

The

encounter

Story

encounter

The Meeting

It was a meeting I will never forget. It was one of those rare times when I realized that what I was involved in was taking on a life of its own. I don't want to over sensationalize it, but I know I'll never forget it.

It was a "normal" monthly area youth pastors meeting. We had been meeting since January of 2000 to plan events for the area. We also became a sort of therapy group because so many youth pastors feel so alone, separated from peer relationships. I had a desire to bring some of those connections together.

I sometimes wonder how many ministries begin with a line similar to the one I remember from the meeting. We had decided to take a little time from our event plans and talk about general youth issues. We discussed the normal realm of topics pertinent to youth workers. Then, someone, I honestly cannot remember who it was, said "Wouldn't it be great if we could open up an indoor skateboarding park?" That was all it took. Ideas started being thrown around so fast, I couldn't keep up. "We could do this!" "We could have this type of ministry." "What an incredible opportunity this would be." And so on, and so on. I can specifically remember the feeling of losing control of the meeting. Not to anyone specifically, just to the excitement of the moment. It was a great feeling. I suppose in a way, everyone was feeling the same.

One important thing to know about this group is that we were a group of young, energetic, naive youth ministers. I don't know if any of us had been involved in ministry for over five years. We truly felt that God could do anything. We hadn't been around long enough to know what the potential problems would be

in undertaking something of this size and scope. I mean starting with literally nothing. Not to mention the fact that we all came from different churches with different ideas and different denominational statements of faith. All we had was, "Wouldn't it be great if we could open up an indoor skateboarding park." I don't think anyone at that meeting ever brought up how much this may cost, or how in the world could we afford it, even after we bought it. We simply had a vision. We simply wanted to reach kids. We knew our area was in need of something. We knew that skateboarders had been neglected. They were told "Don't skate here, don't skate there. We won't give you a park, but don't skate anywhere. We felt that if we could give them a place to skate, all year long, we could win the right to be heard in some other important areas of their life.

Honestly, we didn't have a clue about what we were getting ourselves into. I guess there is no way we could have. Like I said, we were not at all experienced in the area of buying a building to start a ministry. We all felt we were in the place God wanted us to be, but this was different. We all were instantly thinking about something much larger. Much larger than anything that had been done in our area. This would be much larger than the collective skills and abilities of our group. It was definitely much larger than the collective resources of our group (BY FAR). Much larger than anything any of us had ever been involved in before.

I can also remember how I didn't want this meeting to end. Normally, after two hours of meeting together, we are all ready to be done. Not this meeting. The time seemed to literally fly by. I know we went much longer than our "official" meeting time. We could have talked about this all day. I think we sensed

that this topic, this vision, this whatever it was needed our attention. Well, even if it didn't NEED our attention, our attention sure needed it.

Our next meeting was not scheduled for another month. That just would not work. We needed to meet sooner. Much sooner. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe we should just quit our respective churches and ministries, and just do this thing. OK, perhaps we weren't feeling that impulsive, but I know similar thoughts were running through our heads at that time. We decided that we would begin meeting every week. Same day – Tuesday, same time – noon. As you know, youth pastors never pass up an opportunity to eat. Especially, if someone else is paying for it.

I also remember the feeling as people started to leave that day. It wasn't like the end of a meeting. This was different. We all were different. Something changed inside of each of us. In some strange way, we had been given a vision. It came to us collectively. And yet, it came to us clearly. We no longer were individual people working at our individual churches and ministries. We had become one. We had received a gift from God. He united us that day, not to the extent he would later unite us, but none the less, we were one.

Sometimes you get home from work and your spouse asks you "How was work today honey?" I know I could not have done that question justice. That day work was not work. Now, most days doing what I do, it isn't work. But, that day was different. It was one of those "life in ministry" defining moments that you simply cannot forget. I don't ever want to forget. Isn't it funny how a simple question "Wouldn't it be great if we could open up an indoor skateboarding park?" could begin something so incredible? Well, on

that Tuesday at noon, it began something truly unique.

The Building

We started meeting weekly. The group of us who met seemed to develop a definite pattern. There was the consistent core of us who were there every week, with the additional few who would come occasionally. As we began to meet and discuss this potential ministry, it was always clear that we would need a very large building. To have a successful indoor skateboarding park, you simply need a lot of space. As the conversations continued, we began to think of other opportunities that could arise if the right facility were available. We discussed a gym, where we could minister to a completely different type of young person, or young people group. We thought it would be great to have an area that kids could just hang out. More like a drop-in center, with couches and a relaxed atmosphere. We also talked about how powerful a draw music is to this generation. If we could have a facility that had a type of venue option, it would be beneficial.

These times of meeting and planning were going very well. We were not only getting many ideas thrown around, but we were building key relationships of trust. Don't get me wrong, we did have our differences and even disagreements, but overall, the group was remaining very positive. The feeling of camaraderie and unity was very apparent. We were on a mission. I don't know if any of us truthfully felt that we were capable of doing this, but it was far too exciting to stop.

The further we got into our plans, etc, the more we realized we would need to start getting specific with our desires for a building. So, we put together a diagram (floor plan) of what our "ideal" space would

look like. We had one huge room, with a skate park, gym, lounge area and small venue area. I believe it was approximately 30,000 square feet. We decided to put down our ideal space, and even if it didn't happen to this degree, at least we knew what we were looking for. It was very exciting to see something on paper. In some ways, it made it more genuine.

The obvious next step was to begin looking at potential "real estate." Again, I don't think any of us had ever purchased commercial property before. In fact, most of us had probably never purchased any piece of land before. One thing is for sure, Head of the Lakes Youth for Christ had never owned real estate before. Anything would be a tremendous step up from our 15 x 15 office we were renting. We began the process of looking for a huge building. We started in the Canal Park area of Duluth. This is the most popular tourist area, and an incredibly popular place all summer long. It is also one of the most expensive areas in town. We just thought we needed to be in a very accessible area.

We started driving around looking for "For Sale" or "For Rent" signs on big buildings. The first building we looked at was the Grand Slam Adventure World building. Grand Slam was a 30,000 square foot building that had been a kids indoor fun park. They currently had many of the things we were looking for in a building. We thought this might be an ideal spot. We talked to the owner and found out he had been leasing the space. He also told us what the owner was going to want to sell the building for. It was over 1 million dollars. Well, that wasn't the biggest concern, because we knew God could do anything, so we just said we would like to talk to the owner sometime. He said he would get us in touch with him, so we left, thinking this may just be the place. It's interesting,

because we would never actually hear from the owner.

