

Testimony of an Awana Commander

I have been the Commander of <our church's> Awana Club for approximately fourteen years. I took over the position with three qualifications under my belt. First, I am saved; second, I like kids; and third, I was willing. As you can see, this leaves me with a lot of room for improvement! Every year I promise myself that at least one time during the year I will send each team member a post card to thank them for their invaluable service in making Awana work. I think I have managed to actually do this once. I pray that my laziness, my selfishness, my sinfulness, and my lack of faith will never be the reason that anyone uses to explain to God why they turned their back on Him. Fortunately, our team has faithfully filled in the gaps and in spite of my many shortcomings our program has improved each year and we have had the opportunity to present the Gospel to many kids who would not have heard otherwise. Probably the most important thing I have learned these years is that Awana is not a one man show; it takes the unique talents of many people to make it work.

As I get to know kids, the sweet ones, the fun ones, the cute ones, and the problem ones, they become dear to my heart. I had three siblings in Awana that watched their mother shot to death in front of their eyes. The oldest rarely missed a night. Some say that kids come just to play the games; however, I know that there is more to it than that. Kids do come because it is fun AND they come because they are drawn to God's message! I believe this was the case with the oldest boy. He always came, and in fact did not want to quit even after the sixth grade. He was not one of the cute nice boys, but regularly caused everybody grief. In spite of the complaints and trouble, I was happy to see him every time he showed up thinking it was good that he was hearing the Good News. I still see him around occasionally, and I know he has had his troubles with drugs (several times I had to take away some rubber cement he was sniffing to get high on), but every time I see him I hope and I pray that the seeds we planted will bring him to the cross. There are some kids that attend and quietly slip away caught up into a life of sin and selfishness. There was one girl that always came even through a lot of high school. Even though she was interested and liked to hear God's Word, she slowly drifted into a life of sin. The last time I saw her she was pregnant (but not married). I still keep her in my prayers. There are some kids that come to a point in their lives when they make a real decision to reject the Gospel. You can see it in their actions and attitude and you know this child has decided to reject salvation: he has clearly turned his back on God.

These are the kids that break my heart. These kids are the ones that haunt me, that make me question my worthiness. Is it my fault that they have turned their backs on Jesus? If I was a good Commander, if I was even a so-so Commander? Maybe...maybe...if only...so many questions, so many feelings, so much guilt. Perhaps Jesus answers us when he describes the way to heaven as narrow, but it still wrenches my gut to know that so many choose an eternity separated from God. If there is anything that drives me to improve our program, it is this and the kids that show up. I am constantly asking myself and others, what can we do to compete with the world and all its glitter? What can we do to make our program stand out in the clutter of all the other things clamoring for their attention?

We are always looking for ways to enhance our program and have two 'special' Awana nights each year. We started out with one, a Harvest Party in the fall. This is a carnival-type idea with many booths set up (in Sunday School rooms), cotton candy, pop corn, snow cone, face painting, and whatever else we can think up. Why? Our attendance jumps dramatically for this event. This year three sisters who had not attended at all last year showed up this year for our Harvest Party and have been attending ever since! There are some kids that only come that one night but we have council time and they hear God's Word. Isn't that great!?

Also in the last four years we have been putting on a Jungle Party each spring with the idea being to finish the year with excitement and bring the kids back the next year. The Jungle Party is an obstacle course with a slide down the stairs, a tunnel, a maze, lost treasure, animal hunting, and many other ideas. Each year we try to come up with one new or improved event. These events are not cheap but when compared to the salvation of even one soul? One year a Sparky aged boy attended and during handbook time made it quite clear he had no idea who Jesus was. It is hard to accept that right here in the USA there are children with no more knowledge of the Good News than kids from the most remote jungle and the most isolated tribe. I am constantly trying out different ideas to get these kids back so we can share more about Christ. Right now we use our store. Yes, we have the store open every week. If someone brings a new kid to Awana, we give them and their friend five Awana dollars each at the end of the night. The idea is that if the new kid wants to spend the money they have to come back!

