



By Becca Jenkins

"It takes a village to raise a child." As a mother of two young boys, Thomas and Will, I'm beginning to fully understand the truth of that idiom. Though I am an integral part of their lives, I'm not the only influence.



They will need the support of pastors, Life Group leaders, school teachers, soccer coaches, teammates, friends, grandparents, and the like to round out their development. I pray for the strength of this community, and I pray that they will be that strong community to someone else one day. But what about their college years? What about that awkward transition from childhood to adulthood? Blake, my husband and Dawson's College Minister, and I have found that college students are often in danger of not having a "village." If they had one in high school, they are usually forced to start anew in college. And it is *difficult*!

There are so many factors that can hinder that quest for godly community: busy schedules, cliques, distractions, church hopping, and the list goes on. But the necessity of Christian community is paramount in college as students are forming habits, identifying their beliefs, clarifying their values, and making monumental decisions. They need brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage them in truth, to hold them accountable, to pray for and with them, to enjoy fellowship and laughter, and to walk with them through the inevitable dark seasons of life.

This is what the Dawson College Ministry prays that Village will be. Villages consist of 15-20 college men and women who meet weekly in a host home to eat a meal and study the Bible together. For the overwhelmed freshman, for the transfer student struggling to get connected, for the upperclassman seeking wisdom for the next stage of life, we pray that Village will be a warm, welcoming environment where they can enjoy a home-cooked meal, time together in the Bible and in prayer, and deep fellowship.

THE MEAL

Blake and I are firm believers that special things happen over the dinner table. From the very beginning of Village almost four years ago, we prioritized having a home-cooked

meal for students every week. Not only is it meaningful for students to eat something cooked especially for them, but it is reminiscent of home.

We hope that it communicates our desire to be a spiritual family to them. As we gather to be nourished by a warm meal, it is a foretaste of the nourishment to come as we dive into the Bible together.

THE WORD

Each year of Village we read through one of the four gospels together. Our hope is that, if a student comes to a Village all four years of their college career, they will graduate having read all four of the gospels. Students are typically invited to read the week's selected Scripture portion before we meet so that those less likely to speak up in a group will have time to prepare and will feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts. As we read aloud together, we pause to ask questions, seek answers, and share what we believe God is teaching us through the Bible on a more personal level. We feast on His Word together.

PRAYER

This looks a little differently each week. No matter the format, students have the opportunity to share prayer requests every Village meeting. Sometimes students share requests with the entire group and then a leader prays. Sometimes we break into small groups of 2-3 to pray for one another. Sometimes leaders guide students to personally pray through certain categories or topics, and sometimes we write down our prayer requests and exchange cards with another attendee as a reminder to continue praying for one another throughout the week. Students are pointed back to the power and sufficiency of God through His Word and through prayer, so that as they go forth from Village, they are strengthened for whatever lies ahead.



FELLOWSHIP

Once a month, leaders designate their weekly Village meeting as a "hangout night." The groups take this as an opportunity to enjoy God's many other gifts together. During the fall months, there's bound to be some pumpkin-carving or bonfires involved. When Christmas season rolls around, we bake cookies and drink hot chocolate. Our family loves hosting game nights—though we have to reel in our competitiveness sometimes. The laughter and restfulness of these nights are often a needed respite from a chaotic week for the students. And those who may be intimidated by "spiritual talk" lower their guard on these fellowship nights, paving the way for an openness to spiritual conversations in the long run.



"I started attending Dawson and their college Life Group towards the end of my freshman year at Samford and instantly fell in love with the community there. One of the things that first stuck out to me was everyone's warm personalities and openness to those who walked through the door and how they greeted everyone by name. It wasn't until this year that I became more involved with the college community of Dawson by attending Auxano, signing up for a Village, and even Call Con. Signing up for a Village was intimidating at first due to not quite knowing anyone, but after walking into Cole and Sidney's house the first night of Village, I knew I had made the right decision.

