

## Willem Baar | ICCF

This summer, I had the opportunity to serve at ICCF through the LMDJ Summer Serve program. ICCF is a non-profit organization that provides affordable housing and a chance to buy and keep a home when they otherwise might not have been able to. This work excited me because I prefer to work with my hands and to see the changes being done firsthand in the community.



My first impression at the beginning of the summer was that I was amazed at how many houses they were fixing up at one time and how hard everyone who works at ICCF was working to provide for the community. I noticed that ICCF did not just seem like a workplace, but a group of people passionate about making Grand Rapids a better place.

I had so many great experiences this summer. One thing that stands out in my mind are the events that ICCF holds to engage the community. I enjoyed connecting with kids and seeing their joy while we played water games. There were also a few times that I landscaped and cleaned up gardens around ICCF buildings. I also helped to sort and organize the warehouse. I enjoyed these jobs because I could see the progress I was making.

I spent a lot of time with Mrs. Baas while she checked on houses, coordinated volunteers, and made sure the whole remodeling process was going smoothly. I learned how tough her job really is, having to keep track of several houses at once and supplying volunteers with everything they need. I also learned from Mrs. Baas and Mrs. DeJong what it means to come to your job every day and actually work to make a difference in the community around you. Sometimes they would be in the middle of doing something and would get a call or a reminder that something needs to be picked up or moved and they would stop in the middle of what they were working on to provide a helping hand for someone in need.

This book showed me what it really means to be a Christian, not just by saying you are one, but actually living it out. A quote that stuck out to me was on page 73: "You know what it is about someone that makes them a friend? A friend doesn't just say things; A friend *does*." This is spoken by one of the world leaders that Bob Goff's children met on their grand caper. In this chapter, he talks about reaching out to people who are different from him and starting friendships. Bob talks about making an impact on someone by simply just starting a friendship. This idea really stuck with me and it reminds me that the best way to make a positive impact is to befriend somebody, which can lead to positive actions.

My experience this summer taught me many things. There is a real need for affordable housing in Grand Rapids, ICCF is doing amazing work, Sheryl Baas is pretty awesome, and to make an impact it doesn't take a huge gesture, you just need to do something because a friend does.

## Alex Brewer | The Other Way Ministries

This summer I had the opportunity to work at The Other Way Ministries in downtown Grand Rapids. I worked as a sort of assistant maintenance person but my job was really anything and everything that needed doing. This could be cleaning, yardwork, landscaping, painting, cooking, or just about anything else you can think of. Over the course of the summer, I learned some new skills and met some amazing people.



Going into the experience, I wasn't sure what to expect. I have had some experience in areas with high homeless populations so this wasn't a complete culture shock. However, spending so much time in an area that was so dissimilar to mine definitely opened my eyes even more to a different part of the city that I wasn't entirely familiar with. I think that this opportunity has afforded me even more insight into the lives of different people than I had previously and I'm really glad that I did it.

One story that really stuck with me was the story of a homeless man that I met in downtown Grand Rapids. He told me about his life growing up downtown; where he lived, his neighbors, and family. It all sounded great. Then he went on and talked about his recent relationship troubles and the hard times he was going through with that. I have always known in my mind that every person has their own story and a life just as complex as mine but actually having a conversation with someone made that idea really click.

This summer our Summer Serve group read the book *Love Does*. What struck me about this book is not just how fantastical the stories were but rather the fact that faith in God and his plan was able to lead Bob Goff through a happy and successful life. Several times throughout the story there were instances where he experienced a major setback that would have most people giving up; however, Bob Goff simply let it roll off his shoulders and he continued moving forward with full trust that all things would work out. I think that that's something that all of us should try to model. We can't let every setback bring us down, but rather continue moving through them and trust that God has a plan for us.

## Josiah DeBaets | The Other Way Ministries

Over the summer I served at The Other Way Ministries, a community development organization on the west side of Grand Rapids. I worked for them in their food pantry, which is one of the many services they offer. Some of the responsibilities I had while I was there were leading neighbors through the pantry, restocking shelves, and putting away deliveries. Through this internship I made friends with the other people who volunteered and learned more about serving people who have less.



I liked working at The Other Way Ministries because it was a new experience for me.

This is my first time doing the Summer Serve program, and it was interesting to be able to serve people. I enjoyed being able to help people, and most people seemed very grateful that we were able to help them.

I think the most impactful times were when I was guiding someone through the food pantry who was there for the first time. It was nice to be able to help someone who hadn't been there before, because it felt like what I was doing actually mattered. Not that helping someone who had been there before didn't matter, but people who had been there before knew what they were doing a bit better, so it felt slightly more rewarding to help someone who had never been there before.

I enjoyed the book that we read, called *Love Does*. It was more interesting than I expected it to be, mixing fun anecdotes with lessons about how love needs action. It showed how just speaking about love means nothing if you don't show love. It definitely connected with how we were showing love, by helping out in our communities.

Overall, I think the Summer Serve experience was helpful, and I am glad I did it. It was nice to have a new experience, and do something that felt meaningful to me, and was likely even more meaningful to the people I helped.

