



360 PROJECT

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The Story

It was Sunday night, 7:17 PM. The first gathering of a core group of students from Deer Valley High School was about to begin. There were eight boys and four girls who had gathered at one of the students' homes. Although they didn't know it, this was a pilot group that I had started to see if a theory I had been thinking about could work.

My name is Tommy Fox. I have been a local youth pastor for 15 years. I have been on a journey to discover how to raise up a young generation of Jesus followers who understand and live out their God-given gifts, abilities, and passions in order to influence those below them, along side them, and above them. This is a story of my journey along with five high school students who have joined me.

Getting Started

Like most college graduates, I couldn't wait to get my first "real" job. After almost a year of searching and interviewing, I finally settled down in a place that seemed to be a perfect fit. It was really a dream come true. I loved this place. I remember the first week like it was yesterday, sitting at my desk wondering what to do. I was so unprepared for all that would take place in the next few years. I knew what I had experienced in my own life growing up in a local youth group, and I had been an intern for four years during college. So that's where I started.

Our team put together a Sunday morning program with great music, hilarious videos, live drama, and a relevant message. It was the hit of the town. Our numbers grew by leaps and bounds in that first year.

We soon began a small group ministry to care for and spur on the students. Then we added tons of activities and events to keep the calendar full and the kids busy. This always made parents happy, which made our senior pastor happy! Of course we had the usual Wednesday night program as well. All in all we had a jam-packed, full-service program for teenagers.

Although our team was constantly worn out from all the programs, and the pressure for bigger, better, and more was as prevalent as ever, our ministry seemed to be going very well. However, something didn't seem right. I couldn't fully understand what was missing but I knew there had to be more.

I began to ask questions, read books, and become a student of the culture. For the first time I began to see a different end picture than what was in my mind before. I was challenged by my mentor, Paul Johnson, to think differently than I had ever thought before. He talked to me about things such as influence, multiplying, and the Kingdom. I soaked up everything I could each time we got together. He didn't always give me the answers I was looking for, but he always led me in the right direction to find them.

Feeling the Groove

Six years had passed since I had first arrived. I had learned so much! Most importantly, I found out that the things I thought were top priority—the areas where I spent most of the hours of the week—were not nearly as critical as I thought. I'm embarrassed to say that along the way I had fallen into the same trap that had caught many others along the way: *the ministry I led had become more like a business and less like the model of Jesus.*

We made some significant changes, most of them in the mindset of our leaders. I felt we had moved much closer to the formula that Jesus had in mind for us when he left this earth. The problem now was that the formula didn't seem to fit the church where I worked. It was one battle after another. I fought the ones I thought were most important, but there were just too many to take on. It was apparent that my theory wouldn't work in this environment. In my opinion, our church leaders just had a different definition of success. The end picture looked very different, and my time seemed to be slipping away in pointless meetings and debates about philosophy. I had to make a decision that was very difficult even though it was the right thing to do. After ten years, I had to go.

A friend and I decided to start our own organization and test the theory. He was having great success in the urban areas of the city and I really liked his overall philosophy to build the Kingdom. I really only knew the suburban world, and there was a great need there even though it seemed as if there was a church on every corner. I actually found out that only about 20% of suburban teenagers in our city were attending a church regularly (at least two times a month).

What was the problem? This was a fairly conservative, Bible belt region of the United States. How could only 20% of suburban teenagers be attending church regularly? The truth was, even fewer of these teens were living out their Christian walk on a daily basis. So I kept asking myself, "What are we doing wrong in the church? Why are our students not living out their faith? Why are so many of them falling away when they graduate?"

Many answers to these questions were found as my pilot group of eight boys and four girls continued to meet during the next 15 weeks.

The First Night

I started the group by going around the room and asking each person to share why he or she was invited. As I made my way around the room I looked into the eyes of each student. I got the feeling that what I was asking was somewhat of a surprise to many of them.

Some of the students looked confused. It was like they had no idea that they played such a critical role in the redemptive process that Jesus began and planned for us to continue.

Some of the students looked scared. I could almost hear the questions rattling around in their heads: “Does this mean we actually have to talk about Jesus in front of people? I have a hard enough time talking at all, and now you want me to talk about *Jesus*?”

For other students it was as if they finally had a chance to do something with their faith. It was like they were given permission for the very first time to share the love of Christ in a practical way. I think they had always known it was part of the deal as a Christ follower, but didn’t know how to organize the idea.

I explained to the group that Jesus’ purpose was very clear. We read in the Gospels that the reason he existed was to seek and save that which was lost. His purpose was to reconnect the disconnected. He existed to bring glory to his Father by bridging the gap between sinful human beings and a holy God. He did that on the Cross!

We must all connect to God through his son Jesus Christ. Our goal, I told the group, was to help connect the hearts of their friends with the heart of God. We could do that the same way Jesus taught us: by building friendships of integrity where we could begin to have influence. We needed to live our lives in such a way that our friends could not resist asking things such as, “Why? Why are you so nice to me? Why do you care so much? Why do you spend your time doing that? Why won’t you go with us? Why do you continue to forgive them?”

I looked into the students’ eyes. I told them that our journey is not an easy one, but it is what we are called to do as followers of Jesus. We can be assured that God is with us, guiding us, and using us, each step of the way.

The Reaction

After I cast the vision of what we were about to do, I opened the conversation up to the group.