Everyone was so kind and welcoming and I quickly began to get the feeling that I had known these people for years. Flash forward to October and I had begun to form deeper bonds and friendships with the others of my Village and at Dawson. When it came time for Call Con, I had always believed that God existed but was dealing with doubt and the realization that even though I had grown up in a Christian home, I had not taken my faith as my own nor completely devoted my life to Jesus. It was on the second night of Call Con after a conversation with Blake and several of my friends that I had gone back to talk with Kara and made the decision to devote my life to Jesus. I am so incredibly thankful for everyone at Dawson who has helped me and will continue to help me through my walk with God."

THE HARVEST IS RIPE

As Blake and I have watched Village grow from a single, 20-student group to three groups, then to six groups, and soon-to-be seven groups, Jesus' words in Matthew 9 have come to mind many times: "The harvest is ripe." Students, whether they enter college as a Christian or not, all have a common need for community. They are hungry for it. And whether they realize it or not, they are hungry for a community built on a foundation that is stronger than common majors, common professors, common Greek houses, common hobbies, etc. By the goodness of God, when students come to Village, they see a community of students whose common interests are of eternal significance—who believe that knowing God and making Him known are what is of ultimate importance. They see students who are not divided by labels, classes, hierarchies, or reputations, but who are level with one another at the feet of Christ, and who believe they are to love one another with "brotherly affection." In coming to Village, students realize they are not merely hungry for community; they are hungry for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is clearly seen in the story of one of our students, Ansley Emerson, who writes:



NOW MORE THAN EVER

Perhaps now more than ever, the hunger for face-to-face community feels especially strong. Following the social distancing rules of the early pandemic, we saw a 171% increase in Village attendance, and the numbers have continued to rise. Contrary to the belief that their generation only values the online social world, these students desire real, deep relationships. They value genuineness—like a sometimes-clean-but-usually-messy house, the chaos of getting my boys ready for bed, the bustle



Thomas and Will Jenkins.

of a busy kitchen—as opposed to the carefully curated Instagram profile. They want to be real. And really, don't we all?

Thankfully, the Lord has provided the laborers for the field. Blake and I are so grateful to the College Ministry team and to other couples of our church who have graciously served by leading a Village. They truly embody 1 Thessalonians 2:8, being ready to share not only the gospel of God but to share themselves. I cannot overstate how much our leaders' "sharing of themselves" has played a role in the growth of Village. To see leaders show up consistently opening their homes, providing food, reading the Bible, working through the tough texts, praying continually, following up on prayer requests, being vulnerable themselves—is attractive to students. They want more of it, and they want to share it with their friends.

FULL CIRCLE

I'll close with the story of Elayna Navas, a Samford student who joined the very first Village back in 2018. She joined as a freshman and has been a part of

one ever since. Elayna will graduate this spring, and when asked to reflect on the past four years in Village, she wrote the following:

"Village has made a huge impact on my college career. I started going to Village my freshman year (back when it was on Tuesday nights, before Auxano even existed) and I am now finishing my college experience attending Village at the same household. Before coming to Village, I had a difficult time finding a community of believers that I could be a part of, struggling with feeling unseen and unknown. I remember the Sunday that Blake talked about Village in Life Group, explaining what it was. I wanted to go but was super nervous not knowing anyone. However, when I walked into that home I was immediately welcomed and included in conversations. At Village, it's like one big melting pot of people from different schools, backgrounds, and ages all coming together once a week to talk about God's Word. Over a meal and a fun Question of the Week (my favorite was, "What's your favorite smell?"), I have been able to talk with other college students about what we each glean from Scripture and the real things going on in our lives. These are people I might not have met were it not for Village. As my senior year is halfway done, I can honestly say that through Village I have been able to find a community that knows me, sees me, and loves me in a Christlike way, and I will forever be grateful for it."



Becca Jenkins is married to Blake Jenkins, Minister to College Students at Dawson. They have two sons, Thomas (5) and Will (1), and enjoy inviting college students into their home every week for good food and great conversation.

AUXANO

WORSHIP FOR
YOUNG ADULTS
+ COLLEGE

TUESDAYS
7:00 P.M.
CHAPEL