

TONYA HOWARD – Interview, May 17, 2005

*Bekah Menning, Assistant to the Project on Lived Theology, interviewed Tonya Howard, the Tutoring Coordinator at Charlottesville Abundant Life Ministries (CALM). CALM, which is a Christian based community center, was started in 1995 and provides holistic programming children and adults in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Charlottesville, Virginia, which is made up mostly of low-income, single parent (female) headed households.*

Bekah: Could you tell me about your work at Abundant Life, what you do on a daily basis?

Tonya: I will have been at CALM three years this September. I am the tutoring coordinator for the first through fourth grade tutoring program. And I basically recruit tutors, put the program together, do home contacts, parental involvement – that’s probably the biggest role, parental involvement, getting the parents involved with the tutoring program.

Bekah: When you say home contacts, what does that look like?

Tonya: Just visiting with the parents that have kids in the tutoring program and letting them know what’s going on as far as their kids’ education. Also going to Johnson School, getting report cards, doing conferences, keeping up with the kids in their academic environment. And the home contacts are very important. I know a lot of the parents, so I just visit, see how they’re doing, see if there’s anything they need, pray with them if they need to or if they want me to.

Bekah: How often do you do those, for each child’s parents?

Tonya: It varies. I try to get out in the community at least one evening a week. I don’t get around to all the parents in an evening, so it just varies from week to week. I just try to be available at least one evening during the week. I might get about four parents an evening, due to their work schedules.

Bekah: Do you find it difficult to get parent involvement, or what’s that been like? You said that’s one of the most important things...is it a challenge?

Tonya: Yeah, parental involvement has been very hard. A lot of the parents, some are working two jobs, some are working nights so they’re sleeping during the day. And then there’s some that just don’t care what’s going on. I will say within the last year it’s increased a lot, because one of the requirements that we ask of parents with kids in the tutoring program is to do two service hours (per semester). And that varied, like we usually ask them to come down and do some filing or clean up the building or something like that. And lately we’ve been doing more of having the parents bring a dish for a dinner and that sort of thing, and the parents seem to enjoy that – making something and bringing it to share. And just being flexible with the parents on when they can do hours and when they can be involved, and finding creative ways for them to be involved.

Bekah: Do you feel like you've been able to build more trust with parents the longer you've been there, and the longer CALM has been there?

Tonya: I think so. I think the trust we have between our parents in the community and CALM is great. I think it's awesome. And I think the relationship and the trust I have with the parents are great. Of course there are some that just aren't taking to CALM but I think overall our community trusts us, and looks to us for support.

Bekah: What do you think the reason for that is? Can you point to specific reasons why there's that trust?

Tonya: I think one of the reasons is we're out in the community more...

Bekah: Are you talking about you and Eddie (Tonya's husband, who also works at Abundant Life Ministries) right now or...

Tonya: Yeah, me and Eddie, and just other staff members that are out in the community and getting involved in community members' lives. And most of that has been through the kids, and I think the parents have become more open. And I think the biggest thing is that we're out in the community; we're not just down in the building (the office, in Blue Ridge Commons apartment complex), saying "you need to do this and you need to do that". We really go through with some of the families...

Bekah: Right, so you don't live in Albemarle or somewhere and come in just for work.

Tonya: Right, we're there. And most of the staff live right here in the community, and that makes a big difference. They're not just seeing us one day and we're gone. We're committed to being here.

Bekah: I want to hear more about your story... You grew up around here, right?

Tonya: I did. I moved to Charlottesville when I was 16 and have lived here ever since. Went to Charlottesville High School. My oldest son's father was here, so that's why I moved here.

Bekah: And what led you to the work with Abundant Life?

Tonya: Well, my husband (Eddie) was working there before me, probably a year or two before I started. Before I had my last child I was working as a pre-school teacher and I went on maternity leave and decided that I wasn't going back to doing that kind of work. And I really wasn't sure what I was going to do, but a couple months later Rydell (the Director of Abundant Life) came to talk with me about the tutoring position because one of the staff members had quit, and I said "Ok, I'll try it on a trial basis first", and he talked to me about the details of my biggest role being the connection between parents and Abundant Life through the tutoring program...

