

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

On building raptor cages and self-confidence

By Lee Burdette Williams

IT WAS AN INOCENT enough question. "What are you doing for the long weekend?" my friend asked. What was I doing? I was planning on feeling resentful for a good portion of it, because while my friend and many others had plans to enjoy the three-day weekend that marks the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I had signed on to serve as a site leader for a community service project as part of the MLK Challenge.

"Well," said my friend, trying to be helpful, "maybe it'll snow. The forecast says we could get a big storm." I smiled at the thought. Yes, maybe the MLK Challenge will be snowed out, and I'll get to stay home in front of the fire with a good book.

It was a noble idea, this Challenge: celebrate the holiday in a way consistent with King's vision of doing good for others. One of the students in my Fall semester class had mentioned that we

could all sign up as a group to do a project together. I pointed out that the Fall semester would be over by the time this event came around. And I was skeptical that anyone would participate in a class project after the class was over (and grades were submitted). "Who thinks they would do this? And be honest, OK?" I asked them.

All but one (who was about to graduate) raised their hands. I remained skeptical. "OK. I'm going to send around the sign-up list, and only put your name

down if you really want to do this." Eleven names appeared on the list by the time it came back to me. "All right, then. I'll see you all on January 17th."

As a site leader, I had to attend a pre-Challenge meeting, during which we were told about the planned projects. Some of them sounded great (and manageable):

make meals for the families of hospice clients. We could do that. Raise money to buy animal food for the Humane Society shelter. Sure. Paint the waiting lounge in a local hospital. Yep. Some projects sounded not a little intimidating: build a medal stand for the Special Olympics competition. Put together a thirty-foot "raptor cage" for a local wildlife refuge.

Jenny, the community service coordinator, went through the list and shared each project with her typical unflagging enthusiasm. Whenever I or another site leader would ask a question

like "So raise money how?" or "Build a raptor cage how?" Jenny would simply say, "It's all part of the Challenge." But after more questions she would eventually come clean with some vital details: "They'll provide the paint and ladders" or "The raptor cage comes in a kit."

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The whole raptor thing—that definitely was not going to be my project. Raptors, as far as I knew, were the killers in *Jurassic Park*, and building a cage big enough for them or their descendants, outside in January, high on Beech Mountain, was not what I was going to be doing, especially when Jenny said it would require a lot of building experience and power tools. Instead, I envisioned my class all gathered in my kitchen churning out lasagna and cream cheese brownies. Now *that* sounded great.

The way it would work that morning, Jenny explained, was that only the site leaders would know about the projects until the teams were all sorted. At that time, site leaders would share a sheet of paper with the twelve projects listed, and the group would have to quickly decide what project they wanted and send a representative to the front of the room to claim a project.

This all sounded reasonable. My class members had all been to my house and, given how cold it is here in January, would probably jump at the chance to enjoy a day gathered around a fire cutting vegetables.

I'm sure you can see where this is all going.

NOT A SINGLE MEMBER of my class showed up that morning. I was assigned to a group of students I had never seen before: eight women, one man. They looked at me the way a patient looks at a surgeon just before the anesthesia mask goes on.

"Hi, everyone," I said, with more conviction than I felt. "This is gonna be great."

No one replied. We did quick introductions while we waited for the other groups to assemble, and finally Jenny moved to the microphone where she began to list the possible projects groups could choose. I tried to read their faces, but they were, at that moment, looking slightly anesthetized. Jenny completed her list, and before I could utter a word, Chad, the one male in our group, said to no one in particular, "How about that raptor cage . . . that sounds great, whaddya say we do that, I think that'd be so cool, let's do that, OK? OK I'm going to go claim it as ours." Before any of us could reply, he ran to the front of the room.

The others in the group stared at me as though we had just undergone a group mugging. Jenny's voice

came over the mike. "OK. Group six has the raptor cage project at Genesis Wildlife Sanctuary." We sat there, stunned.

Chad returned and was oblivious to the panic quickly rising within the group. "So," I said, trying to salvage the moment, the day, "Does anyone here have any experience building something pretty big like this raptor cage?" No response. "Anyone ever build anything at all?" Nothing, even from Chad, who at that moment reminded me of a slobbering golden retriever who has thoughtfully deposited a groundhog carcass at its owner's feet.

"This'll be so cool," he said again. No one responded.

"Um . . . Chad?" I asked. "Have you worked with power tools much?"

"No, but I watched my grandfather a few times."

"Build a big structure?"

"A birdhouse. I think it was for purple martins."

One of the other site leaders stopped at our table.

"You guys are building the raptor cage? Good luck. That's gonna be really hard."

"Thanks, Bob," I said, smiling through tight lips. "That's so supportive of you." Jerk.

We climbed into the van with directions to the sanctuary and made a stop at my house to collect some tools. I grabbed all the hammers and handsaws in my garage, along with goggles, work gloves, a circular saw, a power drill, and a tape measure. Half an hour later we were on Beech Mountain, meeting the staff member who was to show us where the raptor cage kit awaited us. Behind her, a large but timid dog eyed us suspiciously.

