

The Heart of the Vision

The following is text of Chief Ron Mackey's talk at the Blue Ridge Property Dedication Event on September 24, 2016

INTRO – From the The Story of Deerfoot Lodge, p.84

“The Board has prayerfully decided not to increase the numbers of campers or to expand to new locations. ‘The future of Deerfoot does not lie in increased numbers,’ says Chief Chuck, ‘but in increased impact, accomplished by continually improving the quality of its staff and staff training.’ To maintain its excellence, Deerfoot will remain a small camp with a distinct focus. This is God’s calling.”

When those words were written roughly fifteen years ago, they did, in fact, reflect the Board’s sentiment, and the thinking of Deerfoot as a whole. The idea was greater effectiveness would result from doing one thing as well as it could be done. After all, one of the strengths of the Deerfoot ministry for more than 85 years is that it has kept its eye on the mission-ball and avoided initiatives that might easily lead to ‘mission drift’. Expansion seemed more likely to mess up a good thing, so Deerfoot was determined to keep focused on this one thing in this one place. There was wisdom in that thinking for that time.

So, what changed? Why did we move from that way of thinking to announcing a second Deerfoot nearly 1000 miles from the original?

It’s a long story, but I will share the main chapters tonight. I hope that it will reveal for you the heart of this vision, and that you in turn will see your part in it.

This is important because I don’t view this vision as mere organizational strategy, but rather a Holy Spirit led movement. Business plans and strategies have their places, they identify and seize opportunities, and then execute plans for growth. They succeed

because smart people at the top know how to pull the right levers and push the right buttons to make things happen.

But a movement is different. It is not reliant on direction from top leadership, but rather it has an inertia of its own, shared by participants who are passionate about the cause, and in this case, the cause is the need for more men of God. Deerfoot is one of the places where the hearts of boys and men are often touched with the reality and power of God, and transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I can’t think of anything more urgent in times like these.

I don’t have to convince you of this, because you’ve experienced it yourself, and you could stand here tonight as well as I can to share the ministry importance of this place. Your part of the movement that God is leading. The success of this vision, from a human perspective, does not rest solely on me, or the Board, but on all of us, who will tackle this enormous challenge just as Deerfooters have always done: together, with deep reliance on God.

It’s always been a movement, from the beginning in 1930. But for the Board and me, how we think about this mission began to change radically back in 2011.

Three things were happening then...

1. Personally, I began to sense the possibility of complacency, which is dangerous. It leads to mediocrity and decline. So, I suggested that the Board consider a retreat together to re-ask the Big Questions that every organization needs to answer: Who are we? Why do we exist? Where are we headed? The Board agreed.
2. Concurrently, the Board read a book together called *Guyland*, by Michael Kimmel, which sheds light on the world of adolescent and young adult males. It is not a Christian book, and I warn you, should you decide to read it, there are sections that are disturbing and explicit. It rocked our world as a Board. I remember one of our senior members, Grove Rust, now with the Lord, shaking his

head with alarm. As a result, we as a Board felt new urgency about our mission.

3. Thirdly, the camper wait list began reaching new heights. Upon analysis, we discovered that we were turning away not only new campers, but many returning campers & staff.

During that Board retreat in March of 2011, we drilled down into the depths of this mission, our heritage, and dreamt together about future impact. A key moment for me was when one of our revered, long standing, stake holding board members said something like “for the first time in my time at Deerfoot, I believe the Lord may be leading us toward some kind of expansion.” I waited to see if anyone would motion to excommunicate this board member. Didn’t he read the book?!

From that retreat on, the Board posture changed from one of keeping Deerfoot going as is, to a sense that God has more for us.

The Guyland book shook us. Because we could see the reality of what he describes in our own campers, staff, our sons and grandsons. It’s true of course that living as a godly man in a broken world has always been challenging, Jesus told us it would be. The world hated him, and it will hate his followers. Whether it’s greater or worse now, I can’t say, but I will tell you this, this culture is absolutely toxic to boys and young men who seek to live as godly men. And the data shows the boys are not okay.

Deerfoot is a safe place for so many. It’s not perfect, of course, but it is a place where boys are free from screens, and catch a glimpse of a better way of life where we relate to each other in real time, face to face. It’s a place where we’re honest and open about living as godly men. And in that context over time, the heart opens, and the Holy Spirit does deeper work.

We knew that this mission was making a difference for many who come, but the question became, are we doing all that God has called

us to do? What grew within us was a belief He’s calling us to do more. As much as we love the present, and fear messing it up, a discontent arose with the status quo.