Bekah: Tonya, did you say you were living in Blue Ridge Commons (BRC) at that time?

Tonya: I was living here, in Prospect. We had bought a house, so we were already living here. But I have lived in Blue Ridge Commons, from my teenage years on up.

So I took the job. And I liked it, I really liked it. And the good thing was that a lot of the parents in the community knew me because I've lived here. And there were also some trust issues because when I lived in BRC I wasn't saved and there were some other mothers I was running with and going to parties with. As I began to work there (CALM) more and more a lot of the mothers became more trusting and were amazed at how God had changed my life.

Bekah: Was there any skepticism from the other mothers...I guess I'm sort of thinking of the racial dynamic, and whether CALM was perceived as sort of a white-run thing...Was there any of that at all?

Tonya: Honestly, I don't think so, I don't think that was there. It could have been and maybe just wasn't noticeable...

Bekah: Or maybe just that it was run by outsiders (people outside the neighborhood), maybe it wasn't a racial thing at all.

Tonya: Right, it definitely could have been an outsider thing, that the community wasn't sure that this was really for them. Because it was a lot of outside people. But now that it's mostly community (run), they're getting the feel that CALM really is for the community, and we support the community.

Bekah: I was thinking that you probably have a special impact on people because, like you were saying, most staff actually live in the community, but you're sort of from the community and Eddie's that way too, and Kerra (another staff member of CALM), so that probably really helps to build trust.

Tonya: Oh yeah. One thing I would say is that people want hope. They want to see hope. And they want to see good things happening. And I just felt blessed that God made it possible for us to buy a house here in the community but I never thought it would be in this realm of also serving the community. So it is a blessing and it's hard at times but it's good.

Bekah: Yeah, I don't know how well they compare, but I was up in Sandtown, a neighborhood in Baltimore, a couple months ago, and that's a really run down neighborhood that's had a lot of community renewal in the last couple decades, and they have a Habitat there. And it's doing incredible things, renovating all these row houses. And the amazing thing there is that they've seen a lot of people either stay or come back to the community. And I don't know how much of that you see in Prospect, but that would be really hopeful, if CALM and you guys could assist in that – encouraging people to stay and help continue to build the community up...

Tonya: And helping people to know that this is their asset...there are riches here in Prospect and BRC, and getting people to invest right here in their community. I do think that since I first came here the community is definitely taking more pride in investing in their houses and cleaning up around their houses. And those who don't own but rent are also doing those things,

wanting their property to look nice. But, yeah, I think people are becoming more prideful of their surroundings and are not putting up with a lot of things that happen like the drug dealing and the shooting...not that that will go away completely but people are definitely standing up against it.

Bekah: Yeah, and I guess they really need to because a lot of people from the outside are starting to look at this neighborhood as a place they might want to move to (because housing costs are getting so high in Cville), so it will help if people have a strong sense of pride in their community and can stand up to those kinds of changes too.

Tonya: Right, exactly.

Bekah: This might be sort of a redundant question, but I'm wondering more broadly what experiences in your life have led you to want to do the kind of work you're doing now. We talked a little bit about how you got to CALM specifically, but are there experiences like growing up in the church or influence from your parents that led you to want to do ministry-type work?

Tonya: I grew up in a foster home and I grew up in the church, but I don't think those were the things that drew me to do what I'm doing now. I think a lot of the trials and tribulations that I went through - and I know that our community is mostly single mothers and I have been a single mother and I know what it's like to struggle and try to take care of the kids and go to the schools and provide - it's those things that drive me to do what I'm doing because I've been there and people relate so much better to those who have been there. And the community has seen me go through the same things that they go through. So when they call to talk, I'm not just saying, "oh yeah I know how you feel" but actually don't; I do know how they feel...

Bekah: Yeah, you can empathize.

Tonya: Right, so I think that's my drive for me to keep serving, because I've been there.

