

“Not Just a Dream”

Part I

It was for several reasons that a 19 year-old high plains country boy found himself standing in front of the snow covered Stage Coach Inn in West Yellowstone, Montana, on a January night at 51 degrees below zero. I later found out that I was not the first to come to the West (short for West Yellowstone) needing a new start. I brought only two bags, 50 bucks and an unimportant name. As Mac Davis put it, I had truly found happiness putting Lubbock, Texas, in my rearview mirror. I left there a tangled mess of flunked classes, empty beer bottles, failed expectations and damaged family ties. I had spent high school and three semesters of college exasperating most everyone I came in contact with and began to be ashamed of the man I was becoming. I felt the mountains might be the place to provide the education I knew I needed.

It was my parents who dropped me off at 3 a.m. to catch the bus north out of Lubbock, and as hard as I tried, I really couldn't blame them for my situation. My Dad was a science teacher, preacher and farmer who believed in never missing a Sunday (am or pm) or Wednesday service, including Super Bowl Sunday. He also believed all the verses in Proverbs about the rod. My mother was a classic dedicated homemaker who sewed my clothes and made my lunch for school every day. I had spent hundreds of hours in the assemblies of churches, with outdoorsmen, farmers and cowboys with my Dad. I had all four grandparents alive and well and interested in my spiritual development, as well as the many other surrogates that any good church provides. To say the least, I should have been the last boy to find himself drifting and directionless at 19.

But there I was. And finally something from all those years kicked in. I remembered being told, when all else failed, to find the church, to find God's people, and that is exactly what I did. Well, first I began my job cleaning motel rooms in my faded brown coveralls and cowboy hat. I'm not sure what people thought when I knocked on their door and said, "Housekeeping," but I don't think it was, "I can't wait to sleep in the sheets this guy cleaned." After a 40-hour week of finding out why you don't skip class and drink beer all night, I looked up "churches" in the phone book. Since the "Church of Christ" was the only church I knew existed at the time, I called the number and made plans to attend a service. There are many moments in our lives when we can look back and say this or that changed my entire life or set a course of events into action that was irrevocable. This was such an event. I showed up one Sunday morning to a

motel and was directed upstairs to a small room. In the room were 20 or so people along with 20 or so jackets, hats and gloves hanging over two 7x7 elk antlers. It was the heart of snowmobile season, the snow was high, and the air was cold. The elk were there just because it was Montana. It was here that I would learn one of the truest functions of the church.

I met the man who would teach me the meaning of the word “mentor” and lead me into the purpose of my life. His name was Gale Loomis, and he was a mixture of mountain man, preacher and entrepreneur, with a Mark Twain twinkle in his eye. He was joined by his faithful wife Terry who deserves much credit for caring for him and his soon-to-be and all-too-eager sidekick. I’m not sure why Gale decided to take me under his wing as he did. I ate a lot, talked a lot, and had no money and no car. Maybe it was because he ate a lot, talked a lot and needed somebody to catch his horse and not laugh when he had to mount his horse from the back of his pickup.

Whatever the reason, Gale began to talk to me and take me places. He would always buy dinner if we ate out and ask me over to his house to watch basketball or football games. Gale and Terry were in their sixties at this point and it really didn’t make sense why I liked spending time with them, but I was always there. There were many others in that small church who did the same types of things. Paul and Diane Scott, Glenn (Gale’s brother) and Virginia Loomis, and John Schumacher to name a few.

As the weeks turned into months, and finally two years, I had spent hundreds of hours with Gale riding horses and snowmobiles and watching the Denver Broncos and Utah Jazz, in addition to the times we spent together singing, preaching, and praying through three services a week in that little one-room church building. It wasn’t all fun though. After my first eight-minute sermon, Gale smiled and critiqued, “You’ll get better.” A young lady I was pursuing and her family were disapproved of in no uncertain terms. Then there was the time I told Gale that I had a few beers for my 21st birthday, and he called me a fake. We didn’t talk for a week. There were no gray areas for Gale. He was the kind of man that you either had to reject or give in to and conform to his standard. In two years, I gave in. I guess it was because I saw he was real. I saw his many successes, but learned his flaws as well when he told me about his failures in his life, business and family. I saw that he really did care about me and not just about enforcing a bunch of rules that fit his religious views. I realized that he loved me. I was drawn to him and his example of what a godly man was.

