

Becoming PHILIPPIAN KIDS

Jan Carlson's junior-high class got more than a trip to Disneyland when they took on her challenge to memorize a book of the Bible. | BECKIE SUPIANO

Anyone who has ever taught a confirmation or Sunday-school class knows how challenging it can be to get students to memorize anything. Once a common practice, memorization of catechism texts or extensive sections of Scripture has typically gone by the wayside in today's climate of media stimuli and short attention spans.

Yet eight junior-high students at First Covenant Church in Everett, Washington, memorized Philippians last year. Not just a few verses or an extended section, but the whole book—all four chapters, 104 verses, and 2,200-plus words!

The woman who inspired them to accomplish this feat was an unlikely candidate—a retiree who had only recently moved to Everett with her husband.

The first year Jan Carlson taught the junior-high Sunday-school class she challenged her students to memorize an entire psalm. Memorizing Scripture reflects the importance of “having God’s word in your heart,” she says. She offered an incentive—a weekend away in Birch Bay, a resort town fifty miles north of Seattle. She chose Psalm 34, a passage she says “was very helpful to me,” and which she had memorized herself.

The class had ten regular attenders,

and each of them took Carlson up on her offer. They worked on it for a couple of months and recited it together for the congregation that summer.

As promised, Carlson took the students to Birch Bay. They drove the church’s van and rented two condos across from the beach. They had the “time of their lives” playing on the beach, roasting hot dogs over a campfire, and swimming for hours in the indoor pool. Everyone took turns making meals, serving each other, and cleaning up.

When the owner of one of the condos stopped by, the students recited Psalm 34 for her. She was so moved that she cut their rental fee in half.

The experience was so positive that Carlson decided to put a new challenge before her students. In the fall, she invited them to memorize the entire book of Philippians.

“I felt this was a very worthwhile thing to do. It would be something they would retain for years to come,” she says. “I always have the word of God in my heart. It’s something that’s yours.”

Again, Carlson promised a reward. In keeping with the increased challenge, she stepped up the reward too. If the students memorized Philippians, Carlson told them, she would take them to Disneyland.

No Small Gift

It was no small promise, and no small gift, either. Carlson planned to pay for the trip by setting aside her Social Security checks for the entire school year. “It was a big thing, and spending a lot of money, but in fifteen years they’d remember this,” she says.

Bill Goodwin, pastor of First Covenant Church, remembers Carlson approaching him about her plan. “I’ve got a new idea,” he recalls her saying. Goodwin’s initial reaction was, “That’s a safe thing. No one is going to memorize a whole book of the Bible.”

But Carlson’s enthusiasm was contagious, and the students agreed to try. Five students started out on the project, and three more came on board later.

Memorizing Philippians took the class most of the year. Asked how to accomplish such an undertaking, eighth grader Lucas Verge says, “Take it slow and do little parts at a time, go back and make sure you didn’t forget the last parts.” His father, Pete Verge, says he knew Lucas was up for the challenge, but he was impressed by how many of the other kids participated.

The students often went to Carlson’s house to work. They helped each other in pairs. Carlson describes them spreading out throughout her condo, one group in the bedroom, another in the TV room, another on the stairs.



The junior-high Sunday-school class in Everett, Washington, recites the book of Philippians, from left: Sarah DeWitt, Amber Burwell, Courtney Peters, Garion Nelson, Jan Carlson, Lucas Verge, Brittany Peters, Melinda Burwell, Kali Burnside.

“They spent an awful lot of time at my house,” she says.

Those students who found the task easier helped the others. They worked hard, but they also had fun. Sometimes they would sleep over. “We’d play games, work, watch TV, and work some more,” remembers Sarah De Witt.

The students liked hanging out with Carlson. “She’s awesome, a lot of fun,” De Witt says. “Not your regular seventy-year-old Christian.” Goodwin agrees. The congregation’s nickname for Carlson is the Energizer Bunny, he notes. “She wants to make the church alive,” he says.

