

“No person or place is too small for God. See our places and our people as God sees them,” Dan Flint of M.A.T.E. paraphrasing Stephen Witmer’s *A Big Gospel in Small Places*.



That is indeed what our 19 youth and 3 chaperones found during our 2022 Youth Mission Trip to Farmington, Maine through Mission at the Eastward (M.A.T.E.) We departed Pilgrim Church on Sunday, June 26 after a beautiful commissioning to go forth to do God’s work as the congregation sang Shalom Chaverin. Having loaded up our vehicles the previous night with all our luggage, bedding, tools and food, we were able to hop in and go. We rented a minivan, to the comfort and joy of Angélique, and chaperone Nancy Cooney provided a 15-person van from the Accord School in Norwell, where she works as a nurse and driver. We also took Nancy’s Honda Pilot, which has a trailer hitch which carried all our tools. Chaperone Greg Hunter got 20 tool belts, complete with hammers, measuring tapes, speed squares, utility knives and pencils, donated from Goodrich Lumber in Kingston. He also brought his big wooden box of personal tools – we were well equipped. And we headed north!

We stopped for a lunch break at the Kennebunk rest area and arrived at our home away from home for the week – the Farmington Conference Center – around 4 pm. We explored the camp and chose the bunkhouses for the boys and girls and unloaded all the food into the commercial kitchen/recreation hall. The ping-pong table in the rec area was an immediate hit, as was the refreshing waist-deep “river” that was down the road. Greg and Nancy went with Dan and Andy from M.A.T.E. to scope out the work that we would be doing at the 3 sites we’d be working at for the week. While they were gone, the river-refreshed kids and Angelique made the first dinner – tacos! We then had an orientation from M.A.T.E., along with a 15 person group from the UCC church in Middlebury, VT and a 50+ person group from the UCC church in Dover, MA. One important message, “Not only are we there to construct and repair homes, we’re also there to LISTEN. It’s equally important to put down the hammer and listen to the people we meet. EVERYONE has a backstory.” There was lots of excitement as we made our way to our bunks the first night. Sleep came late as anticipation of the upcoming week and all it entailed kept everyone talking into the wee hours of the morning.

On Monday, we made our breakfasts, packed our brown bag lunches, and headed off to our sites.

Angélique's group of 6 – Harrison Vose, Jack Edwards, Maddie Shifrin, Isabella Leith, Luke Hutton and Ben Wood– went to the home of Durwood Swett, a 91 year old man who built his house (with the help of neighbors and friends) back in 1961. Our first tasks were to rip off old faux-stone siding and rotting soffits. It was dirty and messy, but we got it done and didn't let the rain stop us. An intriguing part of the day was when Durwood's neighbor pulled up in front of our house and asked what we were doing. He seemed impressed that we were there donating our time and energy to help Durwood, particularly in the rain. He left us with this, "There's three things that make America great – Jesus, people, and the Constitution."



The next few days were much more technically challenging. Taking things down and de-constructing is easy. Building things and constructing takes a lot more skill and effort. We got some periodic visits from Dan and Andy, who gave us instructions on how to put up vinyl siding, but we still felt a little lost. At one point, when the kids were all trying to use the skill saw to cut the vinyl siding and Angelique was trying not to freak-out about someone getting hurt, Durwood's neighbor, Cliff, came over again. He warned us that we were "going to cut our fingers off," and gave us some clippers



especially designed to cut siding - MUCH easier and MUCH LESS fear inducing. As luck (or divine help) would have it, he had put vinyl siding on his own home the previous summer, so he was a bit of an expert. He stayed with us all afternoon giving us instructions and guidance. We felt like we were making progress. When we went back the next day, he came over again to see the project through until the end – the only break he took was to go to the hardware store ten miles away to get us the one piece we were missing.

During our time together, we got to know more of Cliff's story. Pre-conceived notions were dispelled as we shared his grief over the loss of his beloved wife, and his disillusionment with the government from his time in the military. When Durwood came out to check on our progress and talk a little, he



told me that Cliff “would do anything for anybody.” Cliff commented MANY times on how impressed he was with our group and the work and effort we were doing, noting that “grown men wouldn’t have stayed and worked through the rain.” Even Durwood’s visiting nurse commented on how “wonderful” it was to see “young people helping out like this.” She was going to bring news of M.A.T.E. to her other elderly clients.