Ross started by saying how excited he was to do this together. He talked about the friends who had come to his mind as I talked. They were mostly guys he had grown up with but had failed to intentionally impact. He understood the big picture, but when he thought of how he acted sometimes in front of his own friends he was afraid that they would think he was judgmental for trying to be an influence when he sometimes made the same poor choices.

Kelsey seemed a bit uneasy about the idea. She explained that she wanted to be used by God but said she felt more comfortable with the already convinced Christians. Ironically, she had only been a Christian for about three years. She was pretty popular and involved in many activities, and I could tell she wondered what this would do to her reputation.

Kate knew all along that this was the plan. Unfortunately, she had always been very shy and felt that this sort of thing would be too hard for her or that she wouldn’t be any good

at being an influencer. She thought God only gave those kinds of gifts to outgoing people.

Finally, Marcus acted as if this would be easy for him. Funny thing is, I thought he would be the least likely out of the group to excel. Stephen ran with a different crowd. Although he played soccer, he really wasn't a jock. He was actually kind of nerdy and awkward. But, nonetheless, he was ready for the challenge.

Following are the stories of four of the original twelve students from that first Sunday night Core Group, written in their own words.

Kelsey's Story

So, you want to be influencers. Well, for me there is nothing more exciting than knowing that God has given me gifts, talents, and passions for the purpose of partnering with him to build his kingdom. In other words, I get to play a part in seeing people come to know Jesus!

I have to run to sociology class in a minute but I want to share with you the story of how I became an influencer.

My story began when I was a second grader. My parents had just decided to give up on their marriage and they got a divorce. I'm not an expert on divorces but I have a lot of friends whose parents have gone through one (or more!), but this one was the worst I had ever seen—from the custody battle and weekend rights to the pettiness of who got what. Unfortunately I can still remember it all.

I would describe our family as “hands off.” We never talk to each other about what is really going on in our lives. It's always just the basics: “How was school today?” “Did you do your homework?” “What are you doing tonight?” and so forth. I guess you could say we don't have a close family bond.

I struggled in my relationship with my dad from as early as I can remember. There may have been happier times when I was little but I can't remember them. I never felt that he really loved me and wanted the best for me, and I still don't. He didn't give us his time or energy when we were growing up, and I resented him for that. I didn't understand why he wouldn't want to be a part of our lives. I questioned whether what I was doing was good enough for him. I would strive to be perfect in everything I did hoping that he would love me if I just got another “A” on my report card, or if I was able to start on the basketball team, or if I got accepted to one of the best colleges in the country. I tried to do it all—sports (basketball, softball, track and field), academics (including the National Honor Society), clubs and activities. I wanted to do whatever it took to prove to my family that I was going to make it, to prove to my dad that I could do it and that I was good enough whether he was a part of my life or not. Deep down I felt that I needed to prove to myself,

or to *someone*, that I was worth something, that I needed to do all of these things for others to see that I had value.

I thought if I just did more, if I did things better, then maybe my dad would want me. Maybe he would want to be a part of my life. Maybe he would say those three words that I can't ever remember hearing growing up: *I ... love ... you*. My relationship with my father has caused me to question my significance and worth. It has made me wonder if anyone would ever love me for who I am. I wondered who would be there for me if I really screwed up.

The good news is God provided for me beyond what I could have ever imagined. He gave me a family of people who loved and cared about me, who told me I was important, who wanted to be a part of my life and saw things in me I had never seen. I was learning that I had value beyond all the external things I tried to do to prove myself worthy.

I never went to church growing up. To be honest, I didn't really know why people went. One day at school I noticed this lady who was hanging around some of my friends and talking to them. I wondered what she was doing there, so I asked her. Her name was Heidi and she said she was just hanging out to get to know some of the girls at my school. As I asked more questions I found out that she was a youth pastor at a church in town. I didn't know any youth pastors but I was kind of skeptical. The more I talked to her, though, and the more I watched her and how genuinely interested she was in my life and my friends' lives, the more I was willing to let my walls down and let her in. She was so real with us. It was the beginning of a relationship I had never experienced before.

Heidi invited me to a small group that met on Sunday nights at the house of one of my friends. When I started going to that small group with other middle school girls, I knew I had found something unique. This was *the church*. Not the church I heard about as I was growing up—you know, sit in a pew, sing some songs, hear a boring message, and go home. This was very different. I found love in the hearts and actions of my leader and the other girls in this group. I found people who didn't just tell me about the love of Jesus, but *showed* me what it was. I found people who were different not because of what they said, but because of how they lived! I didn't become a Christian because someone told me about Christ or because I read the Bible, or because I heard a compelling sermon. I became a Christ-follower because I encountered God through the hearts of other people. I saw that they were different and I wanted to know why. The more I got to know them the more I realized that I was encountering Jesus every time I was with them.

In that small group was a girl named Lori. She became my friend the first night I visited the group. She invited me to her house for sleepovers, offered to pick me up and take me to church, and called me on the phone to see how my day went. She cared for me as no one had before. Our relationship continued to grow over the years and it never seemed to be about some personal goal she had of leading me to Christ. Her intentions were to get to know me, and because of her relationships with Christ I was able to encounter him through her. She made an intentional commitment to me that I'll never forget.

To this day Lori and I are still best friends and have begun to invest in others, both individually and together. The story of our friendship is one that we are passionate about. We love to share it with others and we are eternally changed because of her decision to invest in me.