During this time, as in all small churches, a need for a Sunday school teacher developed. Seeing that the church viewed me as being somewhat stable and the fact that we were all in one room, what damage could I do to the 1-3 kids that showed up once a week. I had always liked kids, and I began to greatly enjoy my duties keeping them in line for 30 minutes and walking them through the creation, the flood, and David and Goliath. Of the many kids I taught and began to love, one slowly became especially important. I will call him Trey. He was five years old and had long been the care of relatives as a result of poverty, neglect, vice and abuse.

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While we knew his first five years had been a little less than ideal, none of us knew the extent of the damage he had received. Trey began having more and more trouble, and people started asking questions. Eventually he began to put words to some of his past, and he revealed the source of his problems. His five-year-old mind developed descriptions of sexual abuse, and he spoke of them with his limited vocabulary. The type and extent Nathan of his abuse are too evil to write, and the sorrow that I felt upon discovering this was nothing less than revelatory.

I felt the instant I was told his word-for-word account that I could see the face of Satan. To this day, I hate to write or even speak the name of the deceiver. My life to that point had been about me. I was the main character, and my development and success were really the only thing on the radar. Up to this point, the saddest day I had experienced had been when my two horses accidentally ate poison and died when I was 12. Now I had a five-year-old whom I loved, in desperate need, before me. He had been the recipient, through no fault of his, of abuse that will haunt, confuse and possibly destroy his entire life. And I saw the deceiver, standing there laughing at him and me. I realized that all he desires is to kill, rob and destroy. I didn't have to read Jesus' admonition on that one anymore. I saw it, I had lived it, and I was crushed and bewildered. I wept, and I was angry.

I wasn't angry at God or entirely at the abuser. I was enraged that the evil forces of this world had stolen and planted seeds of death in one whom I loved, one who was so innocent. I began to see my life through different eyes. Things stopped being quite as gray as before. There were good and evil in the world, and the evil was altogether evil, even if for a time it appeared harmless. I began to talk to God about these things more and more. As a result, the desire to help ease Trey's pain and give him a chance at joy and peace began to grow in me. Then I looked around that small town and saw hurting people just about everywhere. I began reading the Bible all the time and listening to any sermon I could get my hands on.

My thirst for meaning and purpose brought me to drink deeply from the poetic works of David and Solomon. I was greatly affected by Psalms 90:12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom." I began to meditate on this and how I would spend my bank account of days. Up to that point, I had lived my ideal life in Montana. I had worked the ranches, broken horses, climbed the mountains, bought the gear, and completed the earthly goals I had at that time. But now my heart's desire was to help others, others such as Trey. So when I asked God to number my days, I believe He placed on my heart the call to minister to hurting young men in the midst of ranches, horses and mountains. I believed the sum total of what He had made me to be was entirely for this function. From that point on, which was the spring and summer of 1997, I have had that one purpose.

Having decided this, I set myself to prepare for this ministry. After consultation with many, I resolved to begin college again. I chose a small school in the metro-Detroit area and

sadly left my Montana life. My good-bye to the family in the West was the closing of a chapter in my life. I came to the church and to Gale directionless and needy, and I left two years later with a focus and a goal that would not easily be altered. I transferred to Rochester College with a laughable 1.44 GPA and 22 credit hours. I set a course to study Greek and receive a bachelor's degree in religious education. My main professor there was a long-time family friend and my Dad's mentor, Dr. Steve Eckstein. It was during my first semester of school that I met and fell in love with my wife, Melissa. She took me horse riding on our first date, and I was instantly hooked. It was also during this first semester that my aunt, Anne Liimatta, persuaded me to write my plans for Whetstone, the vague idea of a boy's ranch I had started to envision.

As I began to put ink to paper to these plans, there were two Old Testament verses that continued to influence my ideas. The first is the one hand written by me -- Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." I found in this verse the themes of maturity and manhood I wanted in myself, would seek to develop in myself, and would seek to develop in the young men I would minister to some day. Like my father and Gale had done with me, men must be sharpened. They do not merely become men. This abrasion smooths out and cuts away sin, immaturity and lack of character that are always present in a young man's life. And it must be done, primarily, by men in a caring and mentoring relationship. I saw Whetstone's name and mission encapsulated in this one drop of wisdom.