## Miles DeBaets | Exalt Health & Degage Ministries

This summer, I had the privilege of serving my Grand Rapids community at two different nonprofit organizations. From Monday to Thursday each week, I assisted the administration team at Exalta Health, a local primary care facility in the Burton Heights neighborhood of Grand Rapids. On Fridays, I ventured to Degage Ministries, where I worked with the maintenance staff, cleaning a long-term housing building that provided a haven for women who are in need of physical or mental health services.



The operations and goals of these two organizations differed significantly, as did my day-to-day roles working for them. At Exalta, I was tasked with everything from fixing drywall to fundraising face-to-face with golf course managers to scribing for an eye clinic with a pair of optometrists. At Degage, I had a rigid schedule cleaning each floor — mopping, sweeping, dusting, and scrubbing. At one organization I had no clue what might be in store for me when I stepped through the doors; at the other, I could instinctively find the supply closet without ever needing any extra instructions. Despite these differences, both experiences shaped me and my outlook on our community.

Because I worked in both the administrative and healthcare side at Exalta, I was able to see how generosity and philanthropy directly impacted the overall well-being of many people who, without the affordability of Exalta, would most likely not see a primary care physician, dentist, or optometrist. It was such a blessing to be able to see the look on someone's face when they tried on prescription glasses for the first time and realized they could see so much better. I saw God at work when a man's eyes lit up with hope as he discussed his Medicaid eligibility with Exalta's social worker. Experiencing these moments that only exist because of the generosity in people's hearts gave me a newfound appreciation for how God uses our resources to advance His work.

At Degage, my work often felt sacrificial yet redeeming. While cleaning floors and bathrooms is not the most exciting task, the gratitude and kindness I experienced from the residents was certainly impactful. Their thankfulness brought me such joy knowing that I was making their lives better in a very small way. Even though the work at Degage was not the most exciting, I really appreciated the interactions that I had with the wonderful women who live at Degage. For example, one woman always did her laundry on Friday afternoons, so we would chat while I cleaned the laundry room and she was waiting for her laundry to finish. She was also so kind and appreciative of the work that I was doing, which made my tedious tasks well worth the labor.

Overall, I had a really amazing time working at both of these organizations; connecting with both my coworkers and my Grand Rapids neighbors showed me how to truly extend God's love to others.

## Nora Herrington | ICCF & Degage Ministries

This summer I had the unique opportunity of serving at two distinct ministries in Grand Rapids. I was able to serve at ICCF, an affordable housing non-profit. And Degage Ministries, a homeless women's shelter. Both of these ministries serve different groups of people within Grand Rapids, so working at both gave me an opportunity to experience more of what help we, as a community, can provide.



I began my summer at Degage where I assisted in two places: their kitchen and their bakery. Something that stood out to me was Degage's model of hiring people that were either previous residents of their shelter or were previously homeless. This full-circle model really helped to forge connections between the ladies and the people employed by Degage. The biggest takeaway that I have from working at Degage is truly the power of listening to someone. I'm sure people have heard it said so many times before but being surrounded by people who lit up when someone remembered their name is something I don't think I will be able to forget.

One of the most impactful experiences from Degage was working with one of the lead chefs. She knew everyone by name, knew their story, and knew how to greet them. The ladies knew her too, they would scream greetings at her knowing she would respond joyfully no matter what. It always struck me how much just recognizing someone's existence can change their attitude in a second. While I worked in the kitchen, I had ladies show off the keys to their newly-owned house, tell stories about family and children, and express their feelings on any topic. Everything always came back to listening and greeting each and every person.

Secondly, I worked at ICCF. ICCF is an affordable housing non-profit that manages over 700 properties in Grand Rapids. I was assisting ICCF's volunteer coordinator and project manager, where we basically ran around to many houses and delivered necessary supplies to volunteers helping with properties. ICCF runs off of volunteer effort, from landscaping to rehabbing entire houses. Nearly 70% of a newly rehabilitated house is done by volunteers. ICCF demonstrated to me how people desire to serve. Most notably, about a week into working at ICCF, I helped with a massive group from Missouri. This group traveled to Grand Rapids and was dedicating all of two weeks to serving as many ministries as they could. This group was chock full of high schoolers who were determined and completed so much good work. Watching them work, and realizing the scope of their service was just mind-blowing. I couldn't picture spending nearly two weeks in a city, serving each and every day, and sleeping on the floor of a church.

Overall, I am so glad that I was able to dedicate my summer to helping people at two different organizations. I loved working in a temporary shelter, and also working at a place trying to make forever homes for the same people in that shelter. I truly will not forget the impact that each person had on me and my faith this summer. This experience will stick with me for a while, and I am so glad I got this chance to immerse myself in helping my community.

## Violet Holquist | Family Promise and The Other Way Ministries

This summer I had the absolute honor of working at both Family Promise of West Michigan and The Other Way. While both organizations are extremely different, I learned valuable life lessons at both locations.