We decided to continue looking if perchance Grand Slam didn't work out. We looked at a huge building (50,000 square feet) right next to Grand Slam that had been vacant for quite a few years. We heard they were also interested in either selling or leasing the space. We never got a chance to be inside the building, they leased it before we could get in.

We also took a tour inside a building in the west side of town, the old North Star Ford building. It was a extensive space, but not ideal for what we were looking for. We found out later that they had also sold it by the time we were looking.

At this point, we were beginning to question whether or not God wanted us to really have this skateboarding ministry. I mean come on, we had been looking now for a month or so, and everything was falling in. We didn't get overly frustrated, although I know we were questioning where we would go next.

One Sunday morning, one of the youth pastors in our group, Nate Johnson, was in his church, Fredenberg Community Church. He noticed that the mayor of Duluth, Gary Doty, was in church that morning. Nate took the opportunity to talk with him after church, and tell him about what our group was trying to do. Now, this was one of those moments you just cannot explain. When Nate started to describe our vision, to have a ministry that could be a skateboarding park, gym, lounge, etc, Gary said he instantly knew the building that Nate was talking about. In fact he said to Nate – "I know the building." "It's the Shriner's Auditorium on 1st Street."

Later, Gary told us the unfortunate reason he was in Fredenberg Community Church that Sunday morning. He and his family had become friends with

another family who they were having a business partnership with. The new family wanted to try out a new church and asked mayor Doty if his family would go with him to Fredenberg Community Church. Gary said OK, and they went together. Gary hadn't been to that church in over 25 years. Further, this business partnership went very bad. In fact, Gary, Marcia (Gary's wife) and their children ended up losing over \$25,000.00 in this business partnership. Although, if they hadn't been in that church on that Sunday morning, we may not have looked at the Shriner's auditorium.

As Gary and Nate continued talking, Gary asked Nate if he and the group would like to take a tour of the building. Of course the answer was a resounding "YES." Gary set up the tour with the Shriner's for our group. We would come to find out later that the building was not "officially" for sale, but they had tried, unsuccessfully, to sell the building years earlier. That week the tour was set up, and about 8 of us were excited to see this mystery building that none of us had ever been inside before.

The Tour

The first time walking into the building was again one of those occasions we will never forget. We walked up the stairs from the Avenue entrance, and into the auditorium. Upon entering this huge, beautiful, old auditorium, our jaws dropped. IT WAS HUGE! It had 30+ foot high ceilings. It could seat 1000 people if you set up chairs on the main floor. It had beautiful hard wood floors, it was the size of a high school gymnasium, it had a balcony that went around the perimeter, for spectators, etc, it was unbelievable. I had lived in Duluth my entire life, and had never known a building like this existed. I must have driven by this building hundreds of times and never realized what I was driving by. Just this room alone was enough for us to be speechless. I remember thinking "You have to be kidding! We could never own a place like this. The possibilities are literally ENDLESS." In some ways, this was the most exciting room I had ever walked into. This was it. If there was any way we could get our hands on this building, we wanted it. The looking was over.

The funny thing was, that wasn't the end of the tour. Not even close to the end. Around the edges of the auditorium were rooms. Lots of rooms. Both on the main floor and on the balcony level, there were more rooms than we could count. Big rooms, small rooms, offices, apartment style rooms, lounges, work rooms, mail rooms a kitchen & more. We couldn't believe it. This place was amazing. We could have game rooms, offices, fitness rooms, computer labs, conference rooms, counseling rooms, movie rooms, art rooms & any number of different things. We could reach out to a tremendous number of different youth

culture groups in this one building. We had seen the top 2 floors of this amazing structure. We didn't realize that this was only about half of the building.

The representative from the Shrine organization, Dudley, asked if we were ready to go downstairs. Downstairs? There's more? Ok, we were "ready." They took us down into what they told us was the garage. This is the place where he said they stored and worked on their little cars. We walked into another huge L-shaped space. It had 15+ foot ceilings. A thought came to us – "Our skateboarding park." This 10,000 square foot space could, with some work, become our skateboarding park. It had a good atmosphere for a park. It wasn't too neat or clean, which only adds to the appeal for skaters. It felt like a warehouse/garage. Now we were completely amazed. That one building could have everything and more that we had envisioned for the "ideal" youth center. We had the gym, the auditorium, lounge rooms, game rooms & a skate park. But, the tour wasn't over yet.

Dudley then showed us a room adjacent to the skate park, called the Red Fez lounge. It was a thoroughly finished bar/lounge. It was complete with a fire place, dance floor and bar. We thought, this could be a coffee house. We could serve coffee drinks, have local bands in for concerts and really build great relationships with kids. Now we were completely taken back. This building was better suited than any other building we had previously looked at. It was laid out so well for our needs. We could minister to 5 or 6 different groups of kids at one time, all in the same building.

I'm not sure if we showed it, but I know we were giddy with excitement. I know at most real estate deals, you probably shouldn't show how unbelievable

you think their property is, but we couldn't help it. This building was remarkable. The ministry that we could foresee happening out of this building was astonishing. I think we would have signed a contract right there, if they would have let us. I know we did not expect to see what we saw that day. I know we were not ready to be blown away in the way we were. I don't think any of us wanted to leave the building. We wanted to just stay and "hang-out" for the rest of the day. We asked Dudley what the next step was. He told us we needed to submit a preliminary offer to purchase. They would look it over, and get back to us. Ok, the fun had really begun. The tour was over, but the excitement had just started.

The Offer

There were some very important decisions that we now needed to make. First, were we ready to move forward with this vision? Then, how much should we offer? Finally, who would actually purchase the building?

There was something very real about this building. Maybe it was the fact that it was perfect, beyond ideal for what we wanted to do. Or maybe it was that we had talked to an actual owner, and they were willing to continue. For whatever reason, this was moving from the vision stage, to something that could indeed happen.

At our next weekly meeting, it took us all of 5 minutes to decide that YES, we wanted to continue to move forward. If God had led us this far, we needed to at least continue in the process. Plus, after seeing a building like this, no one was ready to quit now. So, with some fear I'm sure, we decided that we would continue. I think that decision had been made after the first minute of being inside the building.

As far as the offer goes, we really didn't have a clue. All the buildings we had looked at thus far were over \$1,000,000 pieces of real estate. This building was bigger than some, but it was more suitable for our needs than the rest. As I've said, money was not the issue for our continuing down this path. These buildings could have really been priced at ten million dollars, we didn't care, mostly because we didn't have any money anyway!