The other verse was a reading from Ecclesiastes. In chapter four the writer considers labor and its inherent follies. One truth he does see, however, in labor is that if labor can be shared then it is much more profitable. "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor... and if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." At 21 years I had seen many ministries and churches that seemed to be driven by a single, strong personality. This is not necessarily wrong or unsuccessful, but I felt Whetstone needed to be formed around the wisdom of the above verses. At this point I decided that I would be open to sharing the Whetstone vision with anyone who felt called by God to this specific ministry with me.

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Part II

I met Nathan Dahlstrom in September of 1997 when he moved to Michigan to attend Rochester College. Nathan is the first cousin of my childhood friend, Axel Liimatta. September of 1997 was an exciting and blessed time of my life. I had recently graduated from college and was enjoying a great job as a construction manager working for Pulte Homes. Before meeting Nathan, I had heard of his vision through Axel's mom, Anne Liimatta. Anne joyfully told me of Nathan's plan to begin a boys' ranch and spend his life loving troubled boys. Not much time passed before I met Nathan at church, and he shared his vision with me. I was encouraged to hear him explain his ambitions to work with troubled boys. I told him, "That sounds great!" and walked away saying to myself, "I hope God does not call me to work with troubled boys."

At that time I had a personal desire to continue working with high school teens. During my last two years of college, I was a volunteer leader with Young Life. Young Life is a ministry that reaches out to high school teens through relationships forged between volunteer leaders and teens. Though I had walked with the Lord my entire life, it was during those two years with Young Life that I really began to fall in love with Jesus Christ. I began to experience an intimate and personal relationship with my Creator, relying on Him to do what He says He will do. I was consistently experiencing Him answer prayers, provide, transform lives, and love. The best part was He allowed me to walk alongside Him, equipping and implanting a passion in me to love and disciple teens. For the first time in my life, I began to believe God had a specific calling for my life. I was to spend my life working with teens. Unknown to me at the time was where God would call me, when He would call me, or how He would call me. I was convinced that at the right time God would call me.

When I graduated from college in May of 1997 and moved back home to begin working at Pulte Homes, it marked the end of my time working with Young Life. I was excited to be moving back home and have the opportunity to live with my parents and younger brother Joshua before he graduated from high school. I was also looking forward to putting five years of college education to work as I began my job at Pulte Homes. I worked for Pulte Homes for four months before I met Nathan in September of 1997.

After our first meeting, Nathan and I would speak to each other occasionally at church throughout the following two months. During those two months I was becoming discontented spiritually. Since graduating from college, I had little or no involvement with teens. I deeply missed the relationships with teens, and I was confused and frustrated. I longed for the days I used to spend working with teens. Earlier that summer at a Young Life camp, the speaker

encouraged the audience to pray to God and ask Him to use your life in a big way. For months I had been praying faithfully asking God to use my life in a dynamic and powerful way to His glory. At that time, it seemed God was ignoring my prayers.

I received counsel from Fred Liimatta, who was and is a lifelong spiritual mentor. We met at a Big Boy restaurant one evening before Thanksgiving. I expressed my concerns and shared my desire to live my life doing what God wanted me to do. I was sure this included working with teens. Fred told me that praying to God and asking Him to use your life for His will and purpose is dangerous. I did not understand what he meant, but felt in my heart I wanted to pray that prayer. Before leaving the restaurant, we prayed to God and asked Him to use my life as His will determined. I could never have imagined then how Fred's and my prayers would be answered. Two weeks later God began answering my prayers. My life and its course would change forever. To that point, I had enjoyed good health my entire life; but over the course of the weekend I developed a massive headache that would not go away or lessen in intensity. I was experiencing a loss of balance, the left side of my body went numb, and I began losing function of my left arm and leg. Two days passed and with them, use of the entire left side of my body. The headaches and numbness became more intense by the minute. After an emergency MRI and CT scan, my family and I were told that I had a tumor on the right side of my brainstem at the base of my neck.

