

A rite of passage: Thompson journeys with 52 godly men

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08.24.10 - 02:35 pm



As David Thompson's 13th birthday drew near, his father wrestled with the idea of giving David a gift that would mark the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Craig Thompson wanted his son to experience a rite of passage akin to a bar mitzvah celebrated in Jewish culture, but "I didn't necessarily want to do that. I had been praying for what would be the best thing to do.

"The idea was to give David a 13th birthday present he would remember the rest of his life, that would impact him the rest of his life and let him know I valued him as a person, and I value his future."

His original thought was to develop a list of 52 businessmen and entrepreneurs from different types of industries, but Craig never felt completely settled about that idea. He wanted to help David understand he could live a life of faith without being a mirror-image of his father.

"He's different from me," Craig said. "Though we have similarities, he's a different person from me and I want him to be able to see you can be a godly man and have this personality trait, or be a godly man and be involved in this business or be a godly man and have this type of sense of humor."

Another aspect of the gift was that his son would be mentored by older men, middle-aged men and younger men who are in different walks and stages of life. The financial status of the men ranges from poor to wealthy.

"They've all got something that they've learned in life," Craig said. "In my letters to these men, I ask them what they would like to pass on to somebody who is about to start their life. He's getting the opportunity to learn wisdom at a young age. He can hear good things they've done, hear about mistakes they've made and benefit from their experiences before he goes into life."

The gift is meeting godly men, but David's responsibility is writing a blog and posting it and photographs on the 52godlymen.com website. Some of them are short while others are long and detailed. Craig said the blogs tie in with David's

English assignments and reinforce each experience in his mind. After each encounter, Craig asks his son what was the most important lesson he learned that day.

“This year, I want him to distill wisdom from any source and incorporate it into his life,” Craig said. “He has to stop and think about it. He has to process all the different things he has heard. He has to put a value on something he observed about them or something they said.”

David began his odyssey the week after his birthday in February, though the idea began in his father’s mind two years earlier when he asked David a series of questions concerning what he wanted to do in life.

“I had no clue why he asked me all those questions,” David said. “I would ask him on and off, every three months or so and he’d be like — wait, wait — finally I found out it was for this project.”

Going into the first meeting, David said he was somewhat apprehensive because he does not naturally have an outgoing personality and wasn’t sure about interacting with a grownup for a full day. After 26 weeks, he feels more at ease and is no longer apprehensive.

“But I still have excitement about the different things I’ll be able to do,” he said.

Joe McCullough was the first person David met. McCullough owns Theme Fusion. He is a designer who works with Styrofoam. At the time, he was working on First Baptist Church on Stuart Road.

“His son is a really good friend of mine and I felt comfortable around him,” David said.

The young man wrote on the 52 Godly Men website, “I really enjoyed sharing the life of a Styrofoam designer for a day and I learned some valuable life lessons. There are no problems; only challenges. If you are confronted with a problem, you tend to throw up your hands and say, Oh, no! A problem! But if you are faced with a challenge, you want to lower your head and ram through it. Also, when you’re shaken, what’s inside will come bubbling out.”

He occasionally feels like he might be in the way when he visits someone at work, but he has managed to overcome that sensation. Each of the godly men approach the day differently. Some days are four hours long while other days might be 12 full hours.

David said the experiences have helped him to have a better understanding of what he does and does not want to do in the future. If he chooses an occupation

that doesn't work out, then he can try something else he knows he likes.

"I kind of know what I want to do and what I don't want to do," he said. "And I know if this doesn't work out I can always go over here and do something else that I like."

The best day for David was a day with Alan Knowles, president of Dove Ministries Inc. (DMI Concerts), and superintendent of the Department of Support Services for Hamilton County. He attends Eastwood Church in Ooltewah where he is actively involved as a student ministries adviser, chair of the servant leader team, finance and operations team member and operations administrator.

"As far as interacting with the person, that would probably be my day with Jason Browning, our associate pastor," David said. "We didn't do anything, we just went out for lunch. We talked a lot and got to know each other a lot better."

And along with learning about others, he is learning more about himself and how he acts in a variety of situations.

"I think a lot of the things I've learned from different people, whether it be about life, finances or spirituality, I think a lot or most of it will stick with me," he said.

Some of the men David has visited include Dr. Lindsay Hathcock, Michael Gravitt, Jeff Holley, Pastor Richard Snyder, Dr. Michael Laney, Michael Graham Glasgow, Bob Bevan, Dave Whitaker, Loyd Frazier, David Cobb, Dr. James Beaty, Gene Browning, John Thompson Jr., Terry Forshee, Bill Stockham, Dudley Lytle, Pastor Chris Nipp, Dwayne Pugh, Aleksey Melnikov and his grandfather, John P. Thompson.

David is in the eighth grade. His mother Deana is his teacher. He has two younger sisters: Anna, 9, and Petra, 6; and a younger brother, 4-year-old Paul.

Craig said Anna is already asking if she can have a similar 13th birthday present.

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