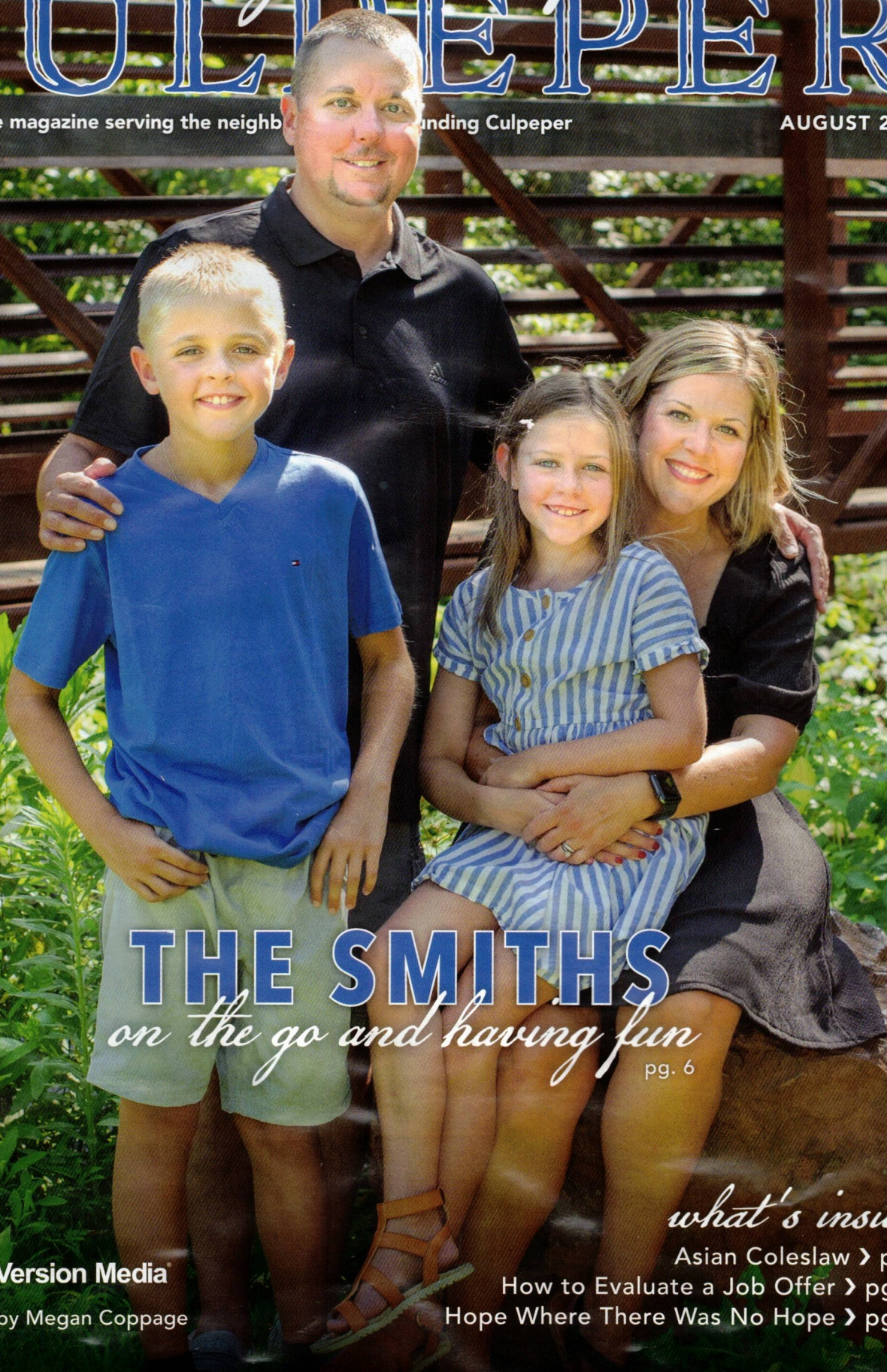


Neighbors of CULPEPER

An exclusive magazine serving the neighborhood surrounding Culpeper

AUGUST 2022



THE SMITHS

on the go and having fun

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HOPE WHERE THERE WAS NO HOPE

By Tom Fish | Photos courtesy of Hope For Appalachia



Thinking about writing this story, a song from my childhood kept playing in my head. "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me...." This song was based on a Bible verse from the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 25, verse 40). Who are the least of the King's brothers and sisters in this parable from Jesus? Where might one find them today?

The Appalachian Mountains extend across 13 states and are home to over 25 million people. To various degrees, the people of the region struggle from remoteness, social isolation, unemployment, lack of social services, poor education, and poorly developed infrastructure. In 2014, the New York Times did a countrywide study that found six counties in eastern Kentucky to be in the bottom ten nationally in terms of education, household income, joblessness, disability, life expectancy, and obesity. Looking at only

household income, three or four counties in eastern Kentucky always make the list of the ten poorest counties in the United States.

In 2011, as the freshly called full-time pastor of New Salem Baptist Church in Culpeper, Virginia, Mike Dodson received a phone call from a fellow pastor from North Carolina. He told Pastor Mike that he had driven over Black Mountain, the highest peak in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. During the trip, he came upon the small town of Lynch, KY (pop. 747 – down from 900 in 2000). The pastor called Mike to tell him what he had seen. The dire economic situation was obvious. Most of the businesses had been closed for a long time and many of the buildings had either been burned or boarded up. The two men of God then prayed together over the phone.