Having the students around was especially meaningful to Carlson because her husband, Dick, was ill. He had been diagnosed with cancer before they moved to Everett from Bellevue, Washington, where they were members of Newport Covenant Church. Dick had had a career as a teacher and educator, so he was part of the class behind the scenes. “I was the energetic one in our marriage, but he always encouraged and got right in there with me, no matter what the occasion or project was,” Carlson says.

The students “were so kind and attentive to Dick,” Carlson says, “always reminding him to use his walker. In the summer months I could not have managed without their help.”

“Dick and Jan just poured their lives into the kids,” Goodwin says. “And the kids poured their lives into Dick.”

As the students learned sections of Philippians, they recited them for the congregation. Anytime Philippians came up in church, one of the middle-school students recited it. The project was designed to help the kids, Goodwin says, but it ended up helping the congregation too.

Melinda Burwell says her favorite part is probably Philippians 4:8: “Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about” (TLB). She explains, “It taught us how to live our lives better.”

Carlson’s own life verse is Philippians 1:6: “I am sure that God who began the good work within you will keep right on helping you grow in his grace until his task within you is finished on that day when Jesus Christ returns” (TLB).

A Surprise Blessing

As the group neared the deadline Carlson had set, a man approached her in church one Sunday morning. He asked how the kids were doing. Then he told Carlson that she and Dick needed to keep their money. He wanted to per-

sonally underwrite the entire trip for all eight students.

“What a surprise, what a blessing!” Carlson says of that generous gift.

When each student had memorized the entire book of Philippians, he or she chose one member of the congregation to recite it to. Once the whole class had memorized all of it, they recited it together for the congregation. It was “such a blessing to the people,” Carlson says.

The students were going to Disneyland. “I’m not one hundred percent sure I like Disneyland as an incentive to do something spiritual,” Goodwin says. But, he admits, the trip was a wonderful bonding experience. And the students were clearly gaining deeper benefits from committing God’s word to memory.

Melinda Burwell explains, “It helps you remember how God wants you to live your life.” She adds, “It helps me remember to do and say good things, especially when I don’t feel that way.” And Sarah De Witt says that having the words of Scripture on the tip of your tongue can help you answer someone’s question about the Bible.

The trip to Disneyland took place last August. Goodwin and the youth di-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 37

Beckie Supiano is an intern with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in Washington, D.C.

PHILIPPIAN KIDS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 25

rector joined Carlson and the students. The group took the train—thirty hours each way—but they had “not even the slightest problem with any of the kids,” Carlson says.

Disneyland “was a blast,” De Witt says. She and her classmates loved riding Space Mountain and the Tower of Terror. For most of the class it was their first trip there.

But Dick’s health was failing. Carlson almost didn’t go on the trip because he was so ill, and they had been told he had between six and eighteen months to live. Toward the end of the week, Carlson became anxious to be home with him even though she called every day and knew he was being well cared for.

Two weeks after the class went to Disneyland, Dick fell and injured his neck. He went downhill quickly after that. In September he passed away, six weeks after the trip.

After losing Dick, Carlson’s interactions with the students became even more important for her. “They’ve given her a purpose in her grief,” Goodwin says. When Dick died, Goodwin suggested that Jan take a break from some of her commitments.

She no longer teaches the Sunday-school class, but she still remains connected to her students. Because palsy inhibits her ability to write, the students have helped address all of her Christmas cards for the past three years.

One moment stands out for both Carlson and Goodwin. The students were prepared to recite Philippians before the entire congregation. They were decked out in matching t-shirts that say, “I know the secret,” a reference to Philippians 4:12. When they began, all but one of the group got to their knees. One of the girls is a little person, and the students decided they all wanted to be at the same height as they shared Philippians. People in the congregation were moved to tears, Goodwin says.

Despite his early doubts, Goodwin says the whole experience has been miraculous. “As a pastor, I’ve just never seen anything quite like it,” he says. □