When I became a Christian I quickly realized how much I wanted to invest in someone else. The church I started going to on Sundays had a leadership team that met at someone's house. My friend Lori had been going to it and asked me if I wanted to come with her. I found out that it was a pretty new group of students from my school who were meeting to learn how to be "influencers for the Kingdom." These students all went to different churches but came together as a team to make a difference on our campus.

The first night Tommy, the main leader, asked me to share why I was there. I told them my story and then I said that I wanted to invest in others as Lori had invested in me. I went on to say that

I wanted to be the type of friend who was different from the rest of the world, the type of person who wouldn't leave when things got rough. I didn't want to judge, but instead to listen and encourage. I wanted to not only pray for those in need but to help meet those needs. I wanted to help people come to know Jesus just as I had.

I soon realized that it isn't always easy. At times I would get discouraged praying for people who never seemed to change. It was frustrating seeing people walk back into their old ways. Sometimes it didn't seem to matter what I said or did. For so long I have prayed for my sister who is not in relationship with Jesus and has refused to change. I invite her to church, talk to her about life, and model for her, the best I can, what Jesus looks like. So far, it hasn't seemed to matter to her. I sometimes get angry with God about why she just won't change, but then I get a small glimmer of hope. Recently she finally went to a church service. I know it's not much, but it was a step! I'll continue praying, continue investing, and continue loving her as Jesus does.

I am learning to be completely open to what God has in store for me. I remember one night at the core meeting Tommy talked to us about being open to the leadings or promptings that God gives us each day. I remember thinking, "That's really weird! What is he talking about?" But, Tommy went on to say that God may be prompting you to sit with someone else during lunch, to walk a different way to class, or to smile at someone you don't usually talk to. It was all about listening to the Holy Spirit leading us through every day, every moment.

One day while I was at school I felt God leading me to walk down a different hallway on my way to class. Every day I took the same path but this day I decided to listen to what I thought God was leading me to do. I ran into a girl whom I hadn't really talked to in a long time. Typically, we would just smile and keep moving whenever we saw each other. As I got closer to her I heard God tell me to talk to her, so I stopped and asked her how her day was going. Little did I know that it was one of the roughest days she had had in a long time. She had just been in an argument with a friend and felt as if she had no one to talk to, but for some reason she opened up to me. We just spoke for a few minutes and

then had to run off to class. Later that day we got together to hang out and talk and reconnect our friendship. During that journey and through many other stories I realized that God is trying to use us, and so often we shut him out. Sometimes it's through daily distractions and other times it's just being afraid to step out and do something a little uncomfortable. But if we listen closely and have courage that he is going to be right there with us, he will use us in greater ways than we can imagine to help share the good news, take care of the poor, comfort the brokenhearted, and free the captives!

What I am learning is that influencing others is what Christ-followers do. We share life with them. It isn't a one-moment or one-time event, it's a process of walking with them on their journey—getting to know who they are, what they care about, and what they hope for in the future, and helping them connect to their heavenly Father and the mission he has for their lives!

I'm so grateful to Tommy for teaching me these great truths and for Lori who invited me into the game by asking me to be a part of the core group. What I learned there through relationships and experiences will be valuable for the rest of my life.

Well, gotta get to class. Be patient and trust God to give you the wisdom and the courage you will need. In the right moment, I pray you will listen to his prompting and be the influencer he has asked you to be. Welcome to the team!

Ross' Story

Hi, my name is Ross. I was the oldest student in the pilot group that Tommy led. I remember the day he took me out to lunch to talk to me about this new idea he had. I have known Tommy since sixth grade and I was ready to follow him wherever he was going. As I write this story I am a sophomore in college and have continued to influence those around me with the principles I have learned over the past three years. After high school I decided to stay close to home for college and do an internship with Tommy. Before I tell you about my internship, though, let me share with you one of my stories from high school.

Our core group had been meeting for about five weeks. Tommy kept talking to us about the way we live our lives as being our greatest witness and causing others to ask the question, "Why?" He talked to us about being intentional without making people feel as if they were projects. I must admit that this was hard to do at first. For me, it seems that it would just be easier to say, "I got this one and you have that one, so let's go!" Jesus was obviously intentional, but his process of reaching people seemed to be the way he served them, listened to them, shared with them, and loved them. This was our goal as well, although there were challenges along the way.

I played football and baseball in high school. This took up the majority of my time, when I wasn't studying! I really loved all that I was learning with Tommy and I believed everything he was saying was true. For me, I just kept thinking about my friends I played

sports with and how tough it would be to really be who I should be and still keep them as friends. I thought they would still hang out with me, but it would just be different.

I wasn't always the best example of a Christ-follower, especially on the football field. I was known to get a bit crazy at times. I guess I felt as if I would be such a hypocrite if I tried to influence the other players and then did the same things they were doing. I knew that what I was modeling wasn't good, but I lacked the courage to be a leader. I think the turning point for me was when Tommy asked me to follow up on someone who needed a friend.

One night, at core, Tommy came to me and told me about some kid who had just moved to our school from a small town a hundred miles away. His name was Chad. Apparently Chad's aunt lived in Pennsylvania and somehow found a phone number for Tommy. She had never met him before but had heard that he might help with her nephew. She told Tommy that Chad's dad had just committed suicide a couple of weeks ago. Chad decided he would come and live with his real mom even though they didn't get along. His real mom was an alcoholic, and that's why he was living with his dad in the first place.