Pastor Mike told me, "As we prayed about the

situation in Lynch, God put a burden on our hearts to do something. He then led us to two missionaries who operated a clothing ministry near Lynch." Those missionaries explained the economic collapse of the area following the closing of the coal mines. Continuing to pray about the needs of that community, the pastors were struck with the idea of taking shoeboxes filled with needed items to school children at Easter and to share the story of Easter and the hope of Jesus Christ with the children. Pastor Mike said, "Three bold school principals agreed that we could do that."

At Easter in 2012, Pastor Mike drove his pickup with three church members from New Salem and met the pastor from North Carolina and a few people from his church. "Together we had enough shoeboxes to give one to each child," recalled Pastor Mike. At the first school, the principal met them and said they had the entire day. "The schedule is yours... I want you to meet every child and share the hope of Easter and of Christ with each one... BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO HOPE!", instructed the principal. "Right there on the steps of that school, we became Hope for Appalachia, and the shoeboxes became hope boxes," Pastor Mike explained.

Hope for Appalachia (HFA) has no paid staff. All donations go directly to support the students and their families. Volunteers serve in a variety of roles (Jessica Meredith, media coordinator; Terry Graham, administrator; Vicki Rogers, treasurer; as well as a volunteer Board of Directors. Pastor Mike mentioned his wife Liesa and daughters Mikaela and Ellie who also serve faithfully. Pastor Mike added, "I estimate we have thousands of volunteers. They



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pack hope boxes, gather and donate dresses, collect supplies for hope boxes, collect clothing (coats, shoes, boots), make and collect blankets, load trailers, drive trucks, bake cookies for teachers, collect prom dresses... and most importantly they faithfully pray."

Teams who visit schools consist of 20 to 25 people. "This past year, we traveled with nine teams. Normally, each team has about four schools and they spend an entire day in each school. Students come into the school gym, one grade at a time," explained the pastor. Before COVID-19, in 2019, 235 missionaries made the Easter trip.

The program is based on three foundations. "First, we have fun with these kids when we visit a school," explained Pastor Mike. "As each grade comes into the gym, we spend 10-15 minutes just being silly and having fun. Whatever makes the kids happy: dancing, throwing beach balls, whatever they want to do," he went on, "In some of the schools, over 60% of the kids are in foster care. Many of them live hard lives, and it is amazing to witness the impact that just having fun has on these kids."

The second foundation is making sure the kids know they are loved. After the fun, students sit in the bleachers. Whether there are 20 or 100 students, the team leader makes eye contact with each child and tells them they are loved. Not only loved by the team, but most importantly loved by God. Pastor Mike told me this story:

This year in addition to visiting 39 schools, we had a night program for parents and family members. The first night in a new school we had never visited, the bleachers were pretty full. I went through the bleachers telling everyone how loved they were, and then I went back down to share the Easter story. A kindergartener who was sitting with a family up in the lefthand corner of the bleachers got up and walked down. He approached me with

his arms up. I scooped him up into my arms. He didn't say a word, just hugged my neck tightly. I continued to talk to the audience. After about 15 minutes, the young woman he'd been sitting with came down and told the boy to come back up into the bleachers. The boy just said "No!," and hugged me tighter. After a while I carried him back up to the family. I learned that he and his brother were in foster care. He was overwhelmed by the power of being told he was loved.

The third foundation of HFA is sharing the Easter story and the hope that Jesus Christ gives. Pastor Mike told me, "Our message has always been that hope can't be found in a bottle or a needle, in money or possessions, or in anything temporary. True and lasting hope can only be found in Christ and the fact that the tomb was empty that first Easter morning." This message of hope is delivered by team members to small groups of students sitting on the gym floor. Team members get to know the kids and their stories. They talk and pray together. Then the team member shares the Good News that Christ opened the way for us to have a love relationship with God and to be with him forever.

In 2018, Pastor Mike's team was visiting schools two hours away from the hotel where they were staying. On the second morning they set out at 5:00 AM wearing their purple Hope for Appalachia shirts. The truck pulling the trailer needed diesel, so they pulled into a gas station. The 19-year-old man behind the counter exclaimed, "You're the Hope guys!" He shared that he had been a beneficiary of the ministry and then said to Pastor Mike, "Don't stop coming. It's too important!" He never mentioned the hope boxes. It's all about the hope and encouragement of the message.

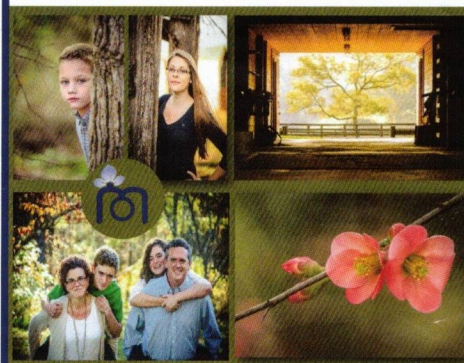
Pastor Mike and I talked for a long time. He shared many powerful stories with me that I wish I had space to share here. Of HFA he said, "Christ is the head. He opens the doors and provides all we need

through his people. Over the past 11 years, God has shown that when his people unite and come together, amazing things happen." The ministry has never been short one single hope box. There hasn't been a time when they could not transport something (including a just-in-time donation of two 16-foot trailers to replace a 24-foot trailer that was beyond repair), nor has there been a time when they could not buy fuel or feed the missionaries. Over the years, God has added many new dimensions to the ministry (gloves, blankets, pillowcase dresses, prom dresses, and other needed items). Pastor Mike has learned to roll with whatever God is doing.

A final note, Pastor Mike emphasized that HFA is a multi-denominational, multi-generational ministry. People from all traditions are welcome, as well as all ages. Some team members who started a trip not sure about Jesus have even been baptized in a nearby river before going home



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