We found out from Gary, that a few years back they were trying to sell their building for approximately \$250,000.00. The real estate market had increased

substantially since then, some property's even doubling in value.

We talked to Dudley, and discussed a few options. They were only interested in a cash sale, although an offer that included some time on both of our parts would be good for them. They had been in the building for 100+ years, so they needed some time to get everything out. Think about it, a fraternal (all male) organization living in one HUGE building for 100+ years. What a recipe for pack-rats! He thought that an offer of around \$350,000.00 might be enough to convince the membership to sell. How the Shriner's organization works is this – they would need to approve the sale with their governing board first, then they would bring that to the entire membership for a majority vote.

We took this information back and begun a discussion of how we could justify a purchase like this. I remember a meeting a month or so before we even took the tour. One of the youth pastors who was with us only for a short time, Brian Bustrak, made a statement that clearly impacted the way we looked at things. He said "Don't ever let the money, either too much or too little, determine your course of action. Let the vision carry you." What a great statement. It really boils down to faith. We needed to trust that if this were part of God's plan, He would carry us. The amount of money we had or didn't have at that point, in reality didn't matter. What mattered was that we were following God's leading hand in our lives.

When we had toured the building, we saw many different items that would be valuable for the ministry that we had envisioned. They had tables & chairs in the auditorium. They had phenomenal kitchen equipment. And perhaps most importantly, they had the biggest disco ball we had ever seen. We

decided that if we could get all the items we desired from the building, then \$350,000.00 was a fair price. In addition, if we could have some time to raise the money, that would aid us immensely.

The final decision we needed to make was who would be the owners of the building. Would our group form our own non-profit, 501 (c) 3 organization? Would one of our churches retain ownership? Or, would Head of the Lakes Youth for Christ take that responsibility? We talked about all the options, both pros and cons. We resolved for a few key reasons to have Youth for Christ as the overseeing organization. First, it was an established, well-known organization. Also, it didn't tie any one specific church or denomination to the project. It seemed like a natural fit. At this point, the group recommended I become the quasi leader of the project.

After some informal negotiation/discussion with Dudley, we came up with this official offer. We agreed to purchase the building for \$350,000.00. We would need to give them \$25,000.00 earnest money in 60 days. Then on February 28th, 2002, we would need to show them, in writing, that we had either all the necessary cash, or available financing from a bank. Finally, we would close the deal and pay them all the cash on June 1st, 2002. Included in the building we all the tables, chairs, kitchen equipment and of course, the disco ball.

It's interesting to note that at the time that the board of directors of Head of the Lakes Youth for Christ voted to purchase the building, we had \$10.47 in our checking account, and no savings account!

The contract

Our purchase agreement had 3 distinct time sensitive aspects to it. 1) We needed to give the Shriner's \$25,000.00 in 60 days, beginning August 1st, 2001. 2) We needed to show them we had cash or available financing on February 28th, 2002. 3) We needed to give them all the money on June 1st, 2002.

I remember the night that the Shriner's had the membership vote for the sale of the building. Dudley had mentioned that he was not convinced if it would pass. He was very optimistic about our group purchasing the building, but many Shriner's did not desire to sell. This was their home for over 100 years. Our group had organized a prayer meeting during the time we knew they were going to vote. It was a great time of praying, sharing, reading scripture, etc. There was a lot of anticipation in the room, waiting for the call. We were all thinking, "I wonder if they are going to vote to sell." At one point I can remember feeling something gratifying. I felt that the control of this vote was somehow out of the Shriner's hands. I thought that if God wanted this to happen, there was nothing that they could do to stop it. If God truly desired for us to have this building to minister to kids, then it would transpire. The phone never rang. It seemed as if hours and hours had passed and it never rang. Some people had to go home. We were now a couple hours into their meeting and we hadn't heard anything. The anticipation and anxiety was rising. We felt confident that we simply needed to continue praying.

Then, the phone rang. It was Dudley. I answered the phone. Every eye was on me, watching to see my response. Just like a good poker player, I didn't let anyone know what the verdict was. Although

inside I was jumping. I asked Dudley to hold for a minute so I could let everyone know. I addressed the group. "Well, I guess it just wasn't meant to be." Everyone looked at me in disbelief. "JUST KIDDING!" "They voted to sell." The room started cheering. The Shriners voted to sell us the building. I finished with Dudley and started the celebration. Not everyone in the room thought I was as funny as I did.

We now knew what we had to do. We had 60 days to raise \$25,000.00. Like I mentioned before, we were starting with nothing. But, as Brian Bustrak had said, "let the vision lead the process." We had never done a capitol fundraising plan before. We didn't have any major donors convincing us that they would give us a large sum. So, we sat down and came up with our plan.

We would begin a church tour, sharing the vision for this potential ministry and the needs involved. Since Mayor Doty's trip to Fredenberg Community Church that Sunday morning, he had become very involved in the process. So, when we told him our plan to visit churches and share this vision, he said he would be willing to come and present with us. What a blessing, to have the Mayor of the city commit to aiding us share this vision.

We knew we had only 2 months to get to as many churches as possible. We started booking churches every Sunday, starting with the churches of the youth pastors who were so involved up to this point. It seemed churches were very interested in having us come and let their congregates know about what we were "attempting" to do. Some churches would even have special offerings that were dedicated to the project.

The response was mixed. Some people were excited about what we were doing. Some were very

pessimistic that it would happen. Some were cautious and had a lot of questions. We had the answers to some of them. Although this was new territory for us, and we were taking much of it day by day.

We had a few expenses early on – copying business plans, pictures, displays, etc. After the first 30 days we looked at what had come in for donations and what we had spent in minor expenses, and we were only at about a positive \$1,000. Half of our time was up, and we were nowhere near our goal.

There were many times in the process that anxiety prevailed. I'm aware that we are supposed to be "anxious for nothing," but that was very difficult for me. This was one of those times. I realized that our plan was not working. There just wasn't enough people giving large gifts and not enough time to get them. Something needed to change. Either we needed to win the lottery (pretty difficult without buying tickets) or God needed to change something. Well, God didn't need to change anything. I needed to change. I discovered that I was taking responsibility for the raising of these funds. I felt that if I presented at enough churches and presented well enough, that all the money would come in. If I did it, key word being "I" then we could achieve this. The truth was I needed to give up the responsibility of this project to God. This sounds very simple. In reality, it was not quite so easy. But, I was forced into giving up control of this likely ministry fully to God.

Once it got through my head, things began to change. Money began to come in. That second month was utterly different from the first. People started giving very generously and it began to look good.