Bekah: Is it difficult for that reason to? I mean, when you see people going through things you've gone through I imagine that's kind of difficult. Is that more motivating, or is it easy to get down about that kind of stuff?

Tonya: I think there's moments where it does overwhelm you and make you sad, but I think also that there's great motivation to keep plugging at it. But I think there's a little bit of both. Because sometimes you want more for that person than they want for themselves. And that can be heart-breaking...I mean, this doesn't stop at five o'clock when I leave the Center, this is on-going everyday; sometimes at night we get phone calls here at the house. So it can be overwhelming and saddening because you really do put in a lot of time and energy and prayer, and some people just don't want it for themselves. But it's very rewarding and it's definitely motivating, just seeing God work in people's lives. It's awesome.

Bekah: Yeah, I imagine it's frustrating because you know people could avoid things they're going through. But you've been there too, so you know that it takes times, and that it might take one, five, ten, twenty years.

Tonya: Right, exactly. Yeah, it can get frustrating. Especially sometimes I have to watch myself about not being judgmental because I want to be like – ok, I've got it, I did it, you can do it. And the circumstances, the situation might be a little bit of the same circumstances, but everybody has their own struggles and things that are hard for them. So I pray about not doing that (judging) too often, but it's easy [laughs]. But you're right, I think it does take people time. And God waited on us. So we have to wait on others also and keep encouraging.

Bekah: Are there hopeful stories that you can point to about people who's lives have seen some good change, or you've seen God working in their lives?

Tonya: Yeah, I think with [Mary (named changed)], and walking with her through all the Habitat stuff, and that she's getting a house, that is just a blessing. And with her sister, whose health is doing so much better and she's getting more involved and coming to church services. Yeah, it's exciting to see God working in people's lives. Even if they don't want to actually admit it, when you say that God is doing something in your life and they're like "Mmm hmmm", but I think they do recognize that, that it's the power of God.

Bekah: This is kind of a broad question, but what would you say, for this particular community, is your hope or vision?

Tonya: I have two. One is definitely seeing a church that looks like our community and is for our community. And second is that so many people are buying the homes that they're already in or purchasing other homes in the community. So those are the two things that I want to see for our community.

Bekah: You said a church that looks like the people and is for the people...Can you say more about that?

Tonya: Well, that the church is not outside people coming in and running the church. That we are seeking, discipling and worshipping with the people in our community. Not to say that there's something wrong with people outside the community coming in, but that there will be leadership from our community running the church.

Bekah: Right, which is really the hope for CALM too, right?

Tonya: Right, exactly. So that's what I would love to see the church look like. And that the community is drawn to that.

Bekah: And there's some planning happening around that vision?

Tonya: Oh yeah. We have bible studies at the Morton's home; there's a Monday night prayer with the women; there's Tuesday morning prayer men's group. So there's definitely prayer

groups going on that the community is involved with. So that's been the first step. And to establish leadership and discipleship.

Bekah: And how do you do that?

Tonya: Well most of the staff or the people from the community...we have discipleship books that we're going through. Some of us are one-on-one, some of us are three, no more than three in a group. And it's just discipling as far as the word and scripture, but also meeting together and talking about things that people are going through or need support in and those kinds of things. And developing leadership, giving people a role of taking care of the food once a month for our church service, and those kinds of things that the community loves and wants to do because it makes them feel like they're part of it.

Bekah: I was just thinking about this interview I read about community organizers, and that the goal is to develop indigenous leaders within a community, but that when people hear that you want to make them a leader they tend to shy away. But the truth is that it doesn't take much to be a leader – it's the kind of stuff you just talked about. So you can encourage people to be leaders without saying "we want you to be a leader".

Tonya: Right, right, yeah. And the reason it scares our community and blacks to say "I want you to be a leader", is that it kind of exposes who you are. Like some people don't want to be in leadership because they're scared that people are going to find our inner stuff about them or see what they're really like. But I think the community and our culture is getting more prideful and wanting to be leaders so that our young kids can see those leadership roles instead of tagging along and rolling along. So I think it's a scary thing for some people in our community and for others we really have natural leadership.

