

MOUNTAIN MISSION CHALLENGER

The Newsletter of
Mountain Mission School

Winter
2025



“For the Lord is good; His steadfast love endures forever,
and His faithfulness to all generations.” – Psalm 100:5



Amanda Deel

Deel, who is originally from Wilkes County, NC, relocated to the region 20 years ago.



"I am a devoted Christian and have had the honor of being a preacher's daughter for most of my life -- an experience that has deeply shaped my values and work ethic," she said. "Above all, being a wife and mother is my greatest accomplishment and the most fulfilling role I've ever had."

She started her own business, D&D Cleaning and there gained a broad range of professional experience. She also worked as a licensed property and casualty insurance agent and later held a bookkeeping position at Street Law Firm. While still living in North Carolina, she was employed by Pinnacle Corporation, a sister company of Window World, where she served as assistant to the operating manager.

As the physical demands of operating her cleaning business began to wear on her, Deel said she told her family she needed to find something new

"I began to pray about it, though I wasn't actively searching for a new job," she recalled. "Then one afternoon at my daughter's softball practice, my niece mentioned there was an opening in human resources at MMS and encouraged me to apply.

"I hadn't worked in an office in 16 years, but after talking it over with my husband, we decided that if it was the Lord's will, I shouldn't ignore the opportunity," she said. "Fast forward

seven months and I'm still in awe. The Lord placed me exactly where I needed to be. Working at MMS has been a blessing. I'm surrounded daily by a loving, faithful team of Christian coworkers and I get to witness God's work in the lives of these incredible children."

Deel has been married to Lail Deel, for 20 years and they have two children, Kloie, age 16; and Hunter, age 10.

"Since coming to MMS, I've had the joy of meeting so many wonderful people -- from the students and staff to the many volunteers who pour their hearts into this ministry," Deel said. "To be honest, I didn't fully understand what Mountain Mission School was all about until I started working here. Now, I see it clearly: this place is God's work in motion -- and I'm truly thankful to be a part of it."

David Cales

Cales came to MMS after seeing an advertisement for the teacher/hall parent position on the ACSI website.



"I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to serve the Lord," he said.

Prior to coming to MMS, he was home-schooling his 15-year-old daughter, who is now enrolled at MMS as a ninth grade student.

"What I have enjoyed the most since coming to MMS is that everyone I have met at the school so far is committed to ensuring these children receive a quality education and come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior," he added.

Several new staff and faculty members have joined Mountain Mission School this year, bringing with them a variety of backgrounds and experiences to share with students at the school.

Those who have joined the staff include: Amanda Deel, human resources; David Cales, high school math, P4; Wilkin Hatfield, IT/Maintenance, P1; Payton Began, nursery, H1; Jahnavi Howell, nursery, H1; Haymanot Zeleke, nursery, Fran's House; Erin Jarrell, subbing, typing, P2; Daniel Ossinsky, math five and six and algebra I, P3; Marie Ossinsky, grade kindergarten, P3; and Tricia Platt, grade one, H1.

Jahnavi Howell

During a college trip from Mid-Atlantic Christian University in Elizabeth City, NC, to ICOM 2024, Howell's class stayed at MMS the night before they headed to conference in Kentucky.



"The time we spent there was beautiful," Howell recalled. "It warmed my heart to see how everyone at the school treated each other as one big family. Being raised as an only child with an estranged family led me to pray continuously for the Lord to bless me with a big family one day."

Not many days after that trip, Howell said she asked about the job and received an application.

"It took me a full year to finally fill it out because I knew I needed to mature in my faith before committing to a full-time ministry," Howell said. "When that day came, the Lord prompted me rather abruptly to fill out and submit my application and within the next two weeks, I was moving my things into a dorm."