At one point early on in the 60 day window, a curious thing happened. We had some students who had given some of their personal money, some of

them very sacrificially. One student even gave \$1,000 towards the project. The interesting thing was at one point, people who were under 18 years of age had given more financially than people who were over 18 years of age. What a great statement. They wanted a place like this so desperately, they were willing to give their own money to see it happen.

Like I mentioned, it had started to look good for the \$25,000 first step. In fact, we were ready to make the down payment. Myself and our treasurer, Kevin Boreen, were getting ready to cut the check and bring it to the Shriners. That day, we met and Kevin said "Mark, I think we may have a problem." Through no fault of his, we had miscalculated the amount we had in our checking account, and we were about \$2,000 short of the \$25,000.

I told you that there were many opportunities for anxiety, well this was another one of them. What should we do? If we bring them the check, it could bounce. If we don't bring them the check today, the deal could in essence be off. I found out later, that there would have been a very good chance that the deal with the Shriners would have been off. Many of their members had regretted the sale of the building, and a new vote could easily have gone the other way. Well, I went to see Dudley, and brought him the check. As I gave him the check, I said "Dudley, would you please hold this until tomorrow morning, we've had a mix-up in our books and I want to get it figured out." He said that would be fine. I went home that night still having much anxiety to deal with.

When I got home that night, there was a letter on our kitchen table from my sister and brother-in-law. They had known about our project and had mailed us a check. Inside was a donation for \$1,000.00. Praise

God. In one check, half of the amount was covered that we were short.

For dinner that evening, we were going over to my wife Andrea's parents house. They knew about the project and were curious how it was coming along. I replied "It's coming along great, in fact we made the down payment today." My Father-in-law said "Good, here's a check for the next payment you need to make." He gave us a check for \$1,000.00. In a period of around 1 hour, we had the precise amount that we needed to cover the check to the Shriners.

We continued to go do different churches each Sunday sharing the vision and raising funds. I'm not sure the exact number of churches we visited during that time, but I'm sure it was around 25. Everything was going along well. We got into the new year and things were progressing nicely. February came and I remembered that we had another deadline coming up. On the 28th, we needed to show the Shriners that we had cash or available financing. We surely didn't have all the cash. I didn't know what to do. Mayor Doty recommended we go to a local bank where he had a connection. We had a meeting with the President of the bank, and explained our situation. We shared the vision and let him know exactly what we needed from him. A letter to the Shriners organization telling them that his bank will give us up to \$325,000.00 on or before June 1st, 2002. The President looked at our plans, and the people involved. Very simply and nonchalantly, he said "OK, I'll have someone type up a letter to the Shriners, saying just that." "You can pick it up in the next couple of days."

From what I understand about banks and bankers, that was not a normal way of doing things. We were blessed. That began a wonderful

relationship with the bank that has continued to this day.

Our first two obstacles were overcome. I think many people, even among our group, were surprised at HOW these two barriers were handled. So many times in this process we've realized that we did not have the capability to get certain things done. At every one of those times, something would work out to see that it happened. It is so reassuring to know that we have a God who takes care of us in our weaknesses. In fact, it seems He glories in our weaknesses. There have been numerous opportunities for His glory with us.

We continued to visit churches and give tours of the building. Things were continuing to go well. I think the Shriners were getting tired of us bringing people through the building. We seemed to give multiple tours each week. They were still occupying the building until the June 1st closing. As things were getting closer to the closing date, we set up a meeting between the Shriners, the bank and a title closing company.

We set a date of closing of June 4th. All the groups sent a representative to the closing. It should have been a fairly elementary process. The bank had already decided that they would give us whatever amount of money we needed. The Shriners had seen that we had followed all the necessary steps. Everything should be fairly uncomplicated and uneventful. Similar to many things in this process, this day would hold in store for us more things to remember.

As we looked over the paperwork for closing, Kevin, our Treasurer, noticed that there was no lien listed on the building. In other words, the bank was not taking collateral on the building for the loan. We

thought it was a mistake. We asked the bank representative about it, and he said that that is correct, the President decided to do that to save us a great deal of money in insurance, etc. If he could just keep the books open for 6 months and not put a mortgage on the property, it would help us out substantially.

Everyone at the table just looked around. We were all in shock. The title company didn't know what to do. They close deals comparable to this one hundreds of times a year, and they said they had NEVER seen this before. They said "We don't know what kind of relationship you have with this bank, but this is a gift." In the same meeting the Title company and the attorney that handled the purchase agreement both waived their fees.

The Name

As most of you know who have ever had the dubious responsibility of naming something, it is no fun. There is no perfect name for anything. We tried for a long time to arrive upon a name. The first name we came up with because we couldn't come up with anything was MPF. We needed something to put on our business plans, so we put that. MPF is short for Multi Purpose Facility. Quite creative huh? There was one point that we considered keeping MPF the name, because we could not agree on anything else.

Some of the other names we considered were The Road, The Summit, The Temple, 3-in-One, The Foundation, Pavalucci's, B-B Joel and others. We would vote and re-vote. We could never seem to make a decision.

Finally, it came down to two final candidates – "The Road" and "Encounter." We went with Encounter. Now that we've named it, the name has good meaning. We liked Encounter, because it keeps us focused on what our main purpose really is. Phil Staurseth put it this way, "We always want to be an Encounter, not an oasis." We are about people encountering God.

The First Few Days

After we closed on the sale, it was around 4:00pm. We decided that Dudley and I would meet down at the building and he could give me one last bit of instruction and a set of keys. We arrived at the building and we took a little tour and he gave me a basic idea of how things work. We then proceeded to stand outside the front door and talk. He gave me the keys and we thanked each other for the good working relationship. Then, I just stood there for a minute. It had happened. This crazy vision that innocently started with "Wouldn't it be great if we could open up an indoor skateboarding park" actually transpired. All the obstacles, all the anxiety, all the meetings, all the presentations, all the people, all the prayer, all the excitement had paid off. We had purchased the Shriners Auditorium. The "AAD Temple" as they called it. And now I sat there with the keys and title to this colossal building. Just myself sitting there with this immense structure in front of me. I remember it was an ominous feeling. I went inside. It was very quiet. Very dark. In some ways it was even eerie. With all the activity of the day, I now sat there by myself in this empty building. All the work of the last year brought us to this point. It happened.

