



HOPE IN APPALACHIA

REACHING THE VULNERABLE



When we think of reaching vulnerable people, we usually think of traveling to other parts of the world. But what happens when a pastor desires to reach the most vulnerable within the community he serves? First and foremost, he realizes he cannot do it by himself. This is where Pastor Lonnie Brooks of **East Stone Gap Baptist Church** found himself when he wanted to reach the most vulnerable in the community for which his church was named—East Stone Gap, VA. Located only 23 miles from the epicenter of the opioid epidemic, Brooks knew that the most at risk are middle schoolers (ages 10–13).

Pastor Brooks, along with a former East Stone Gap pastor, Dearing Garner, began praying for divine guidance; a Gospel partnership among area pastors; and community support to be able to minister to these at-risk middle schoolers. Although Garner now lives in Texas, his heart is still connected to Southwest Virginia. Garner sought to bring HOPE, a ministry he founded to **Help Oppressed People Everywhere**. This ministry helps bring hope and healing to people in Romania, South Africa, and now in Appalachia.

Brooks and Garner set out to put together a week long sports camp where students could come to receive love, encouragement, and the Good

News of Jesus. When God gives a desire, He requires our faith to trust Him to open and close doors. Just as doors closed to sports-centered ministries, the door to the International Sports Federation (ISF) swung wide open. The ISF ministers in many hard-to-reach countries. They have organized volunteers for the Olympics but have never done any camps in the US. ISF was open to HOPE's invitation to come to Southwest Virginia and reasoned they could offer the same format they do internationally. Their ministry leaders not only were open to coming to share the love of Jesus with the middle schoolers in Big Stone Gap, they were willing to do so at their own expense.

With the event set, they needed community buy-in, and the Lord opened doors yet again. Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc. provided the needed transportation for getting the students to and from camp. Local business leaders opened their wallets to help cover the cost, and churches from different denominations joined in to help. Local schools



opened their doors to promote the camp, making sure their students knew about the camp and would be able to attend.

The sports camp provided pickleball, fencing, football, basketball, and archery (among other sports interests) but, most importantly, it offered a safe place, a loving environment, warm meals, a godly influence, and the greatest need—the Gospel message. Of the 65 students who attended, 28 made decisions for Christ! For follow-up, each new believer's contact information was sent to the church closest to where he/she lived.

God is still opening doors for camp this summer with most

of the area churches agreeing to help. The middle school will be busing students to the camp after summer school. Two local government agencies and the town are offering assistance and even the park facilities.

So, what happens when a pastor desires to reach the most vulnerable within the community he serves? When he exercises faith, trusting in God to provide the help needed, partnerships are formed, lives are changed, hope and healing are found and, in short, God is glorified. As President Harry S. Truman said, "It is amazing how much you can accomplish when it doesn't matter who gets the credit." In this case, God gets all the glory! ■

