



LaShone Manuel

How did God work in your life during your time at Tall Turf?

My first summer at Tall Turf was a very hard summer for me. I was in the leader-in-training (LIT) program and I was sixteen. My fifteen year old cousin was shot just before I went to Tall Turf. He was a really good kid. You don't hear about young people dying that much, and when it's your own family member, it can really mess you up. I still had to work—my mom wanted me to do something to get my mind off it. The other LITs and the mentors knew what I was going through, and they didn't let me go through it by myself. They let me talk freely. They walked with me.

One night the LITs shared their testimonies with the campers. I decided to share my story. I had a breakdown before I went on stage, but my mentor came to me and said sharing this could impact other people. My mentor explained that we don't know who else has lost family members and might need to hear this. I had the choice to keep the pain to myself and dwell in it, or share my story and free other people. I could allow myself to be free in doing that. There were some other students in there who had heard about my cousin. I think it was important for them to hear his cousin talking about it, saying God is good, especially as a young person. I was able to be vulnerable and release the heaviness I was feeling. God met me there. Having community around me and bringing my grief before God in prayer got me through that.

That whole experience made me realize that I wanted to work with young people. Growing up, I was taught that kids don't have struggles. I realized young people often struggle by themselves because they don't feel like they have anybody to talk to. I felt like my cousin was battling a lot of things before he died, and I wonder if he ever needed somebody to talk to. Until we hear peoples' stories, we miss out on who each person really is. I work as a career coach at Calvin University, and I'm also a youth pastor at my church. I've been doing youth ministry since Tall Turf.

What leadership skills did you develop at Tall Turf?

I grew a lot the summer I was the LIT mentor. I thoroughly enjoyed watching the teens grow and hearing their wisdom as they stepped into leadership. That position taught me how to be the decision maker. When you're a supervisor, you hear the good, the bad, and the ugly of what's going on in the program. I had to take on a different mindset of leading by example, in and out of the office. I had to create relationships with the teens so that they felt safe, but also so that they could grow. I learned a lot about communicating, problem-solving, and building relationships with people that summer.

I loved walking alongside the teens as they prepared to go to college. We talked a lot about asset mapping, both for communities and individuals. Asset mapping is looking at the resources available to you. The LITs went on a scavenger hunt in a Grand Rapids neighborhood and listed all the existing resources in the community, like a school, a housing foundation, and a church. We applied that kind of thinking to individuals, too.



Who are you connected to? Who can be an asset to you? It's really rewarding to see those students go to college and get involved in their communities.

How does Tall Turf encourage young people to seek justice?

Tall Turf was connected to a lot of organizations that were also invested in reconciliation and justice work. They were intentional about creating a multicultural community. We saw it in action. Not only did we talk about justice, we tried to live it out, too. The LITs took an annual mission trip to Mississippi to hear Dr. Perkins (a Christian civil rights leader) speak and to build houses in that community.

Our LIT mentors also encouraged us to get involved in the community as leaders. We went to city commissioner meetings. I became a champion of diversity as part of a program Mayor Hartwell started. Tall Turf connected us to justice and reconciliation initiatives in the community.

What's your favorite camp chant?

My favorite chant is "Boom Chicka Boom." I also still remember Revelation 7:17 from the memory verses we did every summer. When you're a camp counselor, the songs you sing bring forth life—they're a huge part of the camp experience.