Over the previous few days, I had forgotten that we had to move all the things from our small office as well as the many donations we had received over the past few months. We had skateboard ramps, arcade size video games, 150 sheets of plywood, not to mention all the items from our old site. I guess I was more worried about the closing, etc. The day

before we needed to be out of our office, Phil Staurseth, director of Covenant Park Bible Camp, called me and said "Mark, we are doing staff training tomorrow, do you have anything for us to help with." It worked out perfect. We had 15+ people there at 9:00am to help move. They came and moved EVERYTHING in about 5 hours. I'm not sure how we ever could have moved everything without them.

The Staff

Our group continued meeting weekly. The only difference was that now our "office" was much larger. We discussed everything from staff to ministry programs to funding to building renovations. We decided to find people who could oversee the five main ministries we envisioned.

The first area was the Skate Park. We hired Tia Conley to oversee and be the director of this part of the ministry. Tia was a very passionate, hard worker who had owned her own business for the previous 10 years. We felt very comfortable in giving her complete responsibility of this very key area. If we gave Tia a job, it would get done.

We put Phil Staurseth in charge of our Coffee House ministry. Phil was director of Covenant Park camp for the last 15 years and was very capable of overseeing this delicious ministry.

Erick Hermanson and Mary Harvey were going to take over the Venue (Music, concerts, etc) at the ministry. They were both in bands and loved to listen to and play music. They had a very strong passion to see a strong music ministry at the Encounter.

We put Kevin Greene in charge of our Game Room. He had spent far too much time in pool halls as a younger man. He also watched over the building and all us staff, seeing is he used to play football for the University of Minnesota Duluth Bulldogs. He also used to be a police officer. Just having Kevin around made us all feel a lot better!

With the help of others, I did a lot of work overseeing the gym. I would soon pass this responsibility on, but sports were a passion of mine. I had always had the desire to see a downtown sports ministry.

One necessary thing happened as we began to hire staff. Until this point, most decisions were made by our group of youth pastors who started this process. After we began hiring staff, we needed to make a decision about who these staff were working for. Were they working for this group of youth pastors, or for me, or for the YFC board? There was a strain about that issue. We decided that we needed to clear things up. The staff would work for me. Our youth pastors group would have to step back from the responsibility of overseeing this ministry. They could be advisors, but not decision-makers. This was a necessary thing for us to do. I will always be grateful to Rob West, Nate Johnson, Brian Bustrak, Joel Osterlund, Aaron Pust, Cathelene Nunn, Ben LaFreiner, Scott Robertstad and others who were a part of the process.

The Auditorium/Gymnasium

I got into the habit of looking through the newspaper want ads to see if there was anything useful for us. As most ministries, we were on a limited budget, so if we could save money by buying something used, we did it.

As I was looking through the paper, I noticed in the sporting goods section the following want ad. "For Sale by sealed bid – BPI portable basketball hoops." Well, I didn't know what sealed bid was, but I saw basketball hoops, so I called the number listed. I discovered that it was the University of Minnesota Duluth. They told me sealed bid is where anyone can send in a bid, and the highest bidder gets the item. They also told me that these hoops were less than 10 years old and cost \$10,000 each. I went out to look at them. They were perfect for our use. They were portable. One person could put them up and down and wheel them out of the way. With our gym/ auditorium having so many uses, we needed something we could easily put up and down. But, when you put them up, they were beautiful glass backboards, similar to NBA style. They were so expensive, because of their durability and portability.

Wow, the perfect basketball hoops for us. Durable and portable. Exactly what we needed. I knew it was imperative for us to send in a bid. Perhaps we should bid \$5000 or even \$10,000. These were a \$20,000 value and ideal for our situation.

I talked to the representative at UMD who was in charge of the sealed bid process. She told me she couldn't disclose how much she got bids in for, but she could tell me how many bids she received. That was fair. At least I would know how many individuals I

needed to out bid. I kept in contact with her over the few weeks of bidding. I decided not to send in a bid right away and just wait.

I called her on the last day that they would accept bids. By then she knew me well. She said "Mark, you're never going to believe what happened. We didn't get one bid on these hoops, and we decided we are going to donate them to the Encounter." I couldn't believe it. We had just received a gift of \$20,000 worth of basketball hoops. Anyone could have bid \$1 and taken them. Little did we know that these hoops would be played on nearly every day. That they would allow us to reach many people who needed Christ so badly. That basketball hoops would become absolutely vital to our ministry.

As we began to see the gym ministry unfold, we realized that we had these big beautiful chandeliers in our auditorium. Now basketball and antique lights to not go well together. We had them appraised by an antique dealer, who put their value at between \$1500 and \$5000 each. We had 6 lights. He also mentioned that lights like this are only worth what someone is willing to pay you for them. We didn't know anyone who wanted to pay us anything for them. Or even anyone with the faculty of getting them down from our ceiling.

One day Mayor Doty said he wanted to come through the building with a friend of his. So, the mayor, his friend and I started walking through the building. We were sharing the vision with him and he saw the lights. He inquired about their value. I told him the estimate we had received. He sat and looked at them for a minute and said "I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll give you \$30,000 for those chandeliers, and I'll have my company come in and take them down, and replace them with 6 new halogen gymnasium lights.

Then I'll rework any electrical work that needs to be done. And like I said, I'll give you \$30,000 to do it." Then he said "You can think about it if you want to." Now being a true Finn, it didn't take me more than 2-3 weeks to realize that was a good deal. He did it. He paid us \$30,000 and took care of everything else for nothing!

We also wanted to have a game room, adjacent to the gym. We considered buying or even leasing pool tables. They can get very expensive, especially if you want quality tables. We found out soon that we needed quality items, especially with the number of kids who would be using them.

As I looked again in the want ads of our local paper, I saw that someone was selling 8 pool tables. I inquired and found out there was a pool hall going out of business. We went down and looked at the pool tables. They were used but very good quality tables. We told the owner our situation. When he discovered we were a non-profit organization, he said he would sell us the tables and donate to us all the pool sticks, balls, tables, chairs, lights, posters and even some games including ping-pong and darts. We completely equipped our pool hall in one shot. And the price was comparable if we had purchased one new pool table.

We now had basketball hoops. We had gym lights. We had a game room. How often did we have needs, and no idea how those needs would be met. God met our needs.

The Skate Park

The area in the Encounter that needed the most renovation was the skateboarding park. We needed to remodel the Shriners garage into an extreme sports park. We had one professional skate park builder, recommend that we do not put a park in this space. He said it just wouldn't work. It had too strange of a shape and poles throughout the room. This same person would come back later and see the completed park in amazement.