Once the vinyl siding was up, we had to replace the soffits – another not-so-simple task. Andy from M.A.T.E. got us going, then we completed the project on our own. Harrison, Ben and Luke even did the “extra” project of replacing the old, rotting stairs to Durwood’s shed with a brand new ramp, making it much more accessible.



Dan suggested taking a lunch break each day and told us about a swimming opportunity at Wilson Lake, just 3 miles away from our work site. So after a quick trip to McDonald’s to



use the bathroom and get a few treats, we went to the lovely park at Wilson Lake for lunch. Monday was rainy and cold, so we just enjoyed the sights of lake and the Blue Hills, but Tuesday and Wednesday were warm, so the kids went for a refreshing swim. On Thursday, we had many too many tasks to do to complete our project, so we worked straight through lunch, stopping only for a McFlurry treat to keep us going.



Our final task came from the kids and it was above and beyond, willingly staying until 7:00 pm until it all was finished. Replacing the vinyl siding on the lower half of the house made the older, faded upper half of the house look really tired. The kids asked if we could get paint and freshen it up. So off came the shutters, the wooden butterfly, and the storm door. We matched blue paint to the original color and painted the wood siding, and also primed and painted the soffits and the trim. Durwood (and Cliff) were moved to see all the effort that the kids put into

making the house he had built looking so fresh and new. We all left the home exhausted, but with very full hearts.

**Nancy Cooney’s group’s experience, in Nancy’s words**



Our group consisted of Addison Thawley, Greg Kania, Peter Evans, Miles Sampson, Lily Romanelli, Grace Vose, and Riley Widdop.



On the first day that we drove to Florence Barne's house, I had given the group a preview of what to expect. When I had toured the house the previous day with Greg Hunter and the staff from MATE, it was shocking and disheartening to see the conditions that this lady with chronic respiratory illness was living in. It was as if everything and everyone in the home, including Florence and her dog, Tayja, were all malnourished, neglected and forgotten. The house was in disrepair with holes in the walls, no gutter on the roof, plumbing that barely functioned, only plywood on the floor, and a layer of dirt and grime that made it clear that the house hadn't been cleaned in years, if ever. For the four days that we were with Florence and her boyfriend, John, who lived nearby, we came to



know these wonderful people and their history. Florence told me that she had rented this house when she was staying with family in MA to recover from surgery. She said that when she came back, the renters had "trashed the house" and had stolen everything- all of the pots and pans, and even cut out and stolen some of the copper plumbing. Florence was discouraged and admitted that she had given up. She would lay on the couch, watch TV, and sometimes smoke cigarettes, a lifelong habit that she had quit and returned to many times before. Florence was tired from her respiratory illness and deconditioned and weak from not getting up and walking around. Florence also had lost her appetite, was very thin, and existed on very little

nutrition.

We got right to work. We first cut many large branches that were hanging over the house. This brought in more light into the home as well as preventing any branches from coming down and damaging the house in the winter. We then broke up into teams and put two ladders up in front of the house to take down the broken old gutters. With a lot of off-site instruction from Greg Hunter, we





were able to measure the front of the house and figure out the layout of the new gutter so that there would be four slight angles to drain away the water. I was so proud to see these young adults figure out how to snap a chalk line so that we could install the brackets evenly along those lines. Everyone worked together- handing up tools, brackets, and screws and patching holes with sealant. Others started to literally hand wash the front of the house to remove the dirt, clean up a small fire pit area, and mow the lawn. It was a long day with rain showers at times, but we accomplished a lot, and left at the end of the day exhausted and thankful that we could start to see a difference.



