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A Changed Mentor: “I Was the Middle School Bully”

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- Cedarville University junior Zoe Zimmerman admits she was a bully in middle school. Now, she’s using what mentors taught her at that critical age to invest in middle school students through a local mentorship program.

“In middle school, I was the bully because I couldn’t grapple with my own insecurities,” said Zimmerman. “I desperately wanted to be funny, and people laughed at my bullying. I used people as a ladder. I was my own means and end, and God was just tacked on.”

Zimmerman mentors through Seeking Truth, Accountability, Respect and Success (STARS), an outreach of the Miami Valley Women’s Center in Xenia, Ohio.

Zimmerman remembers beginning to bully in elementary school. “In third grade, I would tell a boy brutally mean things and he’d go home crying,” she shared. “In sixth grade, my sidekick and I did elaborate stuff like wear nursing gowns and masks and spray a boy with air freshener because he smelled bad.”

Zimmerman remains constantly thankful for those who came alongside her, built a relationship with her and pointed her to a secure place for her identity.

“My youth pastor was most influential on me because he gave me space to wrestle with big questions while guiding me to the answers,” she said. “My choir teacher, also, showed me the gospel by how everything he did was intertwined with a higher purpose.”

Now, Zimmerman is a middle childhood education major at Cedarville. “I struggled to find where I would be effective for ministry,” she said. “Then God gave me a heart for middle schoolers. They simply have so much content in their minds they’re trying to untangle.”

When she heard about the STARS program, she immediately signed up.

Once a week, Zimmerman spends two hours mentoring 10 girls in the after-school STARS program at Miami Valley Women’s Center in Xenia. The group eats snacks, plays games, chats and Zimmerman leads short lessons.

Zimmerman, originally from Grant, Michigan, sets out to be a mentor, example, friend and strong example of faith in action to her girls. “I hope to help them craft a well-stocked spiritual mind,” she said.

Because of her own rocky journey to faith, Zimmerman feels at home with the age group. “I believe God gifted me in building relationships with people who have a lot going on in their

minds and lives,” she said. “I can see myself in a lot of them, in their struggles and angst. Sin and brokenness, like mine and theirs, don’t invalidate people before God.”

Zimmerman hopes to pass on the gift she received to the girls she mentors. “The gospel brings heart change,” she explained. “Like my youth pastor did for me, I want to ask them the questions they need to burn with.”

“I realize how much transformation happens in middle school,” she added, “and I realize the gospel changes everything or it means nothing.”

“I am privileged to be able to show compassion when their problems seem little compared to the real world and its real problems. Their problems are real to them, and Jesus is a man of sorrows who conquered death and hell, which is a lot heavier than any of our issues, big or small.”

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 4,715 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is one of the largest private universities in Ohio, recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, including its [School of Education](#), strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and high student engagement ranking. For more information about the University, visit cedarville.edu.

Written by Brendan Rowland