The first thing we needed to do was to hire a park contractor. We had two estimates for professional companies to come in and build us a park from scratch. Both of the estimates were over \$100,000. We thought we could hire one person to be the general contractor, and utilize volunteer labor for the rest. Also, if the skaters themselves helped design and build the park, their ownership level would be greater.

At first we couldn't find a qualified contractor. We looked locally and even regionally, and everyone qualified was either working in some other job or building skate parks themselves.

One day, Tia, our skate park director, was in a local skateboard retail shop, just giving them flyers, etc. A younger man walked in that everyone obviously knew, and started talking. He said he had been in California the past couple of years, building skate ramps and skating every park in the state. Tia's ears perked up. She introduced herself, and asked Dan if he was interested in being the contractor for a local skate park. He said it was always his dream to see a quality indoor park in Duluth. He grew up here and skated anywhere he could find to skate. It was a great

match. He also had the next few months open. He hadn't taken a job in Duluth yet, even though he was a very qualified worker in his field.

We would come to find out that Dan was very detailed. He would never skip a step to get something done quickly. He was into quality. He wanted to build the best skate park in the upper midwest. He was also very connected to the skateboard community. He and his friends had built many ramps and skated some of the best parks in the country. He was very excited to take on this project, and we were very excited and blessed to have him on our team.

The first thing we needed to do was to take down a large 2nd level mezzanine in the skate park. This would open up a large amount of space for skating. This was a huge structure, with I-beams, and floor joists. We didn't realize how substantial this was until we got into taking it down. In addition, there were some concrete walls and rooms that needed to be taken down to completely open up the park.

We had decided that we would start demolition on a given Monday. On the previous Friday, I received a phone call from a contractor who had heard about the project. Jim Kampa called me and said "Mark, I have a couple of free weeks that my partner and I could volunteer some time, if you could use us." IF WE COULD USE YOU? It was perfect timing. We started on Monday. They came in with power tools, skills and knowledge of what we were trying to do. If they had not given their time, it may have been an unattainable project for us. This was going to take very skilled labor. We took down the entire mezzanine and concrete structures in the two weeks Jim had devoted to the project.

I remember one staff meeting. We were talking about some needs we had in the building. When we

had taken out the mezzanine there were some very large holes left in the wall of the skate park. We decided to pray that this need would be met. No more than 45 minutes after we had prayed, we received a knock at our back door. We opened it to find Jim Kampa waiting. He said, "I found this blue stone and mortar in my basement. If you help me carry it in, I'll patch those holes in the wall." He fixed the holes – prayer answered – again.

Jim and his partner also put in many, many hours and days over that summer. Without Jim's help, we would not have the skate park that we have. He helped make it possible.

After we removed everything that was unnecessary in the skate park, it was time to begin getting the space ready for construction. It needed to be cleaned up and painted. I remember a week or so before we wanted to begin painting, I received a phone call from a organization in Minneapolis call Hirschfields. They sell home building supplies. They said they had about 200 gallons of paint they would like to donate. We said "great" we're just starting to paint our huge new skate park.

Then shortly after that, I opened an email from a man who had volunteered at Youth for Christ about 6 months earlier. The email said "Hi Mark, I don't know if you knew this, but I'm a commercial painter, and I have a couple extra weeks right now, that I could help with some painting in your new building. Let me know if you have any projects you need painted." We had our paint and we had our painter.

It's interesting to note that our bids from the professional skate park builders to build our skate park were both over \$100,000. We ended up building the entire park, including all wood, other materials, labor & miscellaneous expenses for under \$30,000.

Isn't it curious that \$30,000 is the exact amount Mayor Doty's friend gave us for the chandeliers?

The First Year

We had remodeled all the essential areas of the Encounter. The Skate Park, the Gym, the Auditorium, the Game Room and the Coffee Bar were ready. We decided to open on November 15, 2002. Opening day at the skate park was packed. The anticipation of the park opening was the talk among skateboarders.

The ministry seemed to be developing into 3 distinct areas – The Skate Park, the Youth Center (Gym & Game Room) and the Venue (Concerts). We began to see three different types of youth participating in the three areas. The number of kids who were attending was growing on a weekly basis. By March of 2003, we were seeing over 800 kids per week. It was growing faster at times than we could handle.

I mentioned the skate park was busy from day one. In fact, we were beginning to run out of room for the skaters and those who like to watch skaters. We needed a place for more people in the park. The problem was that we had used up all the available space for the park itself.

One of the members of our board of directors, John Riihilouma, owns a major construction company. He had helped out many times before this with construction needs. He and his company came in and built us a beautiful observation deck directly adjacent to the skate park. They had to take down a major section of the wall. This 2,000 square foot deck oversees the entire park, and is perfect for watching, retail space and just relaxing. In actuality, this deck helped us with our goal of building relationships with kids. Because of the new area, more kids come to

the park and simply “hang out.” What a blessing to have John and his crew donate all the materials and labor for this \$10,000 viewing area.

We noticed another very distinct group of kids with tremendous needs. The kids who would come to the youth center, were mainly kids from the neighborhood. Our neighborhood is not the cleanest, nicest neighborhood in the city. In fact, there are a lot of problems in our neighborhood. We do feel, however, that is precisely why God chose to put us in this area. These kids who would come in were from some of the most unfortunate backgrounds of anyone we’d ever met. They came from families with drug problems, violence, no parental care, abuse of every kind and the list goes on. In addition, we realized most of them had horrible nutritional habits.

Many of the kids at the youth center would come in when we opened and stay until we closed. That could potentially be between 8 and 10 hours a day. We knew they didn’t eat during that time, and feared what happened at other times. We quickly identified our need for a food program. But how could we feed up to 800 kids per week?

We contacted our friend Mayor Doty again, who then contacted his friend in the food business. His friend’s name is Jenno Paulucci. Jenno happens to own a huge business in frozen foods. He told Jenno about our center and the kids. Jenno immediately said he would donate up to 1000 meals per week. All we needed to do was to call their plant on Wednesday with the number of meals we desired. Then we would pick up our frozen entrees on Friday. These were high protein frozen meals, perfect for these kids. Another blessing.

When June 4th, 2003 (our official one year anniversary) rolled around, we had a lot to celebrate. We had seen our first year come and go. We had

completely renovated $\frac{3}{4}$ of the building into an unbelievable youth center. We had the only indoor skate park north of the Twin Cities. We were seeing over 800 kids per week, after only being open for slightly over 6 months. We had avoided any major problems, and dealt with the small problems on a daily basis. It was a great first year.