Tommy asked me to find this kid and begin a relationship with him. Did I mention there are 2,500 students in our school? It took me a few days to find out who Chad was without him knowing I was looking for him, but nonetheless I found him! I had never done anything like this before and to be honest, I was a bit nervous. I walked up to him and said, "Is your name Chad?" He said "Yeah, why?" I kind of froze and then just decided to be as honest as I could without making him feel awkward. I said, "Well, I heard you had just moved to this school recently and I was told to look you up and see how you were doing." He told me he was doing ok and then didn't really say anything else. The whole moment felt really weird. Chad and I are from different worlds. I am kind of preppy, I play sports, and I'm pretty outgoing. Chad dresses in all black, hardly ever talks, and is very shy.

I worked hard in that first meeting trying to find the questions to ask Chad and just get to know him a little bit. I did find out what he did for lunch and where he would hang out so I could find him again. Several weeks went by and I continued to find Chad and sit with him and talk with him. Of course I still did most of the talking!

For a couple of weeks I had been thinking about the day when I would invite Chad to the club meeting at my house. I had played it over in my head many times. But one day we were talking and it just came out without me even thinking about it. I just asked him what he was doing that night, and he surprisingly shook his head as if to say nothing. So I asked him to come over to my house at 7:17 and he said, "What for?" I told him I was having some friends over to have some food, hang out, and talk about God.

He came that night and I introduced him to Tommy along with all the other core students and a few friends. I was kind of nervous how my friends would react to him. As I made my way around the patio in the backyard introducing Chad to one person after another, I became more and more energized and excited. I actually saw a smile on his face for the

first time. My friends were great with him and treated him very nice. After the club, I took Chad and a few friends canoeing in a small river behind our house. He seemed to have the time of his life. I'll never forget that night. It was a blast.

Chad and I continued our friendship over the next couple of years. Although he now has a group of regular friends he hangs out with, we still get together and talk from time to time.

You know, some people might see this story as a good one. Others would see it as a failure because I never got Chad to pray or come to church every week. I've learned that my job as a Christ-follower is to love and serve. My job is to share my life with others and show them, the best that I can, the love of Jesus and what it looks like to follow him. I plant seeds and try hard to not miss opportunities to influence. Then I get out of the way and allow the Holy Spirit to work.

I know Chad is different today than he was before I met him. He is a step closer to knowing Jesus.

My relationship with Chad was a catalyst for me to be the person that I was really intended to be, to live with the kind of character God desires of me. I know I'm not perfect and I never will be. But now I'm not ashamed of the fact that I have a relationship with Jesus. My friends know it and they have actually come a long way, too. I began to pray every day I would drive to school, "God, please help me to be an influence today without being judgmental or hypocritical. Help me to be a great friend who puts others first and is respectful of others' thoughts and opinions, and someone who is fun to be with." To be honest, I was praying to be more like Jesus. He was so good with sinners. He was nothing like them, but they liked him. That is what I am striving to be like.

After high school I was really excited to continue to work with Tommy as an intern. I never really thought I would go into full-time ministry as a job, but I knew God was using me to lead younger kids and so I decided to journey down the path to see where it led.

It was August and Tommy asked me to show up to a football practice where he was a volunteer coach for the 7th and 8th grade team at Highland Middle School. The plan was for Tommy to coach these guys and build a relationship with them and then introduce me to them. The first day I showed up I was standing on the sidelines watching when the head coach, Coach Jones, came up and introduced himself to me. He asked me if I was a scout or something. I laughed and told him I was just here because I was working with Tommy, who had told me to come out and watch.

Coach Jones said, "Well, do you know how to play football?"

I said, "Yeah, I used to play for North High School."

“Well, get out here and help me out!” the coach said. It was so much fun that day. I was hanging out with these kids, teaching them how to tackle, throwing balls to them during their drills, and just getting to know them. I kept looking over at Tommy, who was doing the same with another group. He would just look at me and smile. I knew he was glad to see me getting to coach. He always told me that there is nothing like coaching to help build some incredible relationships with teenagers. After just one day, I knew he was right!

Every day I showed up and did whatever Coach asked me to do. After practice I would walk with the guys to the locker room, asking them more questions about life, school, and football. Tommy and I would then talk about each of the kids and how they were doing. Eventually we decided the time was right to start a core group. It was really cool to be a part of a core group when I was in high school and then to start one of my own.

Tommy asked me to pick out six or seven students and he would do the same. So we found our house and we began to ask the guys. One by one they all said yes. Not one person turned us down! They all seemed very excited and couldn't wait until the group started.

The night of our first meeting I remember wondering if anyone would show up. I had talked to several students, but I realized they were just in middle school. They couldn't even drive! So, I just prayed that they all convinced their moms and dads to bring them.

One car after another pulled into the driveway. Tommy and I were there to greet the kids and their parents. Many of the parents were happy something like this was happening. We spent the first 30 minutes just hanging out with the guys. We ate pizza and played football in the front yard and Guitar Hero in the house. Eventually we all gathered in a small room. Tommy led the meeting and just gave everyone a quick overview of what we wanted to see happen with them and their campus. It was cool to see the excitement on their faces as Tommy explained to them how they were hand-picked because of their influence and how they could make a huge impact on their school.

The next day at practice the kids continued talking about our meeting and couldn't wait until the next one, just six days from then. I guess you could say we were well on our way to building the “core.”