Everyone who knew me was shocked. From the medical side, the outlook was bleak. People with my diagnosis typically live from six months to a year. I immediately began three separate chemotherapy treatments and massive radiation treatments, and I took high doses of steroids daily. My parents, family, and friends showered me with prayers, support, and encouragement as I fought for my life.

A short time after being admitted to the hospital, I was laying in my bed unable to sleep, pondering how and why my life had taken this inconceivable turn. I was praying off and on to God for answers, and at some point it all hit me. It all started to make sense. God was beginning to answer my prayer to use my life in a big way to His glory. I felt God was showing me part of His plan to use me. It seemed God was allowing me to have this incurable and life-threatening sickness to use and heal me to His glory. I was sure then God was going to miraculously heal me and my job was to remain faithful through the upcoming trials. I was to embrace His will for my life, not complain, and possess an attitude of joy and thankfulness. I was confident that with God's help and with those closest to me loving and encouraging me, God would use my life in a powerful way to His glory.

Over the next four years God continued to heal me. Throughout these four years Nathan and I developed a solid friendship. We spent time with the teens at church, facilitated Bible classes, and participated in the assembly when needed. Often times we found ourselves talking about Nathan's vision to begin a boy's ranch. As I was recovering and beginning to experience consistent good health, I began seeking the Lord for the next step in my life. I was sure God

wanted me to spend the remainder of my life in full-time ministry to teens. I began to think maybe God wanted me to join Nathan and pursue the vision together. At the same time, God was opening Nathan's heart, and he was wondering if God wanted me to join him.

One night in the parking lot after church, Nathan and I had a conversation about the matter. Nathan asked me to prayerfully consider joining him. I told him I had already begun to pray about the possibility of joining him and would continue to seek the Lord's guidance. I told him I would continue to pray about the decision for six months. After six months, if I felt God was leading me to join him, I would join him.

Finally, after pursuing other options to work with teens and praying for specific direction from God in regards to joining Nathan, I decided God was calling me to join with him . Shortly after I made this decision, I moved to New York and lived with Nathan and Missy for three months, volunteering at Timothy Hill Children's Ranch where Nathan was working. The dream was starting to take shape.

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Part III

Encouraged by the addition of Jeremy, Nate and Missy set to work at Timothy Hill, preparing themselves for the future. It felt like another planet at first, but Riverhead, Long Island quickly became their home. Their time spent with the founders of the ranch, Jerry and Fern Hill, allowed them to glean lessons learned from a life-time of experience with foster and residential care. Jerry and Fern's son, "Thud" Hill, gave Nate every opportunity to grow and learn during his three years there, and he was able to manage and design several programs for 22 adolescent boys. They even found time to help plant a church at the children's ranch that continues to this day.

Since his freshman year at Lubbock Christian University, Nate had kept in touch with a friend he made there named Brandon Maxwell. Brandon had lived in Bozeman, Montana, 90 miles north while Nate was in the West, and they had gotten together for various outdoor adventures. Once Brandon flew to Michigan from his work in Atlanta, and they took a boy from Nate's church youth group on a four-day backpacking trip. Brandon had become a successful construction manager, and the two of them continued to talk often as he traveled to and from jobs across the U.S. In the fall of 2002, while staying at Nate and Missy's house in Riverhead for a few days, Brandon's story became part of Whetstone's story.

In August of 1993, I moved to Lubbock, Texas, to attend Lubbock Christian University. At this point in my life, I had no idea what I wanted to study, and my life had no direction. During the next year at LCU, I met Nathan Dahlstrom, and we quickly became friends doing anything and everything besides schoolwork.

After my second year at LCU, my best friend Matt Kamplain and I desperately desired to leave the cotton fields of Lubbock to explore the "big sky" of Montana. So we did. In August of 1996 Matt and I moved to Missoula, Montana, to fulfill our dreams of being "mountain men." Through a series of events, Matt moved back to his home in Albuquerque six months later, and I stayed in Missoula working full-time at a lumber mill. When Matt left, a huge part of me left as well due to the friendship that had formed between us. However, as tough as it was, I truly desired the beauty, adventure and freedom that Montana had to offer.

