

VBS, BUS MINISTRY LED ASHLEY VIRTO TO CHRIST

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FRANKLIN – Ten years ago Ashley Virto was a Catholic teenager in Ripley, Miss., who knew about Jesus Christ, but didn't know Jesus Christ.

Thanks to a bus ministry and a Vacation Bible School, Ashley Virto (now 24) is a Christian serving Jesus Christ in her local church (Judson Baptist in Nashville) and the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board and is now helping to train Spanish VBS leaders.

For the past three years Virto has taught various aspects of VBS, from recreation to arts and crafts, during training for VBS leaders who speak Spanish.

Her passion for VBS is fueled by the love and care she received during Vacation Bible School a decade ago at The Way, The Truth and The Life Baptist Church, a Hispanic congregation in Ripley.

Virto recalled that she probably never would have attended that VBS had it not been for the church's bus ministry. She was raised in a Catholic family and had no connection to the Baptist church that ministered to her.



VBS leaders across Tennessee recently attended a national training session. Among them was

Ashley Virto, back row right.

Her mother allowed her to go. "So, I just went. It looked like a lot of fun." Not only was it fun, it proved to be life-changing.

Following a Bible story, Virto gave her life to Christ and prayed to receive Him in her heart. She recalled that "I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but I did it. I told Him in my prayer, 'I don't know who you are, but I want you to show me who you are.' "

Fortunately, that Hispanic congregation did what is vitally important in Vacation Bible School – they followed up on Virto's decision.

Follow up is so extremely important, agreed Vicki Hulsey, childhood specialist for the TBMB who plans VBS training sessions across the state. "Follow up is an essential part of VBS, especially when decisions have been made to accept Christ," she said.

Hulsey observed that many children and youth who make decisions at VBS go home to unchurched parents. "Follow up is key to helping them take next steps of baptism and understanding what it means to grow as a Christian. Follow up with children and youth can also open the door for unchurched family members to hear the gospel for the very first time," she added.

Virto's story does not end after VBS. She began attending the various ministries of the church regularly, including the youth group. At first her mother was upset with her because she thought Virto was abandoning her Catholic background and culture, Virto said.

One day her mother saw Virto reading her Bible and asked where she had gotten it. She responded that the church had given it to her, and to her surprise, Virto's mother asked if she could attend with her the following Sunday.

Her mother felt welcomed by the congregation and before long, Virto's little brother and aunt and her family began attending as well.

"It became like this ripple effect of everyone just wanting to know why we were going to this church," she recalled. All have since accepted Christ as their Savior.

Since then, Virto's grandmother has been introduced to Christ. "My mom's main goal when she became a Christian was for my grandmother to know who Christ was," she recalled. Her grandmother has been open to the gospel and attended a Christian concert.

She acknowledged that her grandmother has not publicly made a decision but "we see something different in her."

Recalling the impact that one VBS had on not only her, but her entire family as well, Virto noted, "You don't know the impact that you are making when you talk to children about Jesus.

"When you teach them music, when you show them a piece of art work that

reminds them of who He is, or read a Scripture verse from the Bible, you don't realize what that's doing to you until you are older or when you start to build your relationship with God," she said.

Virto eventually married and moved to Tennessee and became involved at Judson Baptist Church where she has participated in different ministries with children and gone on a missions trip with the church.

Three years ago she was introduced to the VBS training sessions and has been involved ever since. Spanish VBS Training Clinics were added to VBS training over a decade ago, Hulsey noted.

"As the number of Hispanic churches has increased across Tennessee, the number of clinics to train leaders in Spanish VBS has also increased.

Total attendance across the state usually averages between 200-300. For 2019, a team of four leaders will provide VBS training in Spanish in Memphis, Nashville, and Cookeville.

"Ashley and the other leaders on the Spanish VBS Team are committed to doing whatever it takes to see children and their families come to know Jesus and to grow in relationship with Him," Hulsey said.

Virto has a passion for children. "I feel that I have been called to be in children's ministry. I still don't know what aspect, but I know that I belong in it (children's ministry)."

And, it all began at a Vacation Bible School in rural Mississippi.