I think about all the times that I felt God prompting me to invest in some of my friends and I told him no, that it was too hard, wasn't worth it, or nothing would ever change them. I felt awful and guilty for not doing what he wanted me to do, but I was scared about taking the risk. I didn't trust God and his plan. Over time I began the process of doing life with a few guys who were just about to graduate high school. I began to mentor them, listen to them, and encourage them for who they were. What I found was some of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Some of my friends I invested in never accepted Christ, others did long after I had invested in their lives, and some I have no idea. But God taught me so much through those experiences that I know he used them to equip me to invest in more lives in the future.

I'm so grateful Tommy took a chance on me and invited me into the game. He took a risk with me and helped me take a risk with others. I will forever be an influencer!

Kate's Story

I guess my story begins by telling you that I was raised in a Christian Home. Both of my parents are strong Christians and I come from a long line of Christians. Our home life is very busy, but we have a lot of fun. My parents have been good examples for me and my two younger sisters. I guess you could say we make a great team. We are always doing things together—shopping, doing homework, eating dinner together, and other things. We also make it a habit to pray together every day. My parents have always taught me to love others and to honor God with everything I do in my life.

I feel very blessed to have been brought up in my family, but like most families we still have our moments. Being the oldest I sometimes feel that I have it harder than my sisters. My parents seem to expect more from me. I know they would never say that, but I do feel that way at times. When it comes to sports, grades, and even my spiritual life I feel as if I am always the one setting the bar for my sisters. I guess that's a good thing, but it isn't always easy!

Even though I'm introverted, I've been very involved in a lot of things such as church, school, and sports, although I have to admit that I got kind of bored with church during my sophomore year in high school and didn't go as much. I did enjoy hanging out with some of my church friends, especially Amy, who has been my mentor since 7th grade. I hated the games, I can't sing, and the messages were just ok. What I really enjoyed was my small group.

At school, volleyball took a lot of time for me. I sometimes got a little burned out of all the games and practices, but when I look back, I have so many great memories. One memory I'll never forget was when my best friend Cara invited me to be a part of some student leadership thing. She called it the core group for Campus Life. Cara knew I wasn't that excited about my youth group and that I really wanted to be more involved in something where I could make a difference.

I totally remember that first night when we met at Ross's house. I was hooked! It was exactly what I was looking for. I could never really put my finger on why my relationship with Jesus was just kind of status quo, but through the last two years my spiritual life has really changed for the better.

I kept a journal of my experiences from this group and how it really helped me understand more of the role I play in the Kingdom as a follower of Jesus. Tommy asked me if I would share some of the entries, so here they are:

October 5

Last night I went to a meeting with a few of my Christian friends from school. The guy leading it used to be their youth pastor but now he is starting a ministry at our school called Campus Life. It was cool to hear about how God uses us to reach people who don't have a relationship with him. To be honest, it made me a little bit nervous. I know I grew up in a Christian home, but we never really talked about this before. How do I intentionally influence people? I guess it's just one of those things I will have to do for awhile until I learn how to do it. I'm sure my parents influenced people at some point in their lives; I have just never really heard them talk about it.

Anyway, I'm excited about trying this. I have gone to church my whole life but all I was ever asked to do was invite my friends to church. That was pretty easy. Tommy, the guy from last night's meeting, asked us to think of at least three of our peers who needed to know Jesus and intentionally invest in their lives. I picked two girls from my softball team, Betsy and Carrie, and then a girl from my study hall named Bina. Bina's parents are from India and they are Hindu.

I know Tommy said this would be hard but I just hope everyone sticks with it and really does it. I've made spiritual commitments before and many have failed pretty quickly. I'm going to need a lot of reminding and encouraging.

October 6

So today was really weird. It started when I saw Carrie and Betsy at my locker. It was like I just froze. I couldn't find any words to say to them. I have known them for seven years and we have played softball together for six. Why was it so hard? I just didn't want to say anything stupid. And what if they asked me a question I couldn't answer?!

I'm glad I called Sherri, one of the volunteers with Campus Life. We had a good laugh on the phone, but it actually made me feel a lot better. She said I just needed to be myself. This idea of influencing is a long-term deal, she said. It's not something that will happen or *should* happen overnight! She also told me that for years she tried too hard to influence people and ended up turning them off more than being an influence. She said she just wasn't herself and it was really awkward.

Sherri said that I needed to look for opportunities that happen naturally and not try to manufacture them. For instance, if Carrie's boyfriend just broke up with her and she's not taking it well, I could encourage her and do stuff with her that would take her mind off of him. Then if the opportunity came up I could simply let her know that I will pray for her.

The way Sherri explained it made it sound so much easier, even though I know she's had a lot of practice at this. I sure felt much better when I got off the phone.

October 7

Well, my day started off better today. When I sat at lunch with Betsy and Carrie I was actually able to be an influence. They were talking about this girl they didn't like and I just simply asked them questions about her. The more I asked, the more I think they figured out they were being too hard on her. I didn't come across judgmental at all. When the conversation was over I felt as if they would actually give this girl a chance! I know it's a little thing, but it really felt great to know I was being used by God. I know that sounds crazy, but I believe it!

Yesterday I kept thinking that I could lose my friendships over this if I'm not careful. Today I really felt a peace when I hung out with Betsy and Carrie. Each time there was a little opportunity to be an influence, I felt God sort of tug at my heart to say something. It was actually pretty exciting.