After a year of sorting dimensional lumber into pallets for a measly six dollars per hour, and trying to sort out my direction in life, I figured that I should go back to school somewhere. I liked to work with my hands, and I didn't like to sit behind a computer, so I decided to pursue a

degree in construction management. I found out that Montana State University had a good construction program so I moved to Bozeman to start school again.

When I started school in Bozeman, I found out that Nathan had moved to West Yellowstone. I was excited to get this news because he was only an hour and a half away, and it meant I had another good buddy in Montana. During the two-year span that Nathan lived in West Yellowstone, our friendship grew through many outdoor activities that we enjoyed doing together, from snowmobiling to horseback riding. I was sad to see Nathan leave Montana, but I enjoyed building our friendship during that time, and I knew I would continue to stay in touch with him.

During my four years in Bozeman, I was blessed to be able to live in a rustic A-frame cabin in the woods. My little cabin had a trout creek out front, a wood stove, all the wildlife I could handle, and a red heeler dog to share all of the memories with. This cabin was one that I had dreamed of occupying while I was spending my time on the “llano estacado” (staked plains) of Lubbock with a steady diet of dust and cotton balls. It was the perfect “bachelor pad” for me, and life was I knew it at the time could not have been any sweeter! Although I value what I learned while attending Montana State University, my most extensive education came from experiencing a new life in the mountains. These years really started to shape who I was and what I was truly passionate about. Even though my relationship with God was important to me during these years, it was not a priority or something that I care deeply for. Besides, I had elk to chase, fish to catch, and firewood to collect. Who had time to really focus on a relationship with God? That was my thinking.

In May of 2000 I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in construction management. The construction industry was booming when I graduated so I had my pick of jobs. I received a job offer from a general contracting firm based in Mesa, Arizona, and I took it. My position would afford me the opportunity to travel across the country, managing high-end retail construction projects. My graduation and job offer were met with mixed emotions and an array of bittersweet moments. Although I was excited about having a “real” job and traveling to new, exciting places, I was not excited about leaving the place that I had truly grown to love and that had taught me so much. Furthermore, I was going to be forced to give away my dog which was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. Life on the road for a dog that has grown up in the mountains is no life at all. But with that behind me and a whole new adventure ahead of me, I hit the road with my truck and travel trailer and became a “construction gypsy.”

For the first couple of years, I really enjoyed what I was doing, and I was able to see friends and family across the country during my travels. However, after working with the company for two years, something started stirring inside of me. I didn’t exactly know what it was or how to deal with it, but I knew deep down that something wasn’t right with what I was doing. My time on the road started to get more lonely as I moved from job to job. I was working anywhere from 70 to 80 hours a week, and aside from simply making money I felt what I was

doing was pretty pointless. I began to dread every day of work. Another day meant more traffic to fight, more contractors to deal with, more schedules that could never be met, and then coming home to an empty travel trailer. It was at this point I realized that this was not the lifestyle for me. More importantly, I realized that my relationship with God was not right. I began to feel a conviction that I was not using my talents and abilities for God's glory and that my selfish living was not what He had designed for me. God broke me right then. I had no idea how I was going to get out of the situation I was in or where I could go, but God brought me to my knees. For the first time in my life, I came into God's presence completely broken, humbled and vulnerable. I knew I could no longer do it on my own. After Nathan left Montana, we kept in touch fairly regularly, and when I was traveling I got to see him a couple of times a year. During our times together, Nathan shared with me the vision that God planted in him to open a boys ranch. He shared the details of having a piece of property in the mountains with horses, dogs and cattle and using these mediums to minister to troubled and hurting youth. Although the ranch aspect of the vision was something that appealed to me, I had never worked with troubled youth and quite frankly had no desire to do so. Therefore, over the years I never saw myself being intimately involved with Whetstone – until now.

As I began to honestly seek answers from God and what He wanted me to do with my life, I continually found myself talking with Nathan about this idea to start a boys ranch. The more I talked with Nathan, the more it consumed my thoughts. I soon began to realize that it was no accident that my mind was being flooded by thoughts of horses, mountains, boys, dogs and cattle. I knew God was hearing my prayers and was showing me what He wanted me to do! However, there was still a lot of confusion in my mind as to when and how I would join the Whetstone team, when I would quit my job, and if I really had a desire to work with troubled youth.

