



# Denise Fase

## **How did Tall Turf shape your relationship with God?**

My first summer working at Tall Turf in 1990 was when my relationship with God started. What's really special about that is it happened in a place that truly represented the kingdom of God. I met God in a diverse space in the midst of his beautiful creation. I think we often put God in a box, and Tall Turf challenged me to see God for who he really is. I was coming to understand God alongside people from many faith journeys, cultures, and languages. I got such an amazing insight into who God is through the people I was around because we all bear the image of God. I grew up in the Dutch Reformed tradition. To see God from a Baptist and Pentecostal lens taught me so much about the Holy Spirit. Beginning my walk with God in that context has shaped the rest of my life.

## **How did your position at Tall Turf stretch you as a leader?**

After I had worked at Tall Turf as the program director for a while, God convicted me that I was getting wrapped up in a relationship with him that was based on 'doing'. I allowed my work to become my life. I let myself think that preparing a Bible study was time I was spending with God. God began to shift all of that and remind me that my main job was to be his kid.

Then I began to more deeply understand who I am and my purpose. I started thinking about what changes I needed to make in my life to work for systemic, sustainable change in our community. I began to understand my role as a bridge-builder. My work at Tall Turf became about empowering leaders. I was surrounded by young leaders every week, so I had to ask: how can we create a culture of leadership development? We started developing new programs out of that driving question. We started Bible studies with the high school teens during the school year and then began taking them on college tours. We also developed the leader-in-training (LIT) program during the summer and school year.

## **How does Tall Turf strive for racial equity?**

Part of Tall Turf's mission is reconciliation with God, self, and others. In my story, reconciling with God meant learning about God in the context of his kingdom. I couldn't do that without understanding how we live well in a multicultural kingdom. It's powerful for kids to see people who look like them as their counselors and staff. It's also powerful to see different cultures living together well in a world where we don't see that. We had to become more intentional about antiracism training, so we invited Christian leaders of color to come lead that training. We developed opportunities for role play so that we would know how to approach a conversation or attitude that doesn't feel right. We tried to get past theories and practice real life applications in a safe space. More importantly, we tried to make that posture of learning a way of being.



## **How have you seen youth become leaders during and after their time at Tall Turf?**

In 1998 we started bringing young people on college tours. The tours focused on historically black colleges and universities, because we wanted youth of color to be in spaces where they could envision themselves. The beauty of it was how many of our Tall Turf youth went to those schools and became our tour guides by the time we came with another group of kids! Lightbulbs went on when kids began to understand that their goals were attainable.

After I left Tall Turf, I stepped into leadership at Grand Rapids Initiative for Leaders (GRIL). GRIL's mission statement is "strengthening leaders to transform communities." Tall Turf sent Leaders in Training through the teen leadership program at GRIL. That gave me a good vantage point to see how Tall Turf youth become leaders in their communities after they leave Tall Turf. At GRIL, youth brainstorm how they can be leaders in their community through the lens of justice. They participate in a silent demonstration to advocate for an issue of their choice. There were a lot of shootings in town during that time. I watched the LIT group really take leadership as they focused on gun violence for their silent demonstration. They went to city commissioner meetings, talked to city leaders, and organized the other GRIL youth to get involved too.