

Drew Shripka | The Other Way Ministries

I was given the opportunity to work at the Other Way Ministries on the west side of Grand Rapids over the course of this summer. I worked mostly in their food pantry, which is only one of the many programs they have to support the community around the westside. While I was there, I helped neighbors through the pantry, restocked shelves, and helped unload and organize donations. Through all of these things, I was able to grow connections and friendships with both the other volunteers and the neighbors who came in.

While there are many memorable moments, I have a couple of favorites. One is the struggle of the collard greens. I had missed a couple of days due to a football event, and I came in on Monday ready for a normal day, but when I came in and went to the back to start restocking, I was astonished: Shelves upon shelves of canned collard greens, there was even more on pallets in the outdoor storage unit. Normally, this would be fine; after all, I did see the pantry go from a seemingly infinite supply of tuna to not having it at all in only a couple of months. The problem came in that barely anyone wanted collard greens, or at least would rather have some of our vast variety of soup in the same section. But the most memorable part about all of this came a couple of weeks later, when we just got a huge shipment of lots of canned vegetables that I was helping unload. Everything was going well until we got to the back of the truck, where we found another palette full of collard greens, which had me and my supervisor Bethany, and another volunteer Mark laughing and confused about why we were being sent so many.

The most impactful part of my summer was meeting one of the couple of old guys who was a regular at the pantry. He came from a large family of 7, which allowed him to get a lot of things off each shelf, but he picked sparingly, always telling me stories about his past or teaching me a history lesson while he chose his item. But what impacted me most was what came after. I would help him take his reused bags out to his car, walking slowly with him as he struggled to walk. When we got to his car, I put the bags carefully in the front seat (I could NOT break this guy's eggs) and closed the door, expecting to wish him a good day and go back inside. But instead, he gently laid his hand on my shoulder and prayed a blessing over me.

This interaction has stuck with me and has stuck out as the coolest thing that happened to me during my time working there. Not only that, but this experience changed one of my personal prejudices. I've been wary about accepting the differences between Protestants and Catholics ever since I was taught the history of Christianity, but that day it was dissolved. I have since been more comfortable when Catholic people talk about their perception of the Bible because I was given a deeper understanding and sense of connection.

I didn't expect *Tattoos on the Heart* to be a book that I'd enjoy before I started reading it, but that soon changed after forcing myself to pick it up for a couple of minutes, only to find myself well on my way through after a couple of hours. The real stories told in that book seemed almost fake. The way that Greg Boyle was able to submerge himself in that gang community that no one outside wanted to be a part of reminded me a lot of how Jesus was always hanging around the outcasts of society. Overall, I think this summer has given me a new perspective on people who struggle with food and a deeper connection with the Grand Rapids community.