After a few more months I was confident that God wanted me to join Nathan and Jeremy and begin to pursue the Whetstone vision that God had instilled in Nathan many years earlier. After one of my jobs in Boston, I drove to New York to visit Nathan and Missy for a few days and to share with them what I felt God was doing in my life. As Nathan and I sat around a campfire, I looked him in the eye and said, "I'm in, Nate." I began to reveal to Nathan how God had been working in my life and told him that I wanted to be a part of the Whetstone team. Nathan was blown away by my decision to join the team and was not expecting that kind of news. We were both excited and anxious to see what God had in store for the future. The chord of three strands was now complete.

Shortly after Brandon voiced his desire to join WBR, Nate approached Thud Hill, his supervisor at Timothy Hill, with an idea. Could he, Jeremy and Brandon build a log cabin from felled trees on the ranch property in Long Island? If they failed, it wouldn't cost anything. But if they succeeded, the ranch would have a rustic cabin in a beautiful wooded section of the

property to sleep in. Thud agreed, and Jeremy and Brandon flew to New York and cranked up the chainsaws with Nate.

“The Cabin Week” will forever be a golden Whetstone memory. Having served hundreds of campers in the last fifteen years, it still stands today as a monument to Thud’s faith in us and our faith in each other. But of course, the dream doesn’t stop there.

Around Christmas of 2002, Jeremy and Brandon both moved to Denver, settling on southern Colorado as the place to start Whetstone. Soon they were heavily involved with an outreach ministry of the Lakewood Church of Christ called Dry Bones, volunteering evenings and nights on the streets of downtown Denver. Here, the Lord allowed them to witness to many homeless teens, many of whom they invited into their home – a duplex that they bought and remodeled with the help of many young men from their church and downtown Denver.

However, their biggest commitment in Denver was to become live-in mentors at Shelterwood Boarding School, where they volunteered to live on campus with troubled teens for one year, being paid only room and board. Leaving well-paying careers in construction management and watching their savings accounts shrink, they were given ample opportunity to absorb the truth that everything else is “worthless, considering the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus!” I guess you could say that like Paul and Silas, they truly rejoiced in their sufferings, and remember their year there with great fondness and gratitude.

In the meantime, Nate and Missy had made the difficult decision to leave Timothy Hill Children’s Ranch in 2004 to work at Lubbock Children’s Home. The three of them – Nate in Texas, Jeremy and Brandon in Colorado – began praying and meeting about the next step. Now heavily invested in full-time ministry with troubled boys, they felt more motivated than ever to start crafting an actual program. But they were still waiting for the right time to go out on their own.

Setting aside three days for fasting and seeking God’s concerning the next step, they decided to camp out for three days on the Pecos River in New Mexico, drink only water and praying for guidance. Afterwards, during a week of volunteer work at an orphanage in Mexico, they resolved to remain open to God’s will, whatever that may be. Finally, on the way home from what had become a life-altering trip to the border, they unanimously agreed to commit all their energies and resources into moving Whetstone from dream to reality in the immediate future.

Little did they know it would be six long years before Whetstone would take in its first boy.



Part IV

The Whetstone team made its first visit to West Plains in September, 2005. Why we chose West Plains is a story unto itself, but to make a long story short, we knew someone who knew someone who thought this area would be ideal for a working cattle ranch that served at risk boys. The list of such places is rather small, and WBR was committed to go wherever the Lord was leading.

After a short time, it became clear that this friend of a friend was right. West Plains, nestled in the heart of the Ozarks was perfect. Surrounded by the Mark Twain National Forest, the Ozark Scenic Riverway, and an abundance of affordable land, the area had the potential to satisfy the dream of building a “wonderland for boys.” But what cinched the deal was that West Plains was a good fit not just on paper, but in person as well. Everywhere we went, we received encouragement. The city leaders were encouraging, recognizing the need for such a place locally and nationally. Churches and civic organizations were overwhelmingly supportive of our mission to sharpen the character of young men. The time had come to make a move. Shortly after attaining 501(c)3 non-profit status in 2006, Whetstone began its first capital campaign. Having secured an agreement with local rancher, orthodontist and future board member, Dr. Mark Dake, the fund-raising venture named “Last Chance to be a Boy” after a famous quote from Teddy Roosevelt, aimed to raise one million dollars for the purchase of a property that seemed ideal.

