

PARKER'S STORY

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— by Carlton Deal
(PCC missionary in Brussels, Belgium)



Parker stepped on stage to speak with confidence and humility. It was a context he knew well – for six consecutive years he had been a participant in the Youth Compass Project Compassion, and now, for the first time, a leader.

Nearly 100 teenagers international high school students from Bonn, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Vevey and Brussels had come to Taut, Romania to assist a Christian community development organization called NetWorks in its ongoing work with the poorest of the poor. Every night after work, students would gather for Club – songs, games and a talk about the life of Jesus – followed by cabin time, a chance to process the day and the talk. There is no audience on earth to which Parker was better suited to speak.

The students who come on Project Compassion are not necessarily followers of Jesus, so the talks begin without any assumptions. Some are unsure God exists, some are open but not convinced, some have never heard the story of Jesus. They come from every country under heaven – but few of them feel a strong allegiance to their passport country. They have followed their parents from one international job to another, living in countries that shape them, but without ever knowing which to call home. They are Third Culture Kids.

Parker was leading the music all week, a dream come true for him. I was the speaker. Ironically, the first time Parker attended Project Compassion in 2005, we were also in Taut, Romania, and I was the speaker. He was 13 years old, the youngest participant, and spent the week with his Martin Backpacker guitar slung around his neck. It was the very beginning of his musical development. Now a Recording Industry major at Middle Tennessee State University, Parker was back with a full size Martin, and a recently released CD – called *“Third Culture Kid.”*

For four nights I did my best to start at the very beginning, not assume any knowledge or beliefs, and work my way from questions about the existence of God to stories about the life of Jesus to the difference he wants to make in our lives – while being as funny as possible, of course. I told them about my first day in Europe, a relational God who whispers to us (Eli) and wrestles with us (Jake), and friends who loved their friend enough to carry him to Jesus, the only One with authority on earth to forgive sins and heal diseases. All along my plan was to set up Parker for night five, when we would switch roles – me with the Martin, and Parker telling the story of his journey with Jesus. We would switch back for night six, the final night of Club.

To tell his story best, Parker started with the title track from his CD. *“I was born to a family of 4, in Norfolk, Virginia where my father called home...”* The chorus still brings

tears to my eyes and a desperate prayer that God knew what He was doing in my children's lives when He sent us to Europe for His purposes.

*"I don't know where home is
So many places and I'm left with a void that none can fill
Such is the life of a Third Culture Kid."*

He put down the guitar and started to speak.

He said his early years in France were confusing, but he knew he was different because he was American. His early childhood commitment to Jesus was sincere, but he pointed out that at age six he didn't really know how to have a relationship with anyone, let alone Jesus.

The first major turning point in his life was his return to the US when he was 10. He thought he was going home. But when he arrived in Norfolk, he was the French kid. Kids at school called him Frenchie and Jean-Claude and weren't really sure if that was his real name or not. The names weren't painful – but the lack of understanding was. I'm one of you, aren't I? Guess not. He cried every day for a year.

Then he moved back to Europe, this time to Belgium. His fondest memories of those six years were a deepening relationship with his older sister and fantastic (that might be my word) progress as a musician. His identity questions remained, however, and he began to look for understanding in his relationships with girls, often moving quickly from one to the other. Interestingly, one of them was in the audience, also as a new leader – a short-lived Project Compassion romance from several years ago which didn't quite last the week.

Eventually Parker explained he had a crisis of faith when he realized that neither a home culture or music or exclusive relationships with girls could meet his deepest needs. He came to see God as his Designer, the One who knows best how to guide our lives. He felt alone, like he had nothing, and accepted Jesus as the only One who truly understands him and sets him free to love others as sisters and brothers. Parker invited his peers to place their trust in God the Designer, who makes beautiful things out of us.

You could have heard a pin drop. All over the room, the issues of home and identity and understanding were recognized as profound needs. The knowledge that one of their own had found answers came across like the notion that a treasure map was within their grasp. He said things I could have never said and communicated spiritual truth at a level I could have only guessed at. Students went to cabin time full of questions and ready to talk more openly than ever before. I can't remember a prouder moment as his dad.

Now I'm on my way to London to be part of a Christian Associates leadership conference called Summit. I had to leave camp a day early. My talk last night built on Parker's and I tried to give students words of commitment they could use tonight at the concluding bonfire: *"I'm in, I'm yours."* I wish with all my heart I could be there tonight to see Ben or Yee-Sun or Grace or Miguel or Camille step forward and say to Jesus, *"I'm in, I'm yours."* But Parker will be there, ready to embrace them in their first steps on a beautiful journey. His story has touched their stories and their lives will never be the same.