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Local resident shares her faith on spring break in Florida

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PANAMA CITY BEACH, Fla. — Christian Burman can't help but notice that the young man sitting next to her isn't saying a word.

He stares at the floor, a silent drifter in the sea of voices that fills the minivan as it slowly works its way along bustling Front Beach Road.

Outside, hundreds of college students saunter to and fro in the brisk night air, many on their way to some of the area's renowned hot spots: Hammerhead Fred's, Harpoon Harry's, Spinnaker.

Club La Vela.

That's where the silent young man is headed on March 10.

But instead of walking, he decided to hop into the minivan from Indiana named "Peyton Vanning." It is one of about 30 vans driven to Panama City Beach from colleges and churches across the country to serve students by offering them free rides at night.

But the nearly 300 Baptist ministry students here in the city are doing more than giving free rides. The Beach Reach students on these commonly called "Jesus" vans aim to share their Christian faith with others.

That's why Burman is here. "I knew God wanted me to talk to him," the Plymouth resident, a member of the Baptist Collegiate Ministries group at Indiana University South Bend, says later. "And I was like, 'OK, God.'"

Burman, who is in Panama City Beach for the first time, doesn't — in her eagerness to connect with the young man — try to shove the Gospel down his throat.

At a time when the world sees so many Christians as Bible-thumping Holy Rollers, Burman knows the heart of true evangelism and effective outreach is having a heart for people, striving to build personal relationships and sharing love instead of a lecture.

Burman has seen the loveless approach too many times.

Take, for example, a day or so earlier at Hutchison Boulevard near the Wal-Mart, where a woman was standing on the busy street corner holding up a sign: "Heaven or Hell: The Choice Is Yours."

"Not all Christians are Bible-thumpers," Burman said. "There are some Christians that really believe and go by Christ's example of loving people."

That starts first by learning each person's name.

On the ride in the minivan, the young man sitting next to Burman introduces himself as Craig. When some of the passengers in front begin talking about God, Burman decides to make the conversation personal. She asks Craig, who has been silent, about *his* opinion and his background on spiritual matters.

He grew up Roman Catholic, he tells her.

Burman realizes they have something in common — her mother and brother are Catholic. Then she asks Craig a little about himself — where he goes to school, his major, and what he's been doing over spring break. It's this personal interest in his everyday life that seems not only to strike a chord with Craig, but with the other students who ride in the vans throughout the week.

Students like Casey Stewart.

"It puts a good view on Christians," says the University of Central Florida-Orlando student as he rides Purdue University's van that same night. "It's good for Christians that you guys are out doing this and that Christians aren't judging ... people that drink."

Mariah McRea can attest to that.

The freshman at Auburn University in Alabama sits a day later at a table in Rock'lt Lanes, the site of a free pancake breakfast organized by the same ministry offering the free van rides.

"We were like 'What? Why would they do that?'" McRea says as she cuts up several pancakes doused in syrup, referring to the "Free Pancakes" banner she saw on her way to Edgewater plaza.

Burman's answer to McRea's question is simple: It's something Jesus would do.

"Jesus served people," she says. "He washed His disciples' feet. He did the stuff that normal people wouldn't think about doing."

Of course, this mentality — this mindset of sharing Christ by serving and loving people — doesn't strike a chord with everybody.

Burman remembers standing out on the strip one night to let passers-by know about the free van rides available to spring-breakers.

They ignored her. They yelled. Many doubted the Beach Reachers' sincerity.

"Everyone thinks there has to be a catch," Burman says. "That it has to be more complex than that — and it's not."

But then, there is Craig.

During his ride in the minivan, he opens up to Burman.

He explains that he expects to go to heaven but he doesn't know why.

"Would you like to know how I'm going to heaven?" Burman asks him as the minivan moves closer to its destination.

Then she shares the Bible verse John 14:6, in which Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No man can come to the Father but by Me." She adds the verse in Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

"Is that something you want?" Burman asks Craig.

His answer is yes.

With no further adieu, he asks Jesus to come into his life, which upsets a young man sitting next to him, as the van reaches Club La Vela.

"I've got to get out, I've got to get out," he says angrily as he hurries to leave the van.

That's when Burman warns Craig.

"This decision is probably not going to go so well with friends," she says.

"I know," he tells her. "But I'm ready."

For Burman, those words are proof — proof that people are more likely to respond to the Gospel message when they are met with love.

"I was really excited and pumped up," Burman says about the 20-minute van ride that led Craig to make his new faith commitment.

Burman had treated him like a person instead of a project. She had not only remembered his name, but taken the time to learn a little bit about him.

And sometimes it's the little things, she realized, that can make all the difference.

Tribune staff writer YaVonda Smalls is a member of the Baptist Collegiate Ministries at Indiana University South Bend. She joined a group of five students for the evangelism mission trip to Panama City Beach, from March 8-14.