The only problem was that God seemed to be saying, “not yet.” Even though all signs still pointed to West Plains – so much so that both Jeremy and Brandon had moved their growing families to the area – the fund raising ground to a halt. The “Last Chance to be a Boy” campaign was quickly becoming the “Last Chance to be a Ranch” campaign.

Enough had been raised, however, to open a small office in downtown West Plains, and to hire Brandon as its first employee. It wasn't much, but it was a start. God opened a door for Jeremy as well, to work as a Juvenile Officer, allowing him to gain invaluable experience with troubled youth and with local law enforcement officials.

God sent us just enough to keep going. “Keep trusting me,” he seemed to say.

Even without a ranch, there was still a lot of ground work to be done. A Board of Directors was formed to guide financial decisions, as was a more local Advisory Board to build relationships in the community. Jeremy and Brandon, along with their wives, Cari and Laura, plugged into local religious, educational, civic and service organizations. The four of them worked as employees, volunteers and church members in what was now “home.” Throughout this time, Nate, Jeremy and Brandon continued to meet on a regular basis to discuss what the future may hold. And despite the many encouragements to stay the course, several questions

continued to dominate their discussions. Where was the ranch? Where was the money? Where were the boys?

No matter how hard they tried, there just wasn't enough to buy a property or to justify the move of Nathan, his wife Missy, and now, their 2 children. Brandon and Laura were intent on her staying at home with their newborn. Brandon couldn't support them for long on what Whetstone was then able to pay. The contract for the Dake ranch was ending soon. It was amid these difficult questions that another person called up, out of the blue.

I have known about Whetstone Boys Ranch from the earliest days. My cousin, Nate Dahlstrom, and my close childhood friend, Jeremy Thompson, had been teamed up for over a decade, before I ever became serious about joining.

“Interesting,” I thought. “Have fun stormin’ the castle.”

Jeremy and I would talk every few months or so, over the phone or at holiday gatherings in Michigan. He'd give me the update about how they were gaining “industry experience”...and not getting paid for it. With a wife and growing family, I had zero interest in joining their mad crusade. I was very happy teaching at Henry Clay High School, in Lexington, Kentucky – the heart of the Bluegrass. Not that they were overly interesting in signing me up – me being a “city boy” and all. Nate had mentioned to me once that I would make a good headmaster for some sort of school or academy they might have on campus (some day!) but I chalked that one up to their delusions of grandeur. Besides, I was teaching Gifted and Talented Seniors in a magnet program. I had two sections of Advanced Placement Literature and two sections of Debate, which usually included a large number of GT students as well, since it looked so good on their transcripts – transcripts that would inevitably land on the desks of admissions officers of every highly selective college or university you've heard of, and many that you haven't...because they prefer it that way.

I was a successful Debate Coach who had placed highly in state, national and international competitions. (We actually had a traveling budget.) I had gained a Masters in Secondary Education, my National Board Certification, and I was 10 years vested in the Kentucky Teacher's Retirement System. Another 15 years, and I'd be on easy street.

But there was one part of my job that didn't feel right. Sure, I was doing a whiz bang job of prepping kids for college – but these were kids going to college with or without my help. These kids would appreciate my efforts, and surely benefit from the advice I gave them about good writing, critical thinking and public speaking, but these were qualities common among ood

and bad leaders. Making kids smarter does not make them better people. This was the flaw I saw in the system every day.

There was Marcus, who oozed with leadership skills, but only seemed to care about being the class clown. He attended a few debate tournaments, and seemed generally interested, if only because it was an opportunity to meet “cute smart chicks.” But he eventually fell away because he lost the trust of his parents. There was Sean, a quiet kid who didn’t cause any trouble, and who demonstrated a talent for writing and self-expression, but who couldn’t find the courage to tell someone he was struggling with depression. He shot himself in a closet.

There was Brian, obviously on his own, who hung around the door to my classroom before and after school, waiting to be invited in for a chat. I rarely had the time, for the stack of papers to grade and “curriculum objectives” to be met. There was Stuart, whose combined athletic and academic talent was unsurpassed, but who for some reason had no ambition do anything other party and “live in the now.”

