

UNCOMFORTABLE... IN THE VERY BEST WAY POSSIBLE

BY BETSY MCGUIRE



From L- TeAndra LeShore, Mary Kate Waters,
Elena Harmon, Shawanda Polk,
Discovery Weekend 2011



Kia Jenkins, Mary Kate Waters & TeAndra
LeShore at Oak Mt State Park, Jn 2018



From L- Elena Harmon, Kaitlyn LeShore,
Nay Nay Hampton, Mary Kate Waters,
Maggie Pitts, Discovery Weekend 2011

Mary Kate Waters-Wright is a twenty-nine year old Math Coach at Green Valley Elementary School in Hoover. She was born into First Church and remembers her elementary and youth experience as “a nice warm environment, like home, and always very very comfortable”. But as she moved into the last two years of youth group, “*things started to get a little uncomfortable, in the very best way possible*”.

“My youth group experience was the most formative experience of my life.” This is how Mary Kate describes her experience in the First Church youth group during and after it combined with the youth at Community Church Without Walls in West End.

Moving towards the uncomfortable takes courage, a bit of fearlessness, strength and hopefully a dash of clarity and optimism. Those are words used to describe the staff and lay leaders who in 2009 led the initiative to combine the youth at both churches. **Nancy Hornsby** was an associate pastor at First Church who was friends with a young man named **R.G. Lyons**. R.G. was serving as pastor for the Community Church Without Walls. First Church had recently hired **Jonathan Goss**, a young man from Georgia who felt called to grow a downtown youth program. Nancy knew these young men should meet, so they did.

Reflecting on that time in her life, she said, “I thought we knew what true community looked like, but **I don’t think we could fully grasp what full community meant until we experienced our partnership with First Church and Community Church Without Walls.** Through that partnership I learned so much more about myself and how I interact with the world. I found that I can be mindful of my privilege and where I come from and how I can hopefully work in ways to partner alongside people that have different backgrounds than me.

Mary Kate’s mother, **Jennifer Waters** said, “When that relationship began, between Jonathan and RG, between our youth and the youth from Community Church Without Walls, our youth program and their youth program, as they had known it, began to die. And while beautiful, unique friendships formed between these youth, there was pain here at First United Methodist. There were loving, loyal members who couldn’t understand why this change was taking place; they didn’t understand why it was important; they didn’t think it was right that youth meetings weren’t always held here at our church. We lost members; folks who couldn’t embrace the youth ministry going on here left; they found other churches, I suppose where they could feel more comfortable, and where things felt familiar.”



Martha Louise, Thomas, Mary Kate & Jennifer

Thomas Waters, Mary Kate’s father and Jennifer’s husband, was on the Staff Parish committee in 2006 when they interviewed Jonathan for the Youth Director position. Thomas knew how important this hire was going to be for the life of the youth program. Reflecting on that time, he said, “downtown was not a destination 20 years ago...we had no parking-lot attendant, no thriving downtown. I could see that Jonathan felt called to be part of a diverse downtown church. Not that many 23 year olds think that way. If there is any one thing that made a difference for this church that I contributed to, it’s encouraging the committee to hire him.”

The new combined youth group met on Sunday evenings, either in West End or at First Church and enjoyed the things that any youth group does....service projects and retreats to the beach or state parks, and growing their spiritual community. And as with any group that comes together and opts to stay together, they became friends. Mary Kate and her friends had overnight gatherings on weekends, would go out to dinner, and spent meaningful time with each other outside youth group.



Youth Group at Laguna Beach, FL, 2011



Back, from L- Teandra Leshore, Shawanda Polk, Elise Hayes, Mary Kate Waters, Alexandra Rogers. Front, from L- Maria Spano, Elena Harmon, Alaina Elgin, Maggie Pitts.

Mary Kate expresses the highest praise for Jonathan and R.G. **“They set us up for success** and allowed us space to learn about ourselves and learn from one another. Jonathan was brave because he knew this might not be comfortable for everyone, but he knew it was the right thing to do. And he did it.”

“Though they both took the mission super seriously they also got in the middle of the fun and we had amazing dance parties. They really let their guard down. Those moments of celebration and laughter were the cornerstone of my youth group experience. We saw them as brave, intentional and thoughtful but also as people who valued fun and being together. They encouraged discussions that pushed boundaries. We had vulnerable conversations with our Community Church Without Walls friend, and that process allowed me a shift of how I interacted with the world.”

She adds, “because of them I never questioned staying at First Church. At youth group I felt special and honored. Everyone was celebrated and loved wholeheartedly here for exactly who you were. I never felt that at my high school.”

And in closing, she added, “this experience felt to me like the true reflection of the kingdom of God coming to fruition. We weren’t perfect kids, but we had perfect community.”



Please join our story collecting project! If you know a member with a great story or if you can help collect and write our stories, please reach out to Betsy McGuire at betsyhunter@gmail.com. On Sept 11 there will be a grand story collecting event after church in the dining room. Please come!