October 10

Today I was in study hall and my friend Liz, who goes to Campus Life with me, was asking me about our core group meeting tonight. Our friend Bina, the other girl I wanted to influence, overheard our conversation. She began to ask me questions about my faith. I couldn't believe it! It's like as soon as I let myself be open to being used by God, he started giving me opportunities. Bina is my Hindu friend. I don't know much about her faith, but it was so cool to tell her about Jesus. I didn't even think about being afraid, I just kept talking and answering questions. Scriptures began to come to my mind as I shared with her. I don't think I got it word for word but I know I was close.

I asked Bina if she wanted to come with me to our club night next week. The club is where we bring the friends we have been investing in. It's like a big party at someone's house. I know a lot of my friends might not come to church with me yet, but they would definitely come to club. Bina said she'd love to go. Our club is next week and I'm so excited!

October 17

At core tonight I shared with everyone about my great day. I told them about the opportunities that I've had recently and how I tried to make the most of them. Then I admitted that for years I have been passing them up. They all understood and remembered times when they missed opportunities as well. Tommy really challenged us and encouraged us to trust God to lead us and to help us discern the opportunities to take.

I am learning so much in our core. Most of all I have learned that to grow in my walk

with God I must allow him to use me to continue what his son Jesus started. I learned that I am a critical part of the process of reaching out to my peers that need him in their lives. When I am engaged in “being Jesus” as best as I can, my own spiritual life takes off to a whole new level!

I’m also learning that I must trust God daily. I’ve already had times when I asked God, “Am I going to get through this? Am I going to be the example and leader you have called me to be? How will my friends react? Am I doing enough? Am I alone in this deal or what?” In those times I know I must lean on God and the Christian friends and mentors that I have surrounded myself with to encourage me and help me though.

I am loving Campus Life!

March 14

Last night at Club, Bina gave her life to Jesus. I’m so excited for her! Sherri has been mentoring her for several months and she finally decided to make Jesus, Savior and Lord of her life. I could tell she was really thinking the whole decision through carefully. I mean, her parents are still Hindu and she was pretty nervous about how they would react. But, it was the best feeling in the world to know that I played a small part in helping someone come to know Jesus. I can’t even describe it!

January 5

After her first semester of college, Bina has decided to join the staff of Campus Crusade. She will be traveling to China and will be taking classes there while leading a core group of students who want to be influencers in their world. I am so excited for her!

I just keep thinking about how all this got started. It was a simple conversation that she overheard. I answered her questions, invited her to a club, and she was mentored by Sherri. Now, in one year, she is helping to lead others to a relationship with Jesus.

That’s just a few stories from my journal. As you can see, God is doing some great things and I just feel blessed to be a part.

Becoming an influencer sounds scary, especially for an introvert like me. But what I am learning, now more than ever, is how much people just want authenticity. They want to know who you really are—not the fake you or politically correct you, but who you are at the very center of your being. Being real and open with people doesn’t mean that you have to share all of your deep dark secrets or every area that you struggle with, but they

do want to know that you are human, that you struggle, that sometimes life sucks, and that you don't have it all figured out. Nothing is more intimidating than meeting someone who thinks that life is great, that there is no need to worry, and that no matter what it will be okay.

Yes, God is in control, but sometimes we can't see past our situations and we need someone in flesh who understands as Jesus does. We need people who can relate to us and help us see that our hurt and our pain are real and that God cares about them and wants to help us through them.

I have been so blessed in life and I've come to understand that my mission is to do all I can to be a blessing to others—to point people to Jesus by the way I live and love, and to be a voice of hope.

Marcus's Story

Like a lot of people, I grew up in what most would call a Christian home. My parents, along with my little sister and me, got up just about every Sunday and did the whole “church” thing. I didn't really know what it meant to be a Christian and honestly, I didn't really care at the time. I guess you could say I didn't understand the need for God in my life. As the years went by, we jumped from church to church looking for one we could all agree on. Since that didn't seem to be working, we eventually stopped going to church completely.

When I was ten years old I started to play soccer. I was beyond terrible, but I really just wanted to hang out with my friends. My two best friends, Sam and Steven, played on the team, too. We had so much fun together. I remember how we would stay the night at Steven's house all the time. We actually did some pretty stupid things. I won't go into all of that, but I'm glad we didn't get in more trouble than we did. Sam and Stephen were pretty good guys over all, but their families were not Christian and never went to church. Since my family didn't go anymore either, we never even talked about God or Jesus or church or anything spiritual for that matter. Mostly we just talked about computers, soccer, and the girls we liked but knew we could never get!

I remember one morning my parents said they had been invited by the parents of one of my little sister's friends to go to a church called Skyway Community Church. We had only been there about five minutes and I already knew I liked this place. It had been such a long time since we had been to church and it was kind of nice to be back. On my third week there, I heard a message from the youth pastor, Dan, during the student service about God's love and forgiveness. I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior that morning and from that moment my life began to change. I remember the message being good, but it was one of the volunteers who began to hang out with me who really made me want to keep coming back. He's the one who struck up a conversation with me and asked me

questions about myself. I don't ever remember an adult, other than my parents, who showed so much interest in my life.

