will reveal what that essence really is.

I had just shared my testimony with about 30 elementary Harambee kids. Part of the story was the effect my father's death had on me as a child, and my discovery as a new Christian that God truly is “a father to the fatherless.” (Psalm 68:5) As the group scattered, one of the girls approached me and asked:

“Was it hard losing your dad?”

“Yes,” I responded. “But he had given his life to Jesus, and because of that I'll see him again. I'm looking forward to that.”

As she smiled and rejoined the group, I savored the moment. These are the ones you treasure, when, just maybe, an eternal impact has been made on a child's life.

Occasionally kids will ask: "Hey, Ted, are you the boss?" After an affirmative nod, they usually smile and run away or return to what they're doing, as if to say "Thanks; that's all we need to know." From a kid's perspective, this is a neat place and I'm the guy in charge. Like the school principal, my presence behind the scenes may provide a sense of security, but don't ever get called into my office.

That's their perspective. From my perspective, the incubator is working.

The first thing kids do when they arrive Monday afternoons is head toward the Homework Center. Although some would like to get out of it, they can't. Homework Assistance leader Raquel knows their teachers and the work they have to complete. They'd rather work on one of those shiny, colorful iMac computers staring at them from across the room. But they'd also have to get past Miss Collinus, the Learning Center director, and that won't happen until their homework is done.

The computers are fun. There are 30 different educational software programs to choose from. When they need help, Miss Collinus, Heather (one of our high school staff) and Jim, Neighborhood's project developer, are there to assist them. The kids refer to the software as games, but those "games" help them develop both basic educational skills and their computer skills.

Some of them have to shift gears now, because more kids and the Learning for Life staff are arriving. Soon students from Colorado University in Boulder and the University of Denver will join with community volunteers and Neighborhood staff to take kids through a creative skills development program involving reading and writing.

Tomorrow after school they'll experience the same thing, except Learning for Life will focus on building their math and science skills. Then Learning for Life repeats itself: literacy on Wednesday, math and science on Thursday. But Tuesday is slightly different, at least for the boys, because afterwards they attend Cub Scouts. Wednesday is different because after Learning for Life the kids go with Nancy and her staff to Harambee club, where they eat, play games, learn bible verses and hear stories about Jesus. And on Thursday Duan takes the 'Harambee Hoopers' to basketball practice.

On Friday afternoons, the kids take turns attending Internet Camp with Jim, exploring the internet world of personal e-mails, pen-pals around the world, homework assistance and other areas of interest. The rest will join the other staff, myself included, for an afternoon of plain old fun; perhaps visiting a museum or pet store or (if funds allow) an arcade, or simply playing games in the park across the street.

It doesn't end there. Some of the kids come to Jubilee's Sunday School and monthly Children's Church. They worship with us on Sunday mornings. Sometimes they even hear me preach!

Years ago we developed a diagram that we thought captured the essence of our ministry. We called it the Sphere of Influence. It's been so long ago I don't remember the exact drawing. But it looked to me like an incubator.

For every kid that enters the world of Neighborhood Ministries, we are an influence for good. Not every child embraces the good news of Jesus Christ, but all, through the programs and long-term relationships with staff and volunteers, fall under the influence of God's grace and mercy. Of course, some do find Christ. For them, Neighborhood takes on the added dimension of self-discovery and growth as they learn from their Creator who and why they are. Gradually over time, growth is tested and refined through practical servant/leadership opportunities, such as teaching, tutoring, community service or even running a summer day camp.

The world of Neighborhood Ministries, as I see it, is an incubator. It was built by God-given vision, principles and conviction. It is sustained by the prayers and support of God's people. Its panel walls are distinctly lined with a diversity of programs, through which caring people provide a constant flow of the love of God into the main chamber.

Inside are kids. They're going through the practical, harsh stuff of life, like growing, questioning, changing, hurting, crying, laughing, etc. They're experiencing life with its ups and downs, its fairness and injustice. But they're not alone. Many caring people have built relationships that together provide support structures for them. That's life in the incubator: people committed to dynamic relationships, walking with youth through life's circumstances over time, with the constant flow of the love of God in the air.

Looking back 35 years, I believe that kid with the trombone would have liked this incubator. Although he couldn't put it into words at the time, he knew deep down life was supposed to be more like this. He found it eventually - in a small chapel in Vienna, Austria, of all places - well past his childhood years. Thankfully, the children of our neighborhood don't have to wait so long.