

Ambassadors

Krista and I were supposed to honeymoon in Tahiti. I would have sat on that beach for 20 minutes, followed by complaining about being sunburned for the next 12 hours. Krista would have loved it! But Tahiti never happened for us. Practicality won out when I hydroplaned off that flooded freeway and rolled my car a few times on the way to propose. The money that would have been spent on our Tahitian honeymoon dream was spent buying a Honda Accord that we would drive to the Oregon Coast for our practical honeymoon.

The Oregon Coast is absolutely gorgeous, but when you grow up in Washington State, you can start to take the northwest beauty for granted. The “beaches” are filled with rocks and the Pacific Ocean is frigid all year long. I hear Tahiti is a little different. Our honeymoon was spent playing Monopoly on the many cloudy and rainy days. One day we were looking for something else to do, so we took a drive to the Tillamook factory. We had been told they served the largest ice cream cones we’d ever seen. That was enough to get me in the car!

I remember the factory being an old warehouse-looking place. It was quaint and cute and all things Oregon. There wasn’t a giant merchandise store with their brand name on everything, as there is today. It was just Tillamook, a place run by farmers who made amazing ice cream and cheese! I’d never tasted anything quite like it.

In the same year that we got married, I learned that real cheese doesn’t come in single serve wrappers, vegetables are not grown in cans and real ice cream doesn’t come in rectangular boxes. It was a lot to take in. My food snobbery may have started on that glorious day in Tillamook, but I’m sure it was enhanced by dining with my bougie humanitarian wife.

Fast forward 20 years and we’ve moved from the Pacific Northwest to Orlando, Florida. There was no Tillamook on the East Coast when we arrived. I wasn’t sure how people were doing life here with sub-par cheese and less creamy ice cream. On each trip back to Washington state, I returned with a cooler full of Tillamook cheese. Eventually I moved onto dry ice to get the ice cream I wanted from one side of the country to the other. It needed to be done.

We introduced our Florida friends to Tillamook, essentially posing as legal drug dealers. After leaving our house, they’d go back to eating the poor choice cheese and less creamy ice cream from the stores in Florida. They’d soon experience the depression that comes with missing what you know is better.

In 2019, I was walking down the ice cream aisle and I let out an audible gasp. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw the nine-letter combination that spells joy. I was wearing my blue Tillamook Baby-loaf Bus t-shirt and the woman standing next to me on the ice cream aisle looked genuinely concerned. I turned to her, while quickly loading up cartons of happiness, and said far too quickly, “This ice cream is from Oregon and it’s the best thing you’ll ever have!” She looked at her carton of ice cream and said “Okay,” while putting it back in the freezer to select a Tillamook container instead. I gave her a few recommendations, as if tasting ice cream were

the same as sampling wine. When I was checking out the cashier and bagger heard all about the best ice cream in the world too. One cashier there still calls me the ice cream guy. I feel honored.

I picked up a dozen flavors of Tillamook ice cream and hosted everyone we knew for a tasting. Many new addicts were created that day. For those who are lactose-free, I say some things are worth suffering for. We even showed the Tillamook documentary of crazy fans. Sadly, I wasn't featured in the film.

We keep no less than six cartons in the freezer at all times to please the masses. When the grocery store put Tillamook ice cream on a buy one get one sale - we bought 36 cartons immediately. All that limited us was the size of our freezer. The joy on the cashier's face was matched only by my own.

Tillamook mild cheddar is our staple cheese. It found its way to Florida as well. But my joy turned to grief when the cheddar was only sold in tiny 8-ounce packages. Who can only use just 8 ounces of Tillamook cheddar? That should be a crime. Although my joy was true, it was in limited quantity, about 8 ounces worth. So, until 2020, I was still flying more than 20 pounds of Tillamook cheese back with me from Seattle on each trip.

Annika and I visited the new Tillamook Creamery shortly after its opening in 2018. It was good to be home with my friends. I left full and happy and with an armload of merch. During my next visit out to Oregon in 2019 our family brought a vegan friend who we ruined for the day and our joy was complete when we purchased 20 bowls that were shaped like ice cream cones, branded with the new Tillamook logo. Every time we scoop up a cone at home, we introduce a new person to the Tillamook family.

Because of my rich history with Tillamook, they've kindly recognized me as one of their true fans. I have a pin shaped like a cheese heart to prove it. My goal is to be recognized by Tillamook as their official Ambassador to Florida. I'm doing the person-to-person work that goes far beyond influencers on social media. My lack of social media presence is more than made up for by the quantity of people eat dessert at our house. This is how lives are changed.