Another thing we instituted two years ago was an Awana summer program. We meet once a month through the summer with just games and council time. We don't get enough help to do handbook time. Why do it then? Well, we are the sum total of the exposure to God's Word that over half our kids get. I am loath to leave them go for five or six months without any spiritual food. I pray that we never become so rigid with our program that we won't try something new, I pray that we do not become the next YMCA, and I pray that we never forget that every child and adult no matter how seemingly unlovable, has an eternal soul that God loves and loved enough to die on Calvary for.

This year we have had at least four kids accept Christ as their savior. Isn't that something!? Isn't that what this is all about? It is. When I look at these kids, and know that 50 to 75 percent of them come from unchurched homes, it causes my heart to jump for joy knowing that they are hearing the Good News and some are making decisions for Christ! What an opportunity; what a privilege! My love for these kids compels me to share the Gospel with them. But something has happened in the last five years that has changed my whole perspective on Awana. I no longer look at Awana as just a children's ministry. Every year we have mothers and fathers bringing their children to Awana and they are just as ready to hear as their kids!

One mother brought her three boys to Awana and stayed to help. She was starving to learn what was in the Bible. At the end of the year, my wife invited her to a Bible Study

and shared the Gospel with her and she was saved. She is now active in our program and is holding Bible studies to help other Awana mom's learn more about God. We had a young guy who brought his girlfriend's young son to Awana. He stayed and helped. He was rough looking and I had several people let me know that this guy had some real problems, was I really sure that I wanted to have him around? I would tell them that I did know and that I was keeping my eye on him. I let him come and he would help kids learn their verses and his heart began to change. He had been raised in church and had wandered a long way from his faith but he was coming back. God was at work in his heart and his life changed. I was skeptical. I was a doubter but as far as I could see he had indeed surrendered his life back to Christ. After a year or so I began asking other people outside the church about him. Had he really changed? The answer from those people was always yes. As his faith deepened he decided he needed to be baptized and was. Members of his family came to me with tears in their eyes thanking me for what I had done. What I had done? All I did was allow God's Word to have a chance at his heart, God did it all! That man is now our game director. He helps with our youth group and many other things but most of all he is an evangelist. He is bold in his witness and thinks nothing of stopping by the local bar if he sees someone there he knows. He goes in and shares the Gospel with them inviting them and their children to church. He always has a Bible to give them if they need or want one.

If I could instill any one thing in the hearts of my fellow team members it would be a deep deep burning love for the kids of our community and an awareness of their eternal souls. I would want them to love these kids so much that the hour and forty-five minutes on Wednesday just wouldn't be enough time for them. About six years ago a brother and sister began attending our Awana Clubs. They were among the few who could actually walk from their home to church. They came a little early and they plucked at a soft spot in my heart. I made it a point to remember their names (a major feat in itself) and I made it a point to greet them every time they showed up. They lived with their grandparents and just over two years ago their grandmother died of cancer. About a year later I remember waking up early one morning with an aching burden for Awana kids, thinking, 'Tom, why aren't you willing to go the extra mile? What are you willing to do beyond Wednesday night?' A month later grandpa died. My wife called me (I was out of town) and asked me if we could take the kids and we have now had them for over a year! It has not been an easy thing for them or for us (financially or emotionally) but it has been wonderful to see God's hand at work in their lives (and ours). Think about it. God has given my wife and me a chance to invest our lives into the lives of these two kids. Pray for us that we will be diligent in fulfilling this charge. This kind of love doesn't come from our hearts but from God. I am convinced that God prepared our hearts, filling us with His love, so that when these kids needed us, we were ready to accept them. Just so you know, I am not recommending this to anyone, I am just telling you where God has taken us. There are tons of kids out there that need all kinds of things, but most importantly their eternal souls need to be saved.

Tom (not his real name)

Names have been changed and withheld for privacy.