The summer of 2003

There are many ways to explain what happened during the summer of 2003. We grew too quickly. We had never been down this road before. We had no model to go by. Maybe kids just wanted to be outside during the summer. For whatever the reason, it became a very difficult summer.

We thought that the huge number of kids we were seeing in the winter and spring would continue all summer. So, we continued to carry on with "business as usual" in terms of staff and spending, etc. In actuality, the number of kids who came in declined very quickly come summer. We got caught. As of the first of July, we were in a great deal of debt. We found ourselves in a place we had never been before. We owed more money to people than we had in the bank.

We decided to take some drastic measures. We "officially" laid-off all the workers. We couldn't incur any more expenses at this time. We completely stopped spending money on anything except essentials. We needed to focus completely on getting rid of this \$30,000 deficit.

The staff rallied. Most of them continued working even after being laid-off. We started thinking of any way we could to raise money to eliminate our debt. The staff started doing car washes, rummage sales and other fundraisers.

We sent out a letter to all of our donors explaining our situation. People responded. We received donation after donation to help us get through this time. I can honestly say that it was one of the greatest feelings to see people's donations and read their notes of encouragement to us. Some

people even personally brought their checks down to get the money to us quicker. It was a beautiful show of support.

We had a goal that we would completely eliminate the debt by the time we re-opened in September. We set a date of the 15th for our opening. On the 13th of September I looked at our payables and saw we were about \$5500 still in debt. We prayed and left it in God's hands. On the 14th of September I was opening mail and saw a letter from a large business owner in our area. I opened up the check – it was for \$5000! With the other checks we received that day, we completely eliminated all debt 1 day before we were to re-open for "business." This businessman was told about our ministry a few weeks earlier and had no idea of our financial situation. We opened on September 15th completely debt free.

As I look back on that time in the summer of 2003, I can truly thank God. So many positive things happened as a result of it. We learned some very important lessons. In addition we noticed that we had become more of a youth center rather than a youth ministry. Even though we had this amazing building, our focus needed to remain on being a ministry to youth. Also, we realized the need to have the entire staff focused on the vision. We were about Code RED (Relationship, Evangelism & Discipleship). We can and always will look back and thank God for his faithfulness, even in adversity.

The People

This ministry is all about people. If we existed solely to have many interesting and even exciting stories of how God provides for our needs, that wouldn't be the full story. We are about people "Encountering" God.

There have been many people who have come through the building and been impacted. One man was on a work crew at the Encounter for a week and said that he was so encouraged by the atmosphere here, that he and his family made a renewed commitment to their faith. They went back to church that Sunday and continued to focus more of their life on Christ.

The first two years easily saw over 40,000 people come through the doors of Encounter. Some of them are staff. Some are people simply taking a tour. The vast majority, however, are young people who need Christ. We know that this ministry has impacted thousands of people. In addition, we cannot always see what's going on inside the hearts of people. What we wanted to do, was to tell you a few stories of specific people. We hope this gives you a little taste of the impact of Encounter ministry. More accurately, a taste of the work God is doing in people's lives.

Patricia –

Patricia was a young lady who began coming almost immediately after we opened. She was a senior in High School. She was at a place in her life, like most of the youth we work with, where she was making some very poor decisions. She was drinking, doing drugs and partying. We began to spend time

building a relationship with her. She started asking questions about faith and Christ. One Friday night she came running to me. She was so excited. She had been talking that night with one of our female staff. She had made the decision to put her faith in Christ. She continued to come to Encounter. Her life did not instantly turn around. She still struggled with making good choices. We did see some great progress in her life, however. She kept the relationships with staff at Encounter and we worked with her through the good times and tough times. She is continuing to "live out" her faith. She is now attending church regularly.

Ray –

We started a ministry to "older" youth during the noon hour. We would open up the Encounter on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from noon until 2:00pm to play basketball. Most of the guys who came were between 18 and 25 years old. Many of them were from the neighborhood.

One guy who came consistently was Ray. He was the unofficial leader of this group. Ray is about 6'5" tall, 265 pounds and very intimidating. When Ray said "Let's play" everyone got up to play. It didn't take us long to see Ray's place in "noon ball."

Ray would tell us his story as we began to build a strong relationship with him. He had seen almost everything in life that a person could see. He was exposed to drugs, alcohol, sex and guns at a very young, pre-teen age. He was in and out of jail many times in his life. He began drug dealing early in life. His life was a sad story similar to far too many young people.

As strong and hard as Ray could appear to many, he had a soft spot in his heart. We could tell he had a big heart. As we got to know him better we

realized there was a lot more to this guy than drugs and violence.

We started to see some changes in Ray. He softened towards us. He began to make better choices in his life. We knew that God was doing a work in his life.

One day, Ray told us he wanted to help out with noon ball. He filled out an application for volunteers. One question on the application read "Why do you want to volunteer with Youth for Christ?" Ray responded "I want to give back for what I've gotten from the Encounter."

I sat down and interviewed Ray in my office. I asked him about his answer to that question. This big man, who is a leader among his peers, looked at me and started crying. He said, "Mark, you don't understand. When you first met me, I was going down a bad road. I was carrying a gun. And people were after me who were carrying guns. I know that I would be dead if it wasn't for the Encounter. This place changed my life"

Yeshim –

At Head of the Lakes Youth for Christ, we have different cities that we do ministry in. One of those cities is 20 miles north of Duluth. Chris Hedin is our area director in Two Harbors, Minnesota. Chris has many different programs to reach out to kids. One young lady he worked with had an interesting experience at Encounter.

Yeshim began coming to Two Harbor's Bible study in school. She was a foreign exchange student from Turkey. She was a senior who would be here only the one year. During the Bible study, she was invited to attend one of YFC's evening programs. She went and

had a great time. YFC in Two Harbors was having a lock-in at the Encounter. She decided to go.

Yeshim and her family are all Muslim. In fact over 90% of Turkey is Muslim. She told us that she wanted to learn about many different religions when she was here in America. She had no interest in becoming anything different, she merely wanted to experience different things.

At the Encounter we have many other ministries that use our building for their work. One of those ministries that meets at Encounter is led by a former missionary to Turkey. He stopped through that night to check on something. Somehow he and Yeshim made contact with each other. They started talking. Yeshim was very excited to find someone who had been to her home country. The discussion turned to faith. She had many questions about the differences between the Christian and Muslim faith. They decided to meet again and discuss it further.

