

Jimmy Brazell Community Impact Scholarship Award

2016 Essay submission written by Shelby Stone

"The Least of These"

Haiden enters the world and is off to a bad start. He has already experienced the consequences of drugs for nine months in utero. He has five older siblings, two of whom are adopted, two of whom are living with extended relatives, and one who is being led away by the hand of an officer.

Lane is angry. His bright, two-year-old brain cannot comprehend why he is unable to see his father. Every night, Lane cries for hours, calling out for his daddy, but his daddy doesn't come.

Haley is a two-year-old girl living with her single mother and suffering from neglect. She doesn't know her father, only the boyfriends that her mom occasionally brings home. She has multiple half siblings and one full brother: Gabe, age three. Their grandmother soon kidnaps Haley and Gabe, but after her arrest for a drug conviction, they find themselves in the custody of the state.

Rachel is a young, unmarried woman without a job or a home who suffers from drug addiction. On top of it all, she's pregnant. Rachel has no one to drive her to the hospital on the night she is to give birth, and as a result, she has a wreck on the way. She loses her car, her driver's license, and her baby, who tests positive for meth at birth.

Four years ago, my family began the extensive process of becoming a foster family. This process required numerous tiring hours of training, multiple background checks, thorough home preparation, and ample health examinations and vaccinations. However, as soon as the first children arrived at our home, I could finally see the worth in it all.

Since that time, we've had nineteen children enter our home, and right now, all but two have left. Nineteen is just a number, but it's a number that represents nineteen lives that God cares about, all created in His image (Genesis 1:27). He knew them before they were even formed in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5), and has the very hairs on their heads numbered (Luke 12:7).

"How do you deal with foster care? I'd get too attached to the kids." I hear this question often. My answer is that I'm called to love these children. Although I'm sad when they leave, I'm comforted by the knowledge that I've shown them the love of Christ even in the short time I have had with them. I know that demonstrating such love can make all the difference in their precious lives. As William J. Toms once put it, "Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person ever reads." I've learned that showing Christ's love isn't always easy, and it isn't always fun, but it is always necessary. As Paul said to the Corinthian church, "If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing," (1 Corinthians 13:3, NIV). Building walls around our hearts to prevent

disappointment and heartbreak is not only selfish but also disobedient to Christ's command for us to demonstrate love, patience, and kindness.

Through this experience, I have learned that my life isn't meant to be about me, but about glorifying my Father, for "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." I've learned that to break the cycle of drugs, abuse, and bad choices we must begin by showing Christ's love to the least of these: a future generation of mommies, daddies, and leaders. I've learned that when I give as much as I can away, I gain even more. I gain when I see the first smile of a baby, and I gain when a biological parent hugs my neck, thankful for the love – Christ's love – that I share with her children.

Today, Haiden is four months old. He is chubby with a head full of black hair. By the grace of God, he suffers no health issues or delays.

For months, Lane talked about someday living with his "new family". Recently, Lane and his older sister went to live with their adoptive "forever" family.

Haley, now happy and mischievous, is in kindergarten. She enjoys eating sweets and playing sports. A family in our church adopted Haley and her brother.

Rachel just celebrated her one-year drug-free anniversary. She now has a job, a car, and a driver's license. She lives in an apartment with her healthy, one-year-old son, Daylen, and attends church with my family and me.

Nineteen is just a number, but it represents the children I have been privileged to love and nurture, those to whom I've read bedtime stories, eaten ice cream with, taught to ride bikes, and most importantly, those with whom I've shared Christ's love. I asked for heartbreak – for God to break my heart for what breaks His. In the search for wisdom and knowledge, the quest for our true Love, we find pain, imperfection, and wickedness. "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge, the more grief (Ecclesiastes 1:18, NIV)," but this shouldn't discourage us. The more we observe, the wider our eyes are opened to see the evil of this world. The more we learn to hate and fear sin, the more driven we are to seek God's heart and love above all else. So we pour out love to the hurting, we pour out to the poor, we pour out to the helpless and the least of these, and God gives strength through pain, just as He gives us strength to love.