I really do believe lives are changed by sharing the best of what we have with others. For me, that means Tillamook, and don't even get me started about Juanita's chips because this chapter has to be about more than food. I live every day like I'm celebrating. I can't help it and I don't want to help it. So, when I find something really good – I really want others to experience it too.

That is what an Ambassador does. They represent something by who they are and how they are. The people who have influenced my life the most don't preach to me - they show me. These influencers invited me in and gave me a picture of what the Kingdom of God could look like. As I saw their lives, I was drawn in, kind of like how I was drawn into a life of cheese and ice cream. I digress.

Sam and Candace Vance and their three amazing children are the best of what we have to offer people. I put them in the same category as Tillamook. They are authentic and real in ways that just draw you in. It seems to me that everyone they meet would be better off with more time in their presence.

They have lived a life of brokenness and beauty. Sam and Candace are the most talented and kind people that I've ever encountered. Beauty is created out of their imagination on the stage, in songs, in the classroom and on the canvas too. They sit with the broken and walk through pain with grace and beauty. While they are artists, that word doesn't even come close to describing them. Lives around them are just better. Everyone would be a better person if they spent as much time as they could with the Vances. Life with Sam and Candace is encouraging and real and challenging – because of who they are, and because of the pain they've lived through.

Sam grew up a vagabond of sorts with no one place to call home. His family was always on the move in pursuit of what God might be doing. Not an easy life for any child. He could have been a rock-star with his rugged good looks, the incredible songs he writes and the sounds that come from his guitar and vocals. It doesn't have to be one over the other, but Sam has chosen family over the pursuit of fame. Anxiety has been his shadow and Sam really connects with young artists searching for meaning.

Candace grew up the youngest child with siblings who were old enough to be her parents. Her mother played the organ at the same small church where we all met. She travelled the world alone as a teen and may be one of the most private people I've ever known. She chooses her moments for vulnerability, seemingly just when people need to hear her brokenness most. Wisdom seems to pour out of her the way breath works for the rest of us. Candace could have been on Broadway. She's a tall dancer, vocalist and writer who can choose a myriad of ways to bring a crowd to their feet. But instead of bringing crowds to their feet each night, she also has chosen family over fame. Whenever she speaks, I listen carefully.

The pain Sam and Candace have experienced since I've known them is unfair. We have buried their niece together, faced numerous visits to the ER with their son as he fought to breathe, sandbagged their 100-year-old house from flooding, watched over Sam as he had about two feet cut from his intestines and prayed for Candace as she battled Lyme disease. Jobs have come and jobs have gone during those times. But when Candace's leg shattered while stepping out of the back door one cold February morning, it started to break all of us.

Every single time, through tears and frustration with God, Sam and Candace have survived. They are an anomaly. Christian performers who are raising three kids and have been married over 25 years. Their peers have gone through just as many horrors as they have, just different in nature. Affairs and divorce, child custody battles, suicide attempts and so on – Sam and Candace have walked through it all with others. They talk about the green room backstage like it's a confessional or a counseling office.

Somehow, while putting on makeup or while getting changed they have 30-second conversations that alter lives. Their own scars make them the people to come to. Everyone knows it. Their life isn't about how much money they make; it's about others.

The Vances have taught us about resiliency and hope. Their suffering through things far beyond their control and their honest cries of "Why God?" make them people to trust. They choose hope regardless of what they're going through. Despite difficult circumstances, Sam and Candace have taught me that the show must go on because God is always writing another chapter. Their story finds a way to balance the difficulties and joys that come with life. Being around them teaches me to never give up!

They aren't ambassadors for talking about Christ. Christ is meant to be experienced. We needed people to show us the way in living by faith. I didn't need to do a Bible study with Sam and Candace, although I'm sure that'd been great too. What I really needed was to walk alongside them, to live and share about my life with them, and soak up as much time as we could get together. That is how they've changed my life – just by being present with us.

While the Vance's were Ambassadors to us as peers, the Dewitts were fifteen years ahead of us, showing us where we'd go as a family.

When I first heard about this family that lived in San Diego, I knew I had to meet them. They moved into a rough neighborhood of gangs, drug dealing and prostitution on the corner outside their house. The homeless were everywhere and this family was from the suburbs. The Dewitt's moved into the neighborhood when their kids were ranging from pre-teen to older teens. It couldn't have been easy. Neither David nor Christine possessed a "ministry background" that I knew of or social work degrees. They just felt called to the place.