That summer I turned eleven and was about to start middle school. That meant I was able to go into the student ministry at church. They had just started this leadership team and I thought that it would be fun, so I joined. When I showed up to the first meeting our youth pastor talked to us about investing in our friends who didn't know Jesus. He gave us these 360 cards. We were challenged to pray for three people, six times a week, and miss zero opportunities to influence them. I knew right away who my three people would be. I wrote on my card Steven, Sam, and my dad. I prayed consistently that Sam and Steven would come to know Christ. I also prayed for my dad because he worked up in Boston and I only saw him twice a week, if that.

A few months had passed and again our youth pastor was teaching about getting out of our comfort zone. So I decided to ask my friends to come to church with me. I remember the day I asked them. I wasn't nervous at all. We were such good friends I knew they wouldn't think it was stupid and I also knew they wouldn't turn me down. Pretty soon Steven, Sam, another friend Joey, and I started our own carpool. We never missed! I'm not sure why I never invited them to come to church with me before, but I'm so glad I finally did.

One Friday night at student ministry, Dan gave another message about God's love and forgiveness. He talked about having a purpose in life and how God has a plan for each of us. That night all three of my friends accepted Christ. I was so happy because I knew that I would be able to spend all of eternity with my friends. We began to hold each other accountable for the stupid things we said and did sometimes. We started a small group together with four other guys from our school. We had two guys who led our group and were like mentors to us. They would call us and hang out with us and just encourage us all the time.

We tried hard to be leaders at our school and be good examples of what it looks like to follow Jesus. It sure was easier when there were eight of us instead of just me!

One night my youth pastor came to our small group and told us he and his wife were starting a family and had decided to move back to Kentucky where they had relatives and had grown up. Although it was tough on us to lose him, we understood his reasons. In the last month he was there he introduced us to a guy named Tommy Fox. Tommy was actually Dan's mentor while he was in college. It didn't look as if the church would be able to hire another youth pastor for awhile and Tommy was just starting a leadership group for some ministry called Campus Life. It was a group of students who were interested in becoming influencers. So four of my friends and I decided we would join his ministry and give it a shot. We jumped right in and really loved the meetings and the leaders. We were learning so much about what it looks like to be a Christian.

It was also good timing for me personally. My life was in the beginning stages of a disaster. I can't tell you how thankful I am that Dan introduced me to Tommy before he left. I really needed him in the following six months.

It was my freshman year of high school and my life was as happy as I could have hoped for. I was really close to all my friends, I was getting good at soccer, and I was growing in my walk with Jesus. Then I found out my parents were getting a divorce. I guess it wasn't too shocking since my dad was gone a lot anyway. But, we were all getting along so great. Then on January 8, my whole world changed.

My dad had stayed with us all of Christmas break and was going to go back to work on January 9. He left four days early and said he would be "gone for awhile." I thought he just meant he was going to be up in Boston for a little longer than usual and I might not see him for two weeks or so. When my mom came home on the eighth, I knew something was wrong. I just had a sick feeling in my gut that something bad had happened. My mom told me that my dad had committed suicide on January 6. When I heard the news, I started crying. I couldn't control myself. It hurt so badly I can't even describe it. In my mind everything had been going good for so long, and I had hoped it would never end.

The next day, my friends and leaders from Campus Life came over to check up on me. They had just heard what happened. I thank God for my friends. I don't know what I would have done without them. We talked for a long time and then we prayed together.

The next two months were like a roller coaster. Not only had my dad died but I found out that I was going to have to move to Georgia because my mom couldn't make the payment on our house. To be honest, I was really mad at God. I was like, "Thanks, God, as if I haven't been through enough already!" It took some time for me to realize he was not the one to blame.

We started packing up our house and got ready to move. My mom hoped to be gone by the end of March. This was a tough time for me as well as my mom. She knew I didn't want to move but she also knew it was best for our family. As moving day approached, I counted down the time left to be with my friends and my core group. I will never forget my very last night at our club. There were so many people there that night. This was a time we had once a month where we would invite students whom we had been investing in. It was like a big party and it was a lot of fun.

Sarah, one of the female volunteers, called me to join her up front so that she could pray for me. After she finished praying, she asked all of the students whom I had invited to club to stand up. I saw about eight people. I remember thinking, "Marcus, you actually made a difference. You were responsible for bringing eight people out of maybe 150 or so." Then Sarah asked for those who were invited by *those* eight to stand. Another seven

or eight stood. Three more times she asked that question and to my amazement, close to 60 people stood.

Sarah told me that she was proud of me for getting out of my comfort zone and investing in the lives of my peers. Students began to share that it wasn't just that I had invited them to club, but it was the way I lived my life that was so attractive to them and made them want what I had. What a great feeling that was! Many of my friends talked about how they watched me handle things with my parents' divorce and my dad's suicide. They were amazed at how I continued to have faith in God. I can honestly say he is the only reason I was able to get through those six months and continue to go on today.

That night as I was laying in bed, I was still amazed that God used me, an ordinary, lowly freshman, to reach eight of my peers who would turn around and reach out to their peers and somehow affect 60 students.

Well, we moved up to Brownville, Georgia. Everything is going pretty sweet. My relationship with God is growing and I'm realizing that he is with me as I go through all the bumps in the road. He loves me and wants me to carry out his plan for my life.

I know that God is going to use my story to help others. As painful as it was at times, he has made me stronger. I continue to invest in my peers and partner with Christ to build his kingdom!

