

jeff eastridge:

Forging a new chapter in Holston Conference history



Jeff Eastridge joins his friends for Wednesday-night Bible study at UTC's Wesley Foundation.

It was a cup of sweet tea that seemed to seal the deal between Jeff Eastridge and the Rev. Keith Moore.

Eastridge was beginning his senior year at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, walking back from class, when Moore handed him a cup of iced tea and invited him to the Wesley Foundation.



Eastridge was no stranger to the United Methodist gathering place. A member of Green Meadow United Methodist Church in Maryville District, Eastridge and his family have a long history in Holston Conference. He's not only the grandson of the late Bonnie Householder, a tireless United Methodist Women worker. Eastridge has also attended Annual Conferences as a child, participated in Resurrection as a teenager, and in 2004, graduated from Hiwassee College with an associate's degree in general education.

It wasn't until August 2006, however, when Eastridge finally nestled himself into the faith community at Wesley Foundation.

At the time, most of Eastridge's UTC friends, who were also former Hiwassee students, had "either graduated or moved on," explains the 22-year-old student. "So I was left high and dry. I knew about the Wesley Center because my mom kept telling me to go there."

After accepting a cold drink from the Wesley Foundation director in a student park, Eastridge promised to come to Open House. He never looked back.

Today, a typical week at college has him stopping by the Foundation to socialize on Mondays and Tuesdays after lunch. On Wednesdays, he returns for a \$2 lunch, provided by a local church. ("But it's worth it," he says.) On Wednesday nights, it's

Bible study, and on Thursdays, free soup for lunch. On Thursday night, the Wesley group gathers at First-Centenary UMC for dinner, a Keith Moore message, and Holy Communion. On Sunday morning, his Wesley friends return to First-Centenary for worship.

Sometimes, he goes to the Wesley Foundation just to find a "nook" to study. His major is exercise science; he expects to graduate in August 2007.

"It's nice to be with people with similar interests and experiences," says Eastridge, explaining how the Foundation came to be such a big part of his life. "If you get all of us together, there are quite a few. But most of the time, we're in small groups, so you can just jump right in."

In the process, the son of two educators says his spiritual life has been strengthened.

"Obviously, as I was growing up, I went to Sunday school and church, but I never really did Bible study or extra services, like on Thursday nights," he says with a shy smile. "This is different."

In 2006, Eastridge found himself reaching out for those spiritual resources. After three surgeries and the threat of a cancer diagnosis, he was finally diagnosed with Crohn's Disease in October.

A few days into the New Year, Eastridge was adjusting to new medication and hopeful of pursuing his goal to become a certified personal trainer. A tennis player in high school, Eastridge developed a passion for weight lifting in college. Since his diagnosis, he's carefully and gradually returned to physical activity.

"There have been times when I felt like I have paid my dues," he says, referring to the disease that also struck his 16-year-old sister. "'Why me? Why couldn't this have happened to someone else?' But then, I realize that it could have been worse.

"I am going to make it," he says. "It's just going to take me a little longer." ■

Life at the WF

Location: 607 Douglas Street, Chattanooga, TN 37403-2002

Director: Rev. Keith Moore

Highest attendance: 70 students come for free soup on Thursdays

Core group: About 30 students are active in Wednesday-night Bible study

Wish list: Volunteers are needed to lead special-interest groups on church history, Methodist history, Christian financial principles, etc.

Web site: www.wesleyutc.com

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