At Family Promise, I worked behind the scenes, doing admin and social media work in the Advancement Department. I repeatedly got to do tours through the shelter spaces they had, and lead volunteer groups. I got to sit down in meetings and hear about the homeless families in the area, and how the whole organization works so hard to improve their situations. I learned how close so many families are to homelessness, and how these dire scenarios happen to people of all walks of life, regardless of how homelessness is typically perceived.

For a shorter amount of time, I worked in the pantry area of The Other Way Ministries. This was a 180 flip from my work at Family Promise. There I was face to face with customers, meeting them where they were, and providing them with food. Some people spoke English, others spoke Spanish. Some had large families, others were by themselves. I left every day feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, and this was an amazing reminder that my struggles are nothing in comparison to what others are going through. I had food, a shower, and a cool house to come back to, and so many of those we served don't. It was a constant reminder to thank God for what He has given me, and to never take it for granted.

Before starting the LMDJ summer serve, I thought I had a fairly wide world view. I thought I knew how things worked, and how people reacted and fit in the world. But now, at the end, I realize how in the dark I was. I thought homelessness and financial struggle was the result of being lazy, or being addicted to drugs or alcohol, but in reality, so many families facing poverty did nothing to "deserve" it. It is the result of one hospital bill, an accident, or a missed rent payment. I can't say I know it all now, but it would be undeniable to say that the Lord opened my eyes in ways they have never been opened before. I saw and experienced things that have completely changed my mindset. I also learned that volunteering isn't just about doing the right thing. It's about doing something outside of yourself, and allowing God to lead the way. When you volunteer, you are giving people the opportunity to see how God is moving and influencing your life. You are allowing His Spirit to come inside you, and be a light in your community. And I will forever be grateful for my experience this summer. For seeing new things, and trying my very hardest to reflect the love of God in my city.



## Ronia Koch | The Other Way Ministries & Degage Ministries

This summer, I had the opportunity to do this program for the second time. Coming in, I knew right away it was a great way to serve God. My journey began at The Other Way Ministries on Fulton. The Other Way is a food pantry helping neighbors with food insecurity. I had the privilege of walking neighbors through the items on the shelves and helping to stock them.

During my time working, I became really close to the other volunteers, who worked alongside me every day of the week. It was a great way to be social while still serving. I saw God's work through the neighbors coming in and the volunteers showing up each week. The food pantry would not be what it is today without the support of all the neighbors and volunteers coming together. It really makes a difference and reminds me how thankful I am to God for where I am in my life.



It was eye-opening to see all the different families and backgrounds people come from. It is truly a blessing from God that we can serve Him in various ways through our actions. My favorite part of working at The Other Way was Mondays and Wednesdays when they had food delivery. The van would pull up, and you never knew what type of food the pantry would get. It could be fruits, veggies, chips, meats, and sweet treats you've never seen before. It was always a surprise. Plus, I loved helping unpack the van with my coworker Karl. Overall, The Other Way is a great place to serve and really opens your eyes to the goodness of people and all the resources available to help when you need it.

The second place I was at this summer was Degage Ministries. At the beginning of the month, I helped in their thrift store. I organized and sorted clothes that came in through donations. Their basement was piled with clothes and truly was a mess. I worked there a few hours each week, making a small dent in the basement. After each rack was sorted by size, the next pile of clothes was ready to go through and be hung up. It was very tedious, but I was glad I got to feel the satisfaction of everything being decluttered in the end.

After the first month, I switched to working in the kitchen on Mondays and Fridays. I helped with dinners on Mondays and lunch on Fridays. I really liked the feel of the kitchen and enjoyed working with the people. Working in the kitchen, I got to see how grateful everyone was for their meal. Through my time at Degage, I saw how God gives us our daily needs and love for others.

## Drew Shripka | ICCF

I was given the opportunity to work with Sheryl Baas at ICCF this summer. I spent a lot of time riding in the truck with Sheryl all over town to look at, clean, or meet volunteers at rehab projects and other ICCF properties. Through all of this, I got to see firsthand what it actually takes to turn an old, run-down house into a home that looks too nice to be an affordable home.

What stuck with me most wasn't an event, it was seeing how hard Sheryl worked. She was constantly busy, running between sites, coordinating volunteers, and catching up on the never ending flow of invoices and emails. But no matter how stretched thin she was, she always stopped to check in with every volunteer on site, making sure everyone had what they needed, understood the task, and felt like they mattered to the project.

Before this summer, I didn't realize how bad the housing situation in Grand Rapids actually is. I already knew the housing market was rough, but I had no idea what that meant until I heard how long ICCF's waitlist actually was. Making each house a small yet meaningful dent in a much bigger problem.

*Love Does* by Bob Goff was a book that brought a completely different thing each chapter, but the idea that stuck the most was that love is a verb, not just a feeling or a thought you hold onto. That framing changed how I think about all of my relationships, and even applied to my work at ICCF. Caring about the housing crisis in Grand Rapids isn't worth much if it stays a feeling. It has to turn into floors getting redone and paint getting rolled. Overall, this summer gave me a much clearer picture of how deep housing insecurity runs in this community, and a better sense of what it actually looks like to do something about it instead of just feeling bad about it.