The second day was a continuation of repairing the outside of the house, removing pieces of siding from the back of the house to replace broken siding on the front of the house. Siding was also removed and replaced so that flashing could be added above each window to prevent rain from coming in. After these projects were manageable, a few of us went inside to work on the bathroom. At that time, there wasn't a working toilet or sink in this bathroom, cabinets were broken and falling off the walls, and there wasn't any type of counter on the vanity except for plywood. The priority was to prepare the bathroom for a shower. The kids took down and replaced old sheetrock and insulation from where the shower would be, and cut the flooring with a circular saw to make space for the shower pan. Addison and

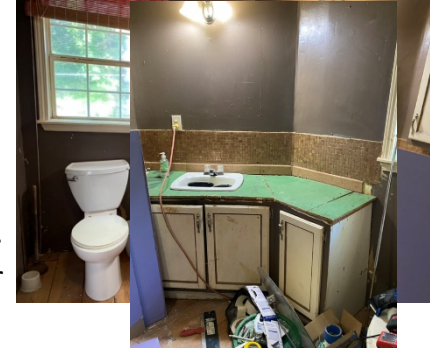
Greg framed, built, and sheet-rocked a wall that was going to be a support for the side of the shower. They did this with little to no previous experience. There was some trial and error, but with the help of the internet and creative problem solving, this wall was a thing of beauty. To me, in many ways this wall was a symbol of our time there. Creating something where there was nothing before- to come together and figure out how to help and support this woman, to work together, make mistakes, to learn and then achieve that goal was truly amazing and transformational for all of us.



In the end, we cleaned every cabinet, closet, and counter in her home. We washed the walls, the floors, and even the dog, Tayja. We cleaned Tayja's eyes and ears, trimmed her nails, gave her a sponge bath, and loved her like she was our own. We installed peel and stick flooring in Florence's small bathroom and used the same peel and stick for the counter of the bathroom in progress. We went to Walmart and filled our cart with anything that we could think of that Florence needed and had gone without for a long time. We got food, clean towels, a vacuum, and many other supplies that would show Florence that we cared about her wellbeing- that we saw her and that she mattered. She was so overwhelmed with the outpouring of love and even confused about it at times because it seemed unfamiliar to her. It was an amazing blessing to see how these young adults showed that they



were the hands and feet of God. They worked tirelessly, completing difficult tasks in a neglected environment. I truly believe that we all lifted each other up and had fun while we completed this physically and emotionally draining work. The mantra that I repeated over and over during our 4 days with Florence was



“Thank God we’re here.” Florence expressed how this experience brought her hope back, and that she was going to quit smoking to keep up her “new” house. I am honored to have witnessed the love and care that our young adults showed Florence, John, and Tayja. Being a chaperone on this trip has certainly

deepened my faith in a way that I cannot truly describe. I will be forever grateful for this experience, for having the opportunity to see God’s love through the work of some truly spectacular young adults, and also the guidance and friendship of Angélique and Greg.

### **Greg Hunter’s group’s experience in Greg’s words**

Our group consisted of **Greg Hunter, Ella Edwards, Zach Falls, Isabella Vose, Nathan Elliot, Sebastian Cooney and Oliver Thawley.** Team Gezinso (Gezin means family in Dutch coincidentally) traveled to a remote home in New Sharon that was owned by Racheal Hooker. Rachael got out of an unpleasant situation and purchased this property with her mother, Nicole, as a new home for them and her 5 year old daughter.

Rachael told us she purchased it last October and got a friend to help her put a new roof on it last November. She was thrilled to get 6 acres of land, a well and a septic system as well as the single wide mobile home. When Nancy and I reviewed





the property on our first night there with Dan from MATE we determined that it would not be safe to work outside the home. The grass was 2 feet tall and tick infested all the way around the property. Nancy and I stopped at Walmart to pick up some groceries and also purchased a weed wacker and a rake.



Our task initially, was to install a bathroom vanity, install 2 sheetrock ceilings, replace some rotten subfloor, jack and level an exterior wall, patch some exterior sheathing and do some vinyl siding repair. While the list of projects seemed daunting we knew we were there to do what we could and they would be in a better position for our being there. No pressure. Hah. Day one saw us taking down the old ceiling in the main room and hanging the new sheetrock, taping and “mudding” the seams and screw holes.

We also had a two man crew outside weed wacking and raking. Zach and Nathan spent a lot of day cleaning up the property to provide easier access for the rest of the crew and also to make the property nicer looking for Racheal and her family. When we arrived the next day the family had already moved bikes and plants onto the “mowed” area. Our first win.