Bekah: Do you see people coming out more, besides the usual suspects, who of course are amazing and do wonderful things for the community, but do you see people who haven't been as involved starting to get interested?

Tonya: Oh yeah, definitely. We have one lady who got straight out of the penitentiary and moved into BRC and she hasn't missed a church service. She hasn't missed a IG's (a club for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade girls) parents' dinner. She has been very involved. And we do have other women who are stepping up to the plate and getting involved. And we don't emphasize having to be a Christian to be involved – that's God's work. We pray that they get saved while they're involved and we're meeting with them and praying with them...even if they're not Christians most people want you to pray for them. Eddie and I have seen that so much while we're out in the community just talking with people...they will stop and say "will you pray for me?" So people are always open to that.

Bekah: I was just thinking about the fact that the Prospect community is made up mostly of single-mother-led households....Does CALM try to address that, or maybe you personally...Do you think that's something that's a cyclical thing, that will probably continue, a generational thing? This is a big question, but do you think that's a problem, something to be worked on?

Tonya: It's definitely a problem. It's definitely generational. I don't know what kind of role CALM would play in that besides what we do now of supporting single moms. There are some men in the homes. And CALM has men's groups to try to get men to step up and be fathers. But to be honest a lot of the women have done it so long, being single, that it's hard to have a man come in and try to rule the household when you've been doing it all by yourself. So that definitely becomes a problem. The women don't know how to submit. And that was a problem for me – I had been a single mom before I met Eddie and it was hard for me to let go and not want to be the man, because I had been in that role so long. And that ends up causing a lot of problems – Eddie and I are working with a female and her fiancé...he got out (of prison) and he's back at home, and he wants to be the sledgehammer and lay down all the rules, which is causing conflict in the household because she's been doing it since he's been locked up. So teaching our men how to be men, and teaching the women how to let the men be men. It's a hard thing, and I don't know where CALM plays a role in it. But I think as a married couple – Eddie and I – we definitely have been through it, and we try to work through those issues with people.

Bekah: It seems really tricky because, like you said, you need to teach men to be responsible and take responsibility for their family, and at the same time it seems like men could learn how to submit to women too – submit to each other – because she's the one who's been there all along. You can't have this thing where a man comes in and all of a sudden she needs to submit to him – that's just not realistic, you know?

Tonya: Right. And it is hard. The Bible says that the man is head of his house, but that's pretty hard to tell a woman who's paying the bills, working two jobs and raising her kids, and then the man gets out of jail and wants to rule everything. I think you're right when you say it has to go both ways. And it's not an overnight process – it took Eddie and I years. So it is hard.

Bekah: Before we wind up can you talk a little bit more about how your faith or spirituality informs your work. I know that it gives you hope and motivation...can you talk a little bit more about that?

Tonya: Well, it definitely keeps me going as far as being very prayful...I mean, you have to be very prayed up to go out into the community. But also I think that with the community having seen me when I was unsaved and seeing me now that I am saved gives a lot of hope, and I think my spirituality is probably one of the biggest impacts on the community than anything. And like I said that just comes from seeing me then and seeing me now.

Bekah: Actions speak louder than words...

Tonya: Yeah, they definitely do. And they also see that I'm not just talking about what the word says, I'm living it. I've been through things and still go through them. And they don't see this picture perfect world – like you're a Christian and saved and therefore everything is great and awesome – they still see me dealing with my own struggles. I think that is probably the one thing that keeps me going at work.

Bekah: I think there's power in vulnerability – that you struggle and are willing to let people see that.

Tonya: Yeah, and I've never had a problem with that. Because the last thing I want the community to see is that we have a picture perfect world, and a nice little house and we're Christians and Jesus loves us. That's true of course – that Jesus loves us, etc. – but when a parent calls me and tells me they're going through something and I can share that I am too, and they'll be like “no you're not”, but yeah I am. And that's what I want them to see – that we can do this together.

Bekah: Great, I think that's it. Thanks Tonya.