They moved in and asked God to provide. That was it! Their faith astounded me. Quickly, they invited their friends to move into the neighborhood with them and they experienced what they would describe to me as "favor." God took care of them and he took care of others around them too. Here is how they eventually described their community life:

Our daily worship, life.... It is praying together in the mornings, picking up donations, giving diapers to moms who come to our front door, household chores, yard work, prayer, visiting elderly and bringing groceries, praying for healing, making our bed, worshipping together with song and music, relationships, forgiving one another, serving our friends on the street, prayer, organizing donations of clothes, helping kids with homework, eating dinner together, living in community, celebrating birthdays, baptizing, cleaning, prayer..... and so much more...

That sounded like a beautiful life to me. It was a life of being a participant with others as they cared for them. I went to San Diego for the first time with a team of youth and fell in love with the place and the people. They had four houses, right next to one another, just like we do today in our neighborhood. It was a wonderful little compound right in the middle of the sketchy

neighborhood. They didn't put up fences to protect themselves, because that would keep their neighbors out – the very opposite of what the Dewitts were about.

The Dewitts just let us be part of what they were doing. It wasn't fancy, but that time in San Diego with them was just what I needed to see. I needed to see a normal family loving their neighbors and figuring out the logistics as needs came their way. The upstairs of their house was just for their family time. It was a place for them to be with their four kids in the midst of a lot of need. The downstairs of the house was where they'd prep meals for 30 or 40 people each night and there were shelves by the front door with things like diapers, or food bags or whatever they'd learned their neighbors needed. The doorbell would ring and someone would give the visitor what they were shopping for. Then they'd sit on the porch with whomever stopped by and talk about what was going on. Most of the time people seemed to need to talk more than they needed whatever they stopped by to pick up. This place felt like home to me in a way that I couldn't explain.

A few years later, when we were starting to care for the poor in our own Seattle neighborhood, I called David and asked if I could come down with some friends. Of course, we could. They taught me to always make room for those who ask. My friends got a crash course on loving the poor from the best people I knew. Not from teaching, but from participating with. The Dewitts were so encouraging and supportive to all of us.

When our family was searching for what was next for us, we took the kids back to City of Refuge in San Diego with the Dewitts. Drew and Annika were only 8 & 10. Krista and I were trying to see what they thought of an unconventional life. So, they delivered groceries to shut-ins, enjoyed dinners with the homeless outside the Dewitt's house and helped with the prep work that it takes to host forty people for dinner every night. We found out that our kids loved it.

Each time I'd be in San Diego for work, I'd swing by and see David and Christine. They would always have a kind encouragement for us about our lives, because they're also great question-askers. Our latest visit was another Dewitt lesson about living well in unknown times. The owner of their four houses was ready to sell, and the City of Refuge crowd of homelessness were not going to be the new owners. After more than twenty years in that neighborhood, they were displaced. It was heartbreaking to hear the story, and to see my friends in such pain. But nothing was surprising to me about their faith and how hope-filled David and Christine were during that time of confusion.

If you have people like the Dewitts or Vances in your life, please share them. They are ambassadors of God's Kingdom. Share people like them with everyone you know. Keep going back and visiting them as often as you can and realize you're a little more like them with each visit. Host dinners and introduce them as the guests of honor. They'll hate it, but if your life was changed because of them, you ought to shout it from the rooftops! Be vulnerable enough to tell everyone that these are some of the people who helped make me who I am. Ask them anything and everything. My ambassadors aren't perfect, but I like them better that way. Maybe the

ambassadors in your life are your parents or your siblings or your first-grade teacher. Who are those people for you? The best of what you have was never intended to be just for you.

If we love something or someone, we share it with others. I am the self-proclaimed ambassador for Tillamook to Florida. I have to share it, even if you think I'm crazy. I'll always have an ice cream scoop at the ready for when you come by. We don't have to talk about Tillamook, but you're invited to share in my joy. I try to live life overflowing what I love.

Our lives are full of stories of people who have been Christ's ambassadors to us. I'd be so thrilled to send you around the country and the globe meeting these wonderful people. But the best part is you already have ambassadors of your own. Celebrate and share them.

May your cheese board and your ice cream drawer always be filled with Tillamook. And may you always live in joyful abundance, sharing what and who you love most with those around you!