The home had numerous places where windows had been removed and the siding was missing. Since this was an older mobile home the same color vinyl siding was not available. The plan was to remove siding from the back of the house. Replace that with new white siding and use the removed siding to patch the front of the house. Think curb appeal, at least the front would all be the same color. Day two found us split into 2 teams, one inside installing the second ceiling and the second crew outside taking down vinyl siding from the back of the home.

The second ceiling went much faster as we were now professionals, so we started on the subfloor replacement. We quickly discovered that subfloor really meant rotten floor joists, rotten plate and studs and a project that was going to tax the skill of this “new to building” crew. Peter from MATE came by a couple of times each day to drop off additional supplies and provide some assistance. He helped attach a beam to the outside of the house and we were able to jack up and support the exterior wall and roof. We had one crew patching holes hanging vinyl siding on the front of the house and the interior crew could now “sister” the floor joists.



(If you don't know what this means ask anyone on this crew to explain it to you they are now professionals.) We then installed the new subfloor, installed a new plate and sistered the wall studs. We stabilized the structure of the home in this area and could then install the new base floor, reinstall the insulation, add exterior sheathing, Tyvek and put up



the new siding. Our siding crew were getting pretty darn good at vinyl siding at this point and we left them to complete the back wall while the "sister" team of Ella and Isabella helped me rebuild the structure on another are of the house. The afternoon sun was cooking the siding crew

and when I went back to check on them we discovered a minor error that required removing a chunk of what they already installed to correct the problem. One, "Mr. Hunter there must be another way" and then they got back to work removing and reinstalling the siding with no complaints but dedication to the task.

The last day was very rewarding. We finished siding the back of the house. Finished rebuilding the structure on the front section of the house. Cleaned up and organized all the leftover materials for the next crew and spent some time with the family. Racheal's daughter, Breanna, grabbed Ella and Isabella and took them on a tour of her room, her grandmother's room and the rest of her house. She was so proud of her home and was excited to show it off. She wanted the girls phone number so she could keep in touch.

The family were so appreciative of what we had done. While the house did not look that much better in many areas, Racheal knew we stabilized her home and made it much safer for her daughter and mother.

I believe we made a huge difference in the lives of these three women. Every day Nicole thanked us for being there and vowed to pay it forward when she was able. We truly demonstrated through our actions what it means to be a follower of Jesus.



Thank you for allowing me to teach your children how to wield a hammer while they taught me how to be more selfless and open to others. This was a great mission trip and I look forward to seeing what these youth do next.



### Late afternoon / Evening activities and other fun stuff

After our long and hot days of work, groups converged back at the Farmington Conference Center for some down time. Some went immediately to their bunks to rest, some went straight to the showers, some went down to the river for a wade in the water, some played VERY competitive games of ping pong (aka “sting pong”) , Spike ball or volleyball, and some helped prepare dinner.



Each night was different - pizza from Farmington House of Pizza (DELISH!) and salad, spaghetti and meatballs, meatball subs and leftover pizza, and a hamburger and hotdog barbecue on the last night.





We played cards and then gathered around the firepit each night, made s'mores, listened to music, watched the fireflies dance, and did the TikTok tortilla slap challenge. It was tempting to stay up really late, but we knew that the next day's work would require rest, so off to our bunks we went.



Each night we gathered for a discussion of “Where did you see God today?” This brought up so many things that moved us - the generosity and hard work of our own Mission Trippers, to the gratefulness of people who had so little and appreciated so much. We read poems about prayer and prayed together. We even shared tears. We truly experienced “all the feels.” On the final night, everyone wrote in everyone else’s journal. This took some time, as we were all together until almost midnight. As Mile’s said in our Mission Trip “wrap-up” service on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, “We could have stayed up all night together, but Angelique made us go to bed.” Ah, the endless energy of youth. It is something to behold.

Our trip home, via a lunch stop at Old Orchard Beach, was smooth sailing, to the delight of the three drivers and the kids who were eager to get back. We all felt so deeply about what an amazing experience the whole week had been in so many ways – the relationships we developed and nurtured with each other, as well as the new friends we made at our respective homes in Maine. God was living among us and through us. We will be forever grateful.

With gratitude and love for all our Mission Trippers,

Angélique

**Our prayer of grace at dinner each night -**

We thank you, God, for the food in front of us,  
the family and friends around us,



and the love between us. Amen.