

Making a Difference Through 3Rs

THE STORY OF KIM BIXENSTINE AND WILLIE SWIFT

BY CARTER E. STRANG



Life's most urgent question is: What are you doing for others?"

— Martin Luther King Jr.

Participation in 3Rs can make a big difference in the lives of the students touched by it. It is a way to answer the question posed by Martin Luther King Jr.: What are you doing for others? One person that can answer that question is 3Rs volunteer Kim Bixenstine — Chief Compliance Officer, University Hospitals — who through 3Rs created a special mentor/mentee relationship with one of her 3Rs students.

As a 3Rs volunteer at Cleveland Early College HS (CEC) with one of the three Tucker Ellis 3Rs teams at the school, Kim came to know Willie Swift. Willie was a quiet, reserved CEC student who was in Kim's 3Rs class small group. As part of the introductory 3Rs lesson — which is entirely focused on career counseling — Kim passed out

her business card to Willie and the other students in her group, urging them to reach out to her anytime they had a need to talk, whether about school, careers, or personal issues.

Willie — who was from a single, disabled parent home in East Cleveland — had an interest in health care and saw this was a golden opportunity. To his credit, he took the initiative and reached out to Kim with questions about school, careers, and personal challenges he was facing.

Their communication did not stop when 3Rs was over. It continued all through high school and college and is still going strong, some 8 years later. During that time, Kim provided not only advice but provided references for summer internships and jobs, donated to his summer mission trips he took with his church, and was there for him at his graduations from high school and college. And she did so much more.

When Kim learned that Willie had decided to attend the University of Mt. Union in Alliance, Ohio and focus on health

Trustee — drove to East Cleveland and loaded up their car with Willie's belongings. Kim returned the next day and took Willie and his mother to Mt. Union. There, Kim and Willie moved everything into his dormitory, just as Kim had done for her own two sons years earlier. Hugging him good bye, Kim reminded Willie to keep in touch, which they did as his first semester unfolded.

Just after Thanksgiving of Willie's first year, his calls home were not being answered. Concerned, Willie called police to check on

his mother, who went to her apartment and found she had died. Willie contacted Kim upon learning the terrible news and Kim offered consolation and support which Willie found extremely helpful, noting that Kim "really helped me process what I was going through." Devastated at the loss of his mother, Willie showed the tremendous resilience that Kim admired:

"His resilience in the face of his mother's death was amazing.

Ever since I met him, his strength in the face of adversity is one of the things that I have most admired about him. Many other college students would not have been able to handle it as well as he did. He not only rebounded quickly but finished college on time."

Following his mother's death, Willie reached out to Kim for advice regarding some financial and family issues. She counseled him to take the opportunity to reconnect with his father, which he did. Willie and his father have stayed in touch since.



care, Kim set up a lunch with Willie with a young graduate of Mt. Union who worked for Kim at UH. It was during that lunch that Kim learned that Willie had no one to take him to college. His mother was unable to drive, his father had been out of the picture for years, and no other family members or friends made themselves available.

Upon hearing of Willie's plight, Kim told Willie she would take him to school. So, the day before his move Kim and her husband Bart — a Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Foundation

She also had Willie come to her home when he was in Cleveland for holiday break. Over the years, when he returned to Cleveland, she took him on various outings, such as to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame with her sons who were also home visiting, and to the Hanna Theater for a play.

This spring Willie graduated from Mt. Union, the first in his family to graduate from college. Kim and Bart were there as Willie's guests.

Reflecting back on Willie's successful maturation from a young quiet high school student to a confident college graduate, Kim said:

"At graduation one of the Mt. Union administrators told us that Willie had become one of the leaders at the school. As I saw Willie walk across the stage to receive his diploma, I reflected back and marveled at what he had accomplished. I was so proud of how he had developed into such a self-confident young man recognized for his leadership abilities. Willie did the work, not me; however, I am glad he gave me the opportunity to mentor him along the way."

On her experience as a 3Rs volunteer, Kim states: "I thank the CMBA 3Rs program and Tucker Ellis for giving me the opportunity to work with Willie and the other students at CEC. If you truly want to make a difference in a student's life, start by becoming a 3Rs volunteer and consider mentoring 3Rs students who request your help."

Willie will be mentoring struggling students in Orlando, Florida this year as an AmeriCorps City Year member. Thereafter, he plans on returning to college to obtain a Master of Public Health degree.

Reflecting back on Kim's mentoring, Willie said:

"Kim certainly made a big difference in my life. She helped me successfully address challenges I have faced, and I appreciate all she has done to help me along the way. I encourage other attorneys to volunteer for 3Rs and to take the time to mentor students. It is a great way to positively impact the lives of young people."



Carter E. Strang is a partner with Tucker Ellis where he created and coordinates its award-winning Pipeline Diversity Program, which includes his firm's partnership with Cleveland Early College HS. Carter is a 3Rs volunteer (11 yrs), 3Rs curriculum author, past 3Rs Committee Chair and current committee member, past CMBA president, and a current CMBF trustee. He can be reached at (216) 696-3956 or carter.strang@tuckerellis.com.

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