How we thought about our mission to build godly men shifted in an important way. Recognizing that the challenges of living as a godly man are all-time, we began to understand the mission as year-round and life-long. That was a radical shift in thinking. While the program is still June, July August, the mission is relevant all year.

A catalyst for this shift was our brother, Steve Mayer, who went home to be with the Lord so suddenly this past April. This Dedication Event was his idea. To say that we miss him here, at the Board table, and as a Deerfoot family seems like an understatement. His passion for this vision was dynamic and contagious, it was like rocket fuel. I think of him regularly in the context of this vision, and his memory fuels my own passion. Keep praying for Steve’s wife Donna, and his sons Ryan, Shaun and Kyle.

What would it mean to carry this mission year around? Within the next year, we had a chance to put our new thinking into action. Chief Nick Isder was among us, and had already revealed a unique ability to relate deeply to staff members. We decided invite Nick to work full time, year around for the purpose of connecting with staff at their schools and homes in the ‘off season’. It was a bold decision--one that promised no revenue in return, since his main duty was to disciple men. Even though the cash flow presented challenges, the decision was based on the urgency of the need. Chief Nick Isder was the man for the hour, and he blessed us with his leadership for four years. He leaves his full time position at the end of this month to pursue a Master of Divinity at Princeton Seminary. We are forever grateful to Chief Nick for his work to sharpen the mission of Deerfoot.

The wait list problem plagued us, and still does. While wait lists are often viewed as signs of success and something to feel good about, we didn’t. For us, it is a sign of a problem. Knowing the kind of needs

that boys face in this world, and the shortage of places where they can grow and thrive, we are burdened about the numbers we turn away (160 this past season). We have to figure out how to say yes to more boys in a way that doesn't jeopardize the special work God has done already.

We're all aware of the dangers that expansion brings. We know many stories of unintended consequences, and organizations which lost their 'mojo' in the midst of expansion. We looked at every idea we could think of, including expansion at the Whitaker Lake site. Nothing seemed right.

It was in December 2014, that the idea to replicate in a new geographic location became a clear and obvious pathway. It allows Deerfoot at Whitaker Lake to continue as it has for over 85 years, and it allows God to write another story to reach more boys. It gives opportunity for reaching into new cities like Atlanta, Charlotte and many others. It provides an option for campers and staff on the wait lists. It extends the mission reach of this ministry and opens the door to a new era of the Deerfoot story.

The Board agreed, unanimously, at our meeting the following March. We identified some guiding principles for this vision about how we would fund raise, debt, organizational structure and so on. We targeted the Smoky Mts region because of the similarities to the ADKs, and agreed on criteria for what kind of property we would need. We charged a property search team, and prayed together. All of that happened at our Board meeting in March 2015.

As I sat on that plane ride home from Charlotte, my heart was racing with both excitement and fear. What just happened? For a small organization like Deerfoot, this is a huge, risky, game-changing move. I had waves of insecurity and doubt. My only point of confidence then, and since then, even now, is that God is in this. Like Israel being led to the promised land, when the pillar moves, Israel moves. God was moving, and so, let's go.

When I landed in Albany, turned on my phone, the email was filled with property possibilities that our search team had already identified. The first one I looked at fit all five of our criteria, which was encouraging and led me to conclude that there would be many other options. I was wrong. That first property was this one, and it was the only property we found in VA, NC, GA, TN, and SC that met all five of our criteria.

The price was high, and a mortgage was not an option. But God moved. In less than a year's time, He endeared the owners to us, and vice versa, and moved upon the hearts of donors to give/pledge \$5.6MM, and one thing led to another, so that exactly 12 mos from the initial decision to replicate, we sat in the lawyer's office here in Cashiers, closing on this property paying with Cash. To God be the Glory.

Those are the highlights. So much more could be said, but I will summarize it by quoting the Jesus figure in CS Lewis' popular book of [The Chronicles of Narnia](#), "Aslan is on the move". Yes, God is on the move!

A new era of Deerfoot is dawning. It's the same story God began back in 1930, but a second volume. We're going to need another book. And, like all God-inspired Visions, it is God-sized and will require His power to become reality. So we will walk faithfully with Him. We have plans, we have dreams but all is held loosely as He does what only He can do. After all, this is His place.

You've had a chance to get around the sites today, Jeff Littauer is coming now to share more about what we envision here.