Yeshim later talked about how she could feel herself changing during those months and weeks. It was as if she was seeing a different side of life. She said, "I could tell this was my destiny." This was why I came to America. T

They met within the next couple days to talk about things further. Yeshim described the time as very exciting. They talked for hours in her host family's home. Her host family was a wonderful, Christian family that also shared Christ with her through their love. After Yeshim had asked every question she had, Bob asked her, "Would you like to put your faith in Christ for salvation?" Yeshim said she couldn't even open her eyes. She was shaking and tears were coming down. She said, "I know this is what I need to do. This is why I came. It's my destiny."

Her and Bob prayed to receive Christ's free gift of salvation.

I met with her on the night before she went back to Turkey. I had the opportunity to ask her if she was nervous to go back. She said, "Mark, that is why God made me a strong woman. I am going back to my country to bring Christ to them."

Ray Spellerberg –

I mentioned that the majority of people who were impacted by the ministry of Encounter were young people. Although not everyone was a teenager. Ray and I had met when I was the manager of a retail golf store. We had a good business relationship, based mostly on golf equipment. When I left to begin in youth ministry, we would run into each other often. We talked about having coffee and eventually did.

Ray was in the media business and helped us out immensely with some promotional spots for our ministry. I knew Ray went to church, although I was not sure where he was in his personal walk with Christ. He would later tell me that he believed in God, but he had dodged the "Christ issue" his whole life. Perhaps it was too personal, too real.

As we began to start the Encounter process, I would let Ray know how things were going, etc. He told me he was afraid that we were going to fall. He felt we were jumping off a cliff, with no one to catch us. In one sense, he was right, we were jumping off a cliff. The difference is that we did have someone to catch us.

Ray had a co-worker who was also a Christian. He would share Christ with him often. Ray was beginning to see a change in his own heart. He was starting to change.

I got a call from Ray and he said he wanted to go out for lunch. We met at a very nice restaurant in town. He started to tell me his story. Christ was becoming very real to him. He told me that the "miracles" he saw happening at the Encounter had impacted him. He saw faith lived out in action and power. Then he told me how he had received Christ as his savior a couple weeks before. He wanted to thank me for just being a friend and sharing the stories of what God had done.

There are so many more people whose lives have been changed through this ministry. One of those people is me. I have been dramatically changed through this time. I have been so encouraged in my walk with Christ. I have been forced to my knees, often. I have celebrated God's mighty hand. I have been privileged to be a part of this work since the beginning. My faith has changed and been strengthened because of Encounter. I thank God that he allowed me to be a part of it.

Epilogue – My Story

How did I get involved at Youth for Christ and the Encounter project? My story begins in high school when I was making some bad life choices. I had grown up in a Christian home. I had accepted Christ at a young age, and had every possible opportunity in life. My parents were (and are) two of the greatest parents and people I know.

In High School I decided I want to "fit in" more than I wanted to serve Christ. I would do anything to be a part of the popular group. That meant I compromised my beliefs. I started to join in with whatever the crowd was doing. I didn't get into any major trouble, but I knew I wasn't living for Christ. I would change these choices if I could, although I think this may have equipped me for working with youth. Especially for working with non-church youth.

Since I was very young, I wanted to own my own retail sporting goods store. As a teenager, I would think about it, plan it out, even diagram it. At one point I drew out my plan. I would have a huge gym in the middle that everyone could try out all the new equipment. Then, I would have lots of little rooms off to the side to have specialty equipment. It was a great idea.

As I attended college, I had the opportunity to work in a retail golf store – Nevada Bob's Golf. It was a great experience for me. I worked my way up to manager. When I graduated from college I had taken over full responsibility of the store. The owner was a wonderful Christian man who would become a good friend.

I had been working there for almost ten years, when I felt my heart beginning to change. I no longer

had the strong desire to own my own store. The owner had even presented me with the opportunity for ownership. But, God was giving me a heart for teenagers. I had worked with youth in some capacity for many years. This was different. I could sense God moving me in a different direction in my life.

Things at the store were going great. It was in the midst of the biggest golf boom we had ever seen. Tiger Woods was in his prime. Golf sales were through the roof. We were doing extremely well in every way. And I loved my job. It was a very strange time to think about making a change. Yet, I knew God was speaking into my heart.

I sat down with the owner, and gave him my one-month notice. I didn't have any job lined up, although I knew that God was leading me out of the retail golf business. I had the desire to begin a non-denominational youth ministry. I was not sure what God had in store, but I knew I needed to do this.

It took a while to unwind from leaving my career of 10 years. I had put in a lot of time and energy into the business. Soon though I was ready to begin planning a youth ministry. It was exciting for me to be in the pioneering stage of the process. I think God built me that way. I enjoy the challenge of seeing what could be. On the other hand, to endure and be faithful in one ministry does not come as naturally. This was a fun time for me.

I began meeting with youth pastors and other ministries to share my vision. I decided to partner with the YMCA to begin a Saturday night high school ministry called "Y Rock." I also put together a youth leadership committee that would help with promotion and ideas.

The first night of Y Rock was a great success. We had around 75 kids attend. We played basketball,

pool, ping-pong and other games. At the end, we had a short discussion time on a hot youth topic. It went great. It was the start of a substantial ministry.

After one year of Y Rock, the Youth for Christ board, approached me about the Executive Director (E.D.) role. I had met the board before and explained the vision of Y Rock, and I knew they were looking for an E.D. For the previous 8 years or so, YFC in our area had a smaller ministry focus. They didn't have an E.D. and were mostly run by volunteers (who were also the board).

As my wife and I prayed about this opportunity, we sensed that this was the right place for me to be. I had some opportunities with some churches, although my passion was to work with many different churches and denominations to reach out to the unchurched. We felt this was the right move.

They voted to hire me on as their new Director. I told them I did not know much about YFC. I had a desire to work with many denominations and youth ministers to share the gospel. They told me that a Youth for Christ director can do that, so I took the job. They also told me what the salary would be, but that they didn't have any money. So, I would need to begin sharing the vision of what I needed to do.

I didn't have any experience with "raising funds," so I had no fear about it. I just started to share the vision with everyone I could, and money came in. The first month almost \$6,700 came in to cover everything. God really provided for us those first few years.

One of my initial goals was to establish a solid network of youth pastors and ministers. I spent a good deal of time investing in those relationships. This would be a great use of my time, especially with the Encounter ministry so close at hand.

After about a year of this group getting together and doing different ministries and events, the wonderful "meeting" happened. And I guess as they say – "the rest is history."

It's interesting to note that the little drawing I had of my ideal retail sporting goods store had some definite similarities to the Encounter building. One day I realized how close the two were, and I just smiled. God works in mysterious ways.