"Oh—actually," she said, "I don't think you'll be doing that. The kit hasn't been delivered." My heart rate slowed a bit to a more normal rhythm. "We need you to build some raptor boxes." Heart rate up. "Let me show you the ones we need to replace. They're these over here." They were smallish boxes, maybe 3 × 3 × 2, open in the front and on the bottom, with a stick perch across them, that hung on a wall in a large caged area. Heart rate down. Maybe we could manage this.

The sanctuary had a pile of various-sized lumber for the project, and because we were replacing the old, rotting boxes with similar-sized new ones, we pulled the old ones off the walls and measured them. Several of the

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students started to sort through the lumber to find right-sized pieces. Two other students set up some saw horses. Chad stood nearby with a handsaw, being supremely confident and remarkably unhelpful—an amazing golden retriever impersonation, actually.

After measuring the existing pieces, we started drawing lines on some large pieces of plywood, calculating how many box sides we could get. After our lines were drawn, it was time to fire up the circular saw. Several years ago, I had the brilliant idea to replace the floor in our living room with wide pine planks, and my husband and I spent our Christmas vacation in the company of this saw, so I was quite intimate with it. I made a few cuts and produced our first box side, then turned to one of the students, Jill. "Here. You try." I gave a quick lesson in circular saw methods, explained about cutting with the grain, and handed her the goggles. After a tentative beginning, she managed to cut across the wood without incident.

Jill made a few more cuts, and then Corey asked to try. I suggested to Jill that she teach Corey, which she did. I stood by and watched, coming up with a title for an ACPA program: "Dismemberment in Community Service: A Psychosocial Approach." Or, of course, something with an acronym: "SLICE (Students Learning In Community Environments)." Or maybe, "Community Service: Blood, Sweat and Tears (But Mostly Blood)." I wondered about a new position for a student organization: Dismembership Chair.

But much to my happy astonishment, they handled the circular like pros, teaching each other while I stood nearby to catch the cut wood and insist on goggle use. A couple of the other women went out into the woods to find some appropriate-sized branches for perches, and two others carefully autopsied the old boxes to figure out exactly how they had been put together. "Look," Sarah showed me with satisfaction. "The sides aren't just nailed together. They have this piece that the sides are actually attached to. So we found some of this size wood." She held up several lengths of 2 × 2-inch wood. "This should work."

They learned about nails, too. The sanctuary's workshop had several types, and after some trial and error (and numerous bent nails), the students learned which ones were actually supposed to get hammered into wood. They learned that the heavier hammers, though harder to swing, made the nails go in much more quickly.

ONE BY ONE, the four raptor boxes were assembled. At one point, I stopped and looked around. Each woman was busily bent over some task. Chad was puttering around in the workshop, looking, I suspected, like his grandfather, except that he was wearing a Polartec jacket instead of a flannel shirt and suspenders. And I looked beyond the students into the woods. It was a spectacular day. The sky on Beech Mountain was azure blue, the snow around us on the ground a shimmering white. The resident dog watched contentedly from a corner of the yard, half hidden by a discarded Christmas tree. The sun had warmed the air to a comfortable temperature, and the students had shed their layers of outerwear as they worked.

After several hours, Corey went into the sanctuary office to find the staff member. She came out a moment later, her eyes wide with delight at the raptor boxes we had made. We had made! She showed us where in the outside cages to hang them (Chad's height and the power drill

were finally put to some use) and assured us that the injured owls, hawks, eagles, and other birds of prey that came for healing would find them quite comfortable.

We collected our tools, including the now-beloved circular saw, and climbed into the van. The same students who on the drive out to the mountain had been silent and scared did not stop talking as we made our way through the woods. In fact, they talked all the way back to campus, laughing and bragging about their new skills. "I can't wait to tell my brother what I did," one said. "He's a carpenter. He'll be so proud of me."

"Wait till I tell my mother I used a . . . what was it? A circular saw? She'll be shocked. I don't even like to start the lawn mower myself at home."

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"I wonder if Habitat for Humanity needs some circular saw babes. We should join them." Babes? In the rearview mirror I saw them all laugh loudly at each other. Even Chad had been forgiven at that point.

As we drove down the mountain, I asked myself, What lessons have I learned? These, I think:

- Don't make friends with the community service coordinator on your campus because you will regularly be enlisted for service projects.
- Make holidays sacred. Untouchable.
- Keep students away from power tools when you're the one responsible for them.

No. Wait. These:

- Make friends with the community service coordinator, who will always be happy to provide you with teachable moments.

- Remember what a holiday honoring Dr. King should be for.

- Give students, especially women, power tools; then stand back and watch their self-confidence grow before your very eyes.

And this, too: if you're going to go around telling students they need to "move beyond their comfort zone," which I do, you'd better be prepared to do the same yourself, which I wasn't—but I did.

As we crested the last high ridge of the Beech Mountain road, I looked briefly to the west. Dark storm clouds were gathering, soon to begin dumping what would be ten inches of snow on the High Country. A sparrow hawk above us glided in the ominous updraft caused by the dropping air pressure. In our van, though, at that moment, the radio was playing, the students were laughing and singing, and I was really glad the storm had held off and given me this most remarkable of days.



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