Reflecting

Since this first group of influencers began, many more have joined them in an effort to build God's kingdom in their own world. I have heard story after story of students beginning to understand and to practice what it means to "be the church." In all of the stories from my first pilot group, I found three distinct characteristics that I believe will help you become an influencer and live as a "360 student":

1. Be Real

It seems that being real is a huge component of influencing others. I heard it throughout all of the stories above and I know it's true in my own life as well. To be an influencer there has to be a certain level of trust where the person being influenced knows that you are just being you. It's refreshing and attractive to connect with people who are just being themselves and are not trying to be someone else to impress you or others. When people are trying too hard or changing personalities to fit in, things seem to be very awkward.

The truth is that we will not connect to everyone. It's just not possible! We need to feel the freedom to be ourselves and invest and influence those that we connect with on some level. We must learn to trust that God will give us the discernment we need on whom to intentionally influence. In the tool "360 Revolution" we choose 3 people that we connect with on some level and simply begin to pray that God will give us opportunities to begin that investment process.

Another reason to be real is that when you are being you, there isn't as much temptation to challenge your character. In other words, when we are trying to please others in order to "fit in," we sometimes compromise our character and say things and do things we normally wouldn't do.

Our character is a key component to the attractiveness we have to others. Remember what Tommy said to the Core, "We must live our lives in such a way that begs the question of our peers, 'Why? Why are you so nice to me? Why do you care so much? Why do you spend your time doing that? Why won't you go with us? Why do you continue to forgive them?'" Other than Jesus, maintaining your character is the greatest tool we have in influencing people over the long haul.

Your character includes the standards you have set in regards to your activities, attitude, relationships, and priorities.

These things must be improving all the time. When people look at your character do they want to be influenced by you? We must constantly be asking ourselves this question.

Be real. Be who God made you to be. Be strong in your character and your influence will multiply greatly!

2. Continue to grow.

Another component to becoming a 360 student is continuing to grow in all areas of our lives. This is one of life's greatest lessons. We must be learners if we want to be leaders. To influence people we must be consistently learning and growing ourselves.

In each of the student's stories in this book you read about mentors, accountability, and small groups. These relationships are a must for influencers. I am convinced that the greatest tool for growth in our lives is someone else that is older, wiser, and spiritually down the road a little further than we are who is pouring their life into ours on a regular basis. I'm not talking about a perfect person but someone that challenges you and asks you the right questions. Someone who prays for you, cares for you deeply, and is there for you through thick and thin.

I have also seen great success with students who are in a group with their friends that are growing together. There is something comforting and reassuring when you and a group of your friends are on the journey together and you encourage and hold each other accountable along the way.

Other ways we need to continue to grow is to read and study. I know school takes a lot of time and reading and studying are sometimes the last things you want to do. I encourage you to find the style or pathway that helps you connect to God regularly and stick to it! Some of you love to read and you might choose to read a book on a subject that interests you, or you may choose to read through a book of the Bible and really study it. Maybe you're not a reader but you could listen to pod casts of great communicators on your ipod or in your car. Some of you might like nature and you need to set aside time to be alone by a lake or a mountain journaling or praying out loud.

We also grow by taking risks and being open to the Holy Spirit as he leads and prompts us to action. Many days we, as Christ-followers, feel a certain prompting to go and talk to someone or do something for someone. Instead we look at our watch and think we don't have the time or we get nervous and pass up the opportunity because it's not comfortable.

We must learn to discern and follow those promptings that I believe will take our relationship with Jesus to a new level. They will challenge us and stretch us but they will help us to see people in a new light and keep our attention on others instead of ourselves.

In the 360 strategy, we find three people, pray for them 6 days a week, and miss zero opportunities. These promptings sometimes fall in that category of missing zero opportunities. Listen to the Holy Spirit and take the risk to seize the opportunities that are in front of us.

Here is a short list of some of the promptings I have had lately. Maybe this will help you to look for them.

- Start a conversation with a stranger

- Look someone in the eyes, smile, and say “hello”
- Ask people how their day is going.
- Ask someone to tell you their story
- Write a letter, email, or text to someone
- Call someone who is on your mind just to check in with them
- Go down a different hallway at work or school
- Invite someone over to your house or out to a movie or coke
- Serve at a community center, shelter, nursing home
- Do something out of the ordinary for someone
- Meet a new neighbor

3. Be known by your love

As an influencer we must become known by our love for God and for his children. We must be learning to see people the way God sees them. A good exercise is to go to the mall or walk downtown or in a crowded place and just begin to look in the eyes of the people you pass. As you look at them think in your head, Christ died for you. It’s humbling to think about how self-serving we have become when in reality Christ died for everyone the same as he did for you and for me—the good and the bad, the short and the tall, the homeless and the business man or woman. God loves them and wants to know them and we have the opportunity to help them see him by our love.

How are you sharing God’s love in your world? How are you serving others and showing compassion? What are you doing to be known by your love?

You know a lot of us grow up going to church, and before we know it we get so caught up in the Christian bubble that fosters the idea that the church is a place where you go to learn, sing, and serve each other. To the outside world the church is a place that has a political agenda, hates gays, and is full of hypocrites. Over the years we have completely lost our purpose....to BE THE CHURCH, that is, to be known by our love.

My prayer for you is that you would become a generation that reflects the heart of Jesus: to be missionaries in your families, in your schools, at your work, on your teams, in your clubs, and with your friends.

May God continue to use you and the gifts, talents, and passions he has blessed you with to become the influencers he has called you to be as you partner with him to build his Kingdom.

The stories in this resource are based on true stories; names and other identifying information have been fictionalized.