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9th-12th

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Love: The Light That Powers Paducah

On the surface, the world appears to be full of nothing but anger and hatred. It is dark and divided. Judgments are made based on assumptions. Our world is noisy, non-stop, and in your face. If we don't figure out how to relate to each other, the divide will only grow. If we don't make an effort to try and understand where someone who is different than us is coming from, we will never find a way to relate. We have to let love fill our hearts so there is no room for hate. Love isn't just a feeling. It is also an action. When we love, we are willing to roll up our sleeves and make good things happen for the people around us. When we love, we can't help but be the light. Like Martin Luther King Jr. said, only light can drive out darkness, and only love can drive out hatred. I see that happening in Paducah, and I am proud to say that the youth are a big part of that. I see the light overtaking the darkness, and I see love overpowering hate.

First, there is a building in Paducah where you will find dedicated high school students working as mentors and tutors to teach kids that success is possible regardless of color, gender, or socio-economic standing. The Oscar Cross Boys and Girls Club is a beacon of hope for kids and families in the city. The club welcomes kids into its doors every weekday, eager to help them grow into community leaders in a love-filled environment. Success is not measured according to the impossible standards created by social media. Within these walls, success is achieved when a kid meets an individual learning benchmark. Success is apparent when two kids forgive each other for unkind words and move forward in friendship on the playground. Mentors and tutors at the Oscar Cross Boys and Girls Club work patiently with purpose and kindness to teach kids that anything is possible with hard work and hope. All of these mentors and tutors are high schoolers who head to The Boys and Girls Club after school and during the summer to shine their light on kids who need to know they matter.

Second, there are two places in Paducah where the city's youth are showing love and making a difference alongside other volunteers of all ages. Volunteers at Community Kitchen and Family Kitchen work together to provide hungry people with a daily meal. Every weekday from 11-1, volunteers fill Community Kitchen preparing balanced and nutritious meals for nearly 300 plus people who otherwise might not be able to eat. Volunteers can serve with their church on a rotating schedule on Saturdays at Family Kitchen. Here, they prepare the meal at home or at church and meet at Family Kitchen to serve families in the community. Volunteers do more than just provide food at Community Kitchen and Family Kitchen. They also show love to those they serve and fellowship with them while they eat. Every person that comes to these two places has a story. Many are lonely. Some are angry. Others have simply given up. Volunteers spend just as

much time in sharing hope and showing compassion as they do in cooking and serving the meal. Community Kitchen and Family Kitchen invite individuals and families to come as they are, eat, and fellowship. They also invite volunteers of all ages to be a part of spreading the light of love in Paducah.

Third, you can also see light overcoming the darkness at Starfish Orphan Ministry in downtown Paducah. Starfish opened in 2006 to meet the physical and spiritual needs of people in the community. They supply clothing, home goods, and personal hygiene items to people in the community who can't afford to buy those things. They also focus on building beds and delivering them to people who do not have a bed to sleep in. Starfish relies on volunteers of all ages to fundraise, to sort through and organize donations, and to build and deliver the beds in the community. They reach out to schools in the area to invite groups to come and help with special projects like bed building. Starfish is also involved with international missions in El Salvador and Brazil. They take mission teams to these two countries around eight times each year to build homes for families who are living in scrap metal huts, to feed the homeless, and to visit orphans and special needs adults living in group homes. The majority of volunteers on these mission trips are high school students who are eager to put love in action and help people in need.

Finally, it is the season of giving. The city of Paducah and the Paducah Power Company make it easy to give back to the community during this time with Christmas in the Park. Noble Park, a Paducah landmark is spread out over 114 acres. There is a 5-acre lake in the center with a bridge and a gazebo, lots of pavilions for gatherings, two playgrounds, walking trails, a public swimming pool, and more. In the spring, summer, and fall, it is filled with people enjoying activities in the outdoors. It is also used for fundraising walks and 5K's. In the winter, however, from Thanksgiving until New Year's Eve, it becomes a Christmas light extravaganza. The power company spends weeks putting up themed light displays using a half million lights along the driving trail through the park. Admission is free, but the city asks that people donate money or canned goods to stock the food pantries in Paducah. Volunteers work in groups every night for 3 to 4 hours to collect donations to make sure that families won't go without food in Paducah. Church youth groups, school groups and clubs, and sports teams make up a large part of the volunteer groups collecting the donations. The city of Paducah is literally driving out the darkness of winter in the park during the Christmas season. The people of Paducah are driving out the darkness by volunteering their time and their smiles to collect lifesaving donations to keep the food pantries filled.

Love is action. Love fuels a community to take care of its people. Love invites us to be a part of something bigger no matter how old we are or where we come from. When a community is full of love, there is no room for hate. Without love and light, a city is merely buildings and roads. The love that the people in a community show each other brings light to that community and gives it the power to drive out the darkness. Paducah volunteers of all ages are showing love and bringing light to the people in our city.