



***HOW CAN A SOUTHERN REDNECK RELATE TO A NEW ENGLAND WOMEN’S COLLEGE STUDENT***

By Tom Brink, ServeUP New England Director

I had an experience 2 years ago which clarified a question that has puzzled me over the past 13 years bringing New England college students to the Deep South to help rebuild homes.

How can college students from a liberal campus culture interact with older volunteers with whom we work? Can college students and older volunteers learn to love each other?

I write this for two groups of people.

First, I write this for potential non-student ServeUP volunteers, who want to come to serve alongside InterVarsity students. You may be nervous about working with students and not know how to relate.

Second, I write this for InterVarsity staff who may be scared to have your students led by an older crowd. “Are these volunteers going to say something which will turn my non-churched students off to Christianity? Can I trust them together in the same space?”

We now live in a radically divided society and placing older conservative volunteers with very liberally minded college students could be a potential powder keg.

What will overcome these divides?

LOVE and RESPECT and LISTENING

Two years ago, while on our ServeUP trip in New Orleans, I was privy to a relationship which I never thought possible. We sent a group from the women’s colleges in western Mass. to work with our partners from the Arkansas Baptist Builders (ABB, a Southern Baptist disaster relief team we have worked with in New Orleans for 10 years). Jackie James, who is head of ABB, could be easily labeled by many as an Arkansas “redneck”. He drives a truck, has a deep southern accent, is loud, and makes many sarcastic (but friendly comments). He most likely is packing a handgun also. He would not be considered politically correct.

He was leading the women’s team in the Upper Ninth Ward in New Orleans. The first day he was hanging out with the women of western MA and was asking people their names. One International woman who was Pakistani Muslim, had a name which was particularly hard to pronounce. Jackie asked and tried 3-4 times and finally he just said: “I just call you ‘Packy’ with a strong southern ‘acky’ sound. I and other staff were shocked but the woman didn’t really respond and went on about her work. Later, that night the staff were upset and discussed at staff meeting what to do so that this woman would not potentially go home from ServeUP. Nothing was resolved.

We arrived on the worksite the next day and the woman herself came up to Jackie. (We all thought..O boy! She’s going to let him have it!)

But she said: “ Jackie, my country’s name is pronounced

“P -ock – I – Stan” , so you would you call me “Pocky”?

He said …”Sure Pocky” and that was it.

Wow….how did that happen?

How could a Muslim student trust a guy from Arkansas so quickly to understand his humor and thus trust him in this way?

As I have pondered this and other instances over the past 13 years of ServeUP, I’ve come up with a few crucial components which a volunteer needs, to bridge this ever widening gap between the generations and cultures.

1. LOVE
	1. Jackie was always friendly and would take these students out for Snow Cones and attend to their needs daily.
	2. He encouraged them to work hard but never put work over relationship.
	3. They knew he was happy they were there to serve!
2. RESPECT
	1. Jackie had something to offer the students. A skill, like carpentry, which was a skill they did not have. He would teach them this skill and then trust them to do it themselves. The students feel respected by this.
		1. I have seen Jackie wire a house with students one day and then set them in front of the house the next day and say…”It’s yours, go finish the wiring!”
		2. Of course he checks it and is there to support, but most importantly he trusts the students to be able to be proficient at the skill learned.
3. LISTEN AND ASK QUESTIONS
	1. Don’t push your views unless asked and be interested in the student’s lives and what they are thinking and going through.

At the end of the day, I have seen many students go home loving and being loved by the most unlikely people. This will happen to you too, as you learn to LOVE, RESPECT AND LISTEN to these students.