All of these boys (not to mention the girls who struggled just as much) were falling through the cracks. There had to a better way.

It was in this spirit of “divine discontent” that I called up Jeremy one day, and asked him to host me, my wife Christine and our three kids, during a visit to West Plains. As he told me during the conversation, I had called during a Whetstone weekend – he was meeting with Nate and Brandon about the future, a future that was becoming increasingly unclear. I later found out that my phone call was an encouragement for them to keep pursuing the vision. God works in mysterious ways, don’t you know?

It was longer than a long shot, but I decided to apply for a Missouri Teaching Certificate just in case there happened to be a job opening. During the Spring Break of 2010, I visited West Plains for the first time.

Unbeknownst to me, Christine had been serving me coffee out of a promotional WBR coffee mug for several years, carefully turning it so that the ranch brand would face me, suggesting a leap of faith that she was willing to take long before me. Writing about it now reminds me of that line from My Big Fat Greek Wedding: “The husband is the head of the family, but the wife is the neck...and she TURNS the head!”

As it turns out, we were headed for Missouri a lot sooner than I thought. In a few short days, we were hooked on Whetstone, offered a teaching job by West Plains High School posted just hours before I walked in to apply, and committed to transplanting in the Ozarks. We didn’t

know any of the details, but the God who can count every hair on every head that ever lived, is pretty good at working those out.



Part V

The complete story of how God put Whetstone together would take a book, one that we will write someday, (stay tuned!) but for now we'll just focus on the opening...an opening that happened a lot faster than we ever dreamed it could.

Before Axel had finished his first year teaching at West Plains High School, Whetstone had a new contract for a new ranch in a new town –20 miles north of West Plains in Mountain View, Missouri.

After it became clear that the Dake Ranch was not going to work out, Whetstone started thinking about other possibilities. Tipped off by a board member, we made yet another visit to another property – one of several dozen over the course of the previous 10 years. But this one was different.

For starters, the owner, Roy Renegar, was willing to help WBR finance the purchase on very friendly terms. As this was in the middle of the housing crisis, condition one was met. The original homestead, a 50 year old brick structure, sat on 285 acres of beautiful Ozark countryside. Half pasture, half woods, it had 7 ponds, a beautiful old red barn, a three car garage and a spacious 40x20 metal pole barn.

But the best part was the dormitory-style addition that tripled the size of the original house. It had 6 upstairs bed rooms that would comfortably sleep 10 boys along with live-in staff and interns, 4 bathrooms, an industrial size kitchen, office space, a large walk-out basement perfect for a school, and top of the line wood flooring, molding and trim work. To top it all off, the entire ground level was finished with large picture windows, French doors and a giant wrap around porch to take in the postcard scenery. “More than we could expect” doesn't adequately describe it. We still tell people new to Whetstone that it must be seen to be believed. Without exception when taking their first tour, parents, donors, volunteers, friends and family are impressed by God's providence in leading us to a place that was almost custom built for our needs.

Convinced that this was the right time and the right place, Jeremy and Axel resigned from their positions and joined Brandon in a second capital campaign – “Building Boys of Character.” The goal was to raise \$100,000 in three months.



Three months came. Three months went. And by the end of the summer, WBR had enough money, and then some, to close the deal. Two months of hard but rewarding labor followed as we readied the property for its first boy.

Finally, on October 9, 2011 – almost a decade and a half after Nate scribbled that note in his journal – Whetstone Boys Ranch swung open its gates. And while Nate is now pursuing a different but related path, the vision remains the same. We continue each day, hoping to build a place of creativity and peace, where boys will be protected and guarded from the attacks of the deceiver. A place where boys can be lovingly instructed and mentored into the men they were destined to be. While we are the tools of Whetstone, the ministry belongs to God.

Compassion, Love, Mercy and Faith. These are God's ministry, and it is His work which we seek to carry out.

We boldly proclaim God as our Provider. He has sustained this mission spiritually and financially, bringing thousands of encouragers, advisors and supporters to our side.

October 9, 2011 was merely the end of a 15 year beginning. Only God knows where we go from here, but one thing is for sure:

Whetstone Boys Ranch is not just a dream anymore.

