

# REDEMPTION IN OUR MIDST

It's easy to say the world is broken, but much harder to do something about it. And though the work of redemption ultimately belongs to God, the church is His body, and He both invites and commands us to participate in that good labor. For this section, we gathered a handful of stories that show what it looks like when ordinary people pay attention—to God Himself, but also to the places where He's called them to bear witness and the gifts He's given for doing so. We hope you'll be encouraged to do the same right where you are, with the people who are looking to you as an example of God's love.



THE AIR IS HUMID with sweat, as 10 pairs of sneakers shriek and pound the court. On the streets of Jonesboro, Georgia, some of these men are drug dealers, addicts, and gang members. But at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, all that matters is how many minutes are left on the clock. The church started small with its basketball ministry, inviting men who played at the nearby public court—a hotbed for drug and gang activity. But word spread, and soon 60 young men began showing up every other Sunday night to play, socialize, and enjoy a meal.

Years ago, when the bank called to repossess Mt. Zion Christian Academy, the church's K-12 school, no one knew its gym would someday house a thriving ministry. Due to the area's changing demographics, much of the congregation had moved away, making it difficult to maintain the property. But those who stayed resisted foreclosure with lavish acts of generosity. Some donated house sale profits. Some spent hours [Continued on pg 48](#)



## Court of the Lord

↑ PASTOR CHRIS REYNOLDS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARTEM NAZAROV

walking through the woods to find pieces of metal to redeem for cash. Instead of boarding up, the church opened its doors to a neighborhood whose needs were growing more urgent by the year—a fact made plain early one spring morning in 2015, a moment Pastor Chris Reynolds remembers as a wake-up call.

It was a Sunday, and Reynolds was preparing for worship when his phone rang: A homeless man seemed to be asleep on the doorstep of his church. Several members had tried to wake him, but he wouldn't respond. And that's when they saw the gun. Reynolds was later stunned to learn that the man had walked miles to end his life in front of their sanctuary. "He could have killed himself anywhere," says Reynolds. Not even 30 years old, this young black male was a casualty of the hopelessness of the area. That morning, as members walked into church past police cars and ambulances, it was clear something had to change. And weeks later, the open gym ministry began.

Among the regulars at the courts is Gordon Hutton—a former drug dealer and meth addict running the streets. But through relationships built at Mt. Zion, he eventually received the gospel and was baptized. Now, during open gym hours, Hutton oversees games and hangs out in the stands. He also leads a recovery group called No Masks and uses his small home restoration

business to employ men who are ready to rebuild their lives. Once, Hutton offered a part-time job to a shy 20-year-old named Delaney, who had become a regular presence at the open gym nights. The two would talk, but Delaney held faith in Christ at a distance. Months later, when Hutton shared his testimony and presented the gospel at halftime, Delaney was there. He gave his life to the Lord that day, along with six other men.

"Basketball is a tool to tell you that Jesus loves you," Reynolds says. "The appeal of a gang is, 'They want me. They love me. They accept me. They're gonna be here for me,'" he says. "The church is talking it, and the gangs are in the streets living it—but who's getting the kids?"

For these young men, the open gym is a haven from the harsh realities of street life. But there is also an urgency to give them hope of a life to come. Weeks after Delaney trusted Christ as his Savior, he was shot five times in the chest and died. He wasn't in a gang or involved in drugs; he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some people might ask whether basketball makes a difference. But for Delaney and others, this gym is more than a court—it's the place where they meet Jesus.

—STEFANI MCDADE

A daughter's perspective on the change at Mt. Zion [intouch.org/Zion](http://intouch.org/Zion)

## Lasting Witness



WHEN ASHLEY JONES and her husband have friends over, they pull out the family photo album. Jones is a mom, but most people she meets wouldn't know that. Her daughter Skylar was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy and passed away shortly before her second birthday. That was six years ago, and now the collection of photographs allows Jones to introduce her little girl to people who never had the chance to know her.

"The gift of a photograph and the magic in it is that we freeze time," Jones said. After her daughter died, it became increasingly hard to remember how Skylar's hair felt against her face or the sensation of holding her tiny hand. "Pictures help bring the memories back. They

➤ PHOTOGRAPH BY TESSA MARIE

➤ PHOTOGRAPH BY ARTEM NAZAROV



are like the external hard drive of your brain. The information is there, but it needs to be pulled forward. Those photos are a tangible way to hold on to memories so I don't forget them."

Jones wanted to help other families capture and preserve their life together, so she started offering a free portrait session to anyone with a terminal diagnosis. Her nonprofit, Love Not Lost, connects photographers to families and presents the diagnosed person with a photo book. "We want them to know they are important, loved, known, and understood. We hope the book will then be passed on to loved ones," Jones said.

She also hopes Love Not Lost will inspire new, better ways to grieve. "Grieving is not something we do well, and I want to change that," she said. "What made [grief] better for me was when people would sit with me and tell me they were sorry. I think that we are so afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, but we really need to just show up and love people."

That's why she shows up with her camera in hand time and again, not only to bring purpose to her own loss, but also to provide comfort. "As someone who has been there before, I can honestly tell people, 'It's going to be okay. You're going to survive,'" she said. "It's a way to provide a little bit of comfort in the midst of a really dark place."

—JESSICA HABERKERN