

young servants sent out

50 Teens go to Panama



Pastor Bert Almazan of CC Panama addresses the youth, who served with the church and other local ministries.

Story by Debra Smith
Photos by Daniel Beltran

Kristen Ramirez hesitated. The little girl had asked her, in Spanish, to blow up her balloon. “She had been playing with it for hours,” Kristen said, “and it was covered in slobber.” Sixteen-year-old Kristen and her teammates from Calvary Chapel High School (CCHS) in Costa Mesa, CA, were in Curundu—a violent and gang-ridden neighborhood of Panama City. They were inside a safe-house run by a Christian ministry; but still, Kristen said, “The kids weren’t clean. A lot of their parents are on drugs, so they aren’t well cared for. Of course we’re taught, as Americans, to avoid germs, so I didn’t know what to do.”



Kristen Ramirez



Cortney Kesterson, a 17-year-old senior at Calvary Chapel High School in Costa Mesa, CA, gives a boy a horseback ride during the school’s February mission trip to Panama.

But suddenly, Kristen knew how to respond. “I had this mental picture of Jesus saying, ‘Let the little children come to Me,’” she recalled, “and I realized I didn’t want to hold back from doing anything I could to bless someone else.” Kristen took the balloon and blew it up; soon a teammate, she said, held a young girl who had lice. “It was neat to see people taking that attitude, realizing that God is greater than any illness—and that loving others is more important than protecting yourself,” she commented.

In February, 50 teens from CCHS and 15 adults traveled to Panama for nine days. Their mission included construction, hospital visitations, children’s ministry, a women’s tea, and an evangelistic skateboard demonstration. CCHS Superintendent Jay Henry explained, “We did a variety of ministries so everyone had opportunity to use the talents God has given them. It’s our responsibility to train the students to use those gifts for God.” The team’s tour book instructed, “Watch for ways to serve. Let your words, face, and body language be shining reflections of Jesus.”

Reaching Kids with CC Panama

Calvary Chapel Panama was planted in 2008 by Bert and Veronica Almazan, who were sent by CC Costa Mesa and CC Beachside, CA. The church meets 45 minutes southwest of Panama City in La Chorrera, the nation’s second-largest city. During the CCHS team’s visit, CC Panama held a special outdoor service in Los Mortales, a neighboring community where the believers regularly lead Bible studies. Afterward Pastor Bert baptized 17 new believers, and the team sponsored a children’s festival involving games, archery, music, and puppet shows.

The afternoon included one unscheduled activity for the youngsters from the church and community. “I was sitting painting kids’ faces, and my friend Amy rode by on a horse,” said 17-year-old Cortney Kesterson. “We were in a field bordered by others, and Amy explained that the neighbor said we could ride his horses. I got to help about 10 kids who wanted pony rides but weren’t big enough to control the horse themselves.” One of the boys she assisted had Down syndrome. “He was about seven, and at first he was scared—but then he liked it,” she said. The team ended the festival with several



Pastor Bert hugs one of 17 new believers he baptized in a river in Los Mortales during the team’s visit.



Children perform hand motions to a song at a festival the teens hosted in Los Mortales with CC Panama.

wordless skits, and a Spanish believer presented the Gospel to the 150 children and many of their parents. Several raised their hands to accept Christ’s forgiveness.

Serving the Church

CC Panama recently bought a house to convert into a church building. In the meantime, explained team member Josh DeRuyter, “The people met in the living room, which was so small some had to stand outside.” The group’s young men renovated the structure on Tuesday, knocking out walls to double the space and laying a concrete slab so people

could sit and listen outside. The day was hot and sunny, and without concrete mixers, the teens did everything by hand. “When a wind picked up in the afternoon, we were so thankful,” recalled 17-year-old Josh. During the construction, “People were constantly offering to help each other. Everyone had such a servant’s heart,” he added. “We prayed together a lot before the trip, and I think that helped prepare people and get them ready to serve.” When the project was finished the next day, “It was so gratifying to see church kids running around playing on smooth ground instead of sharp gravel,” Josh said.

A Heart for Women

On Tuesday evening, the team hosted a formal tea at a banquet hall for the ladies of CC Panama. “We wanted to provide an extra luxury that they wouldn’t normally get, so the women would feel blessed and loved,” explained trip coordinator Rachel Yardley. At the event, the teens were instructed, “You may be asked to clean, hold a baby, change a diaper, mop the floor. ... Come with a willing heart and loving attitude.” Before the tea, team member Jordan Gripenwaldt, adult chaperone Sarah Yardley, and Kristen—whose Hispanic background enabled her to speak fluent Spanish—walked to the nearby market to invite others.

“It was dark, and we got rejected several times,” Kristen said. “I was discouraged, but I noticed Sarah persevering, so I kept going.” The girls approached three older women, two of whom said they had other plans. “But one lady looked at me, almost staring, and said she wanted to come,” Kristen recalled. “Her name was Marisol, and she seemed

really excited.” During the tea, Kristen was busy serving and didn’t see Marisol. The presentation concluded with a testimony from Kristen’s mother, Laura Ramirez. Laura shared how, as she had prayed and trusted the Lord, God had transformed Kristen’s father from an alcoholic into a man of God. Afterward there was an invitation to follow Christ, and Kristen saw Marisol walk forward. Kristen said, “I went and gave her a Bible, and she had so much joy on her face. She looked revolutionized by the power of God. She said, ‘To think that you could have walked by me on the street, but instead, my life has been changed by this day.’”

Skating for Jesus

On Thursday, the teens helped host an outreach featuring four pro skateboarders. The event, which was held in a large Panama City mall parking lot, was sponsored in partnership with a ministry called Movement. Prior to the trip, coordinators had shipped Bibles to Panama for the team to distribute to attendees. However, recalled CCHS Superintendent Jay Henry, “As skate night approached, we had no material. It was held up in customs.” Then, he explained, “Just 20 minutes beforehand, the supplies showed up. It was neat for the youth to see that miracle of God’s provision.”



After a day of ministry, young men pray together for the nation of Panama.



Pro skater Zac Archuleta of Newport Beach, CA, jumps over volunteers during an outreach in the MultiPlaza mall parking lot in Panama City. The youth team hosted the event, which attracted more than 500 people, in conjunction with a U.S.-based ministry called Movement.



Panama is at the southern tip of Central America.

Visiting the Sick

The team visited two hospitals on Monday, individually talking and praying with patients at one facility and performing a children’s program at the other. As teammates gave kids goody bags before the presentation, Kristen approached a mother and her blind son. “I was hesitant,” Kristen said, “because the boy couldn’t see me walking over, and I didn’t want to scare him. Also, I wasn’t sure how to relate.” But Kristen introduced herself, and she soon learned that the woman was a Christian. “She looked really weary,” Kristen said. “She had been seeking help for her son’s eyes for a long time. I offered to pray with her, and it was neat. I didn’t see an immediate change, but I intervened for her before the King of the universe—and that’s special.”

As the teens departed, they noticed two middle-aged women crying in the waiting room. When Kristen asked what was wrong, “They broke down,” she said. “They were sisters, and they were distressed because their mother was very ill. We had exactly two extra Bibles, so we gave them to the ladies and showed them 1 Peter 1:4-6, about being refined through trials. They were really encouraged, and we saw them reading the Bibles as we walked away.”

Trust in the LORD forever, for in YAH, the LORD, is everlasting strength.
Isaiah 26:4

Calvary Chapel High School
www.cceagles.org
jayhenry@calvarychapel.com
714-662-7485