"My favorite thing about Mountain Mission so far is the support I have from my coworkers," Howell said. "From day one, they treated me as a family member and a valuable asset to their team. I like to say if I am only able to give 40 percent, they will be my other 60 percent and vice versa. We all work wholeheartedly to support one another and the children as Christian role-models. It is truly a blessing to be a part of this family."

Erin Jarrell

Jarrell learned of MMS through Clay Mitchell, a friend, who also works at MMS.



"He was my youth pastor when I was a teenager and one day, he invited me to come take a tour of the school," Jarrell recalled. "After the tour, he asked if I'd ever think about working here. He said he figured I'd say 'no,' but I told him, 'If the Lord didn't want me here, He wouldn't have had you ask!'"

From there, Jarrell said everything fell into place. Before coming to MMS, she was subbing at Pikeville Independent Schools, while also working on her Master's Degree in teaching at the University of the Cumberlands.

Jarrell is close with family in Pikeville, KY and visits whenever she can, but added, "MMS has truly become my family too. The people here feel like home and I'm so thankful God placed me right where I'm meant to be. I love everything about being here. The kids make every day special and it's been such a blessing to watch them grow not just in school, but in their faith. I've also seen how much the Lord has helped me grow since coming here. MMS feels like home in every way. It's full of people who love the Lord and care deeply for one another and I'm so thankful that God opened the door for me to be part of it."

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Daniel Ossinsky & Marie Ossinsky



The Ossinskys lived in southern Iowa and were not really looking to move, but an email about MMS caught their attention.

"We prayed, made a pros and cons list and everything fell into place," they said, noting the decision was made to move to Grundy and to become a part of the MMS team.

Marie Ossinsky was the children's ministry director at the family's Iowa church, growing the program from two kids to 15, who met regularly on Wednesday nights.

Daniel Ossinsky worked at Optima, supporting adults with disabilities to live independently. Both had also worked as dorm parents and teachers in the past, but had taken a break while their kids were young.

They have two children, Malachi who is 10; and Isabelle who is eight.

"We love the support from all the staff and faculty," the Ossinskys said. "People ask how we are doing and if we need help regularly, which really shows the heart of this community."

Wilkin Hatfield



Hatfield learned of MMS as his family is close with the Hoods.

"Two summers ago my cousin and I visited and volunteered for a week," Hatfield said. "I really loved Grundy and MMS. I only thought then that I wanted to visit again, but when I heard there was help needed this year I applied right away. A few weeks later I had moved in."

Prior to working at MMS, Hatfield worked at Friendship House in Roanoke VA for a year and a half, leading their food pantry and helping with their other programs.

"So far I've loved working at MMS," Hatfield said. "I've found roles in maintenance, IT and worship and I've enjoyed being a hall parent way more than I expected."

Tricia Platt



Platt said what led her to Mountain Mission School was an easy answer: "The Holy Spirit via my uncle, Paul Platt."

"My career has been split between teaching in infant/toddler classrooms and training teachers at the community college level," Platt said. "I started and ended my childcare career at the Family Care Center in Lexington, KY. My college teaching experience was at Bluegrass Community and Technical College, also in Lexington, where I established and coordinated the Early Childhood Education Associate degree program."

Platt earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in child development from Berea College and her Masters of Science, Degree in child and family studies with a minor in educational psychology from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, TN.

Platt's parents have been married 65 years and live in Houston, TX. Her father is a career pastor and benevolent ministry administrator; and her mother is a retired early childhood administrator and teacher.

Platt has two grown sons - Benjamin, who is in his second tour with the Air Force, currently posted in England; and Daniel, a hopeful Welder and avid WWII military historian who lives in Kentucky.

About Mountain Mission School, Platt said there are many things she loves.

"I love everyone's positivity, helpfulness and the beauty of the campus nestled in the mountains," she said.

Payton Began

Began noted that before she learned of MMS, she was not a Christian and said she was living lost and in darkness.



"I encountered Jesus almost a year ago and it changed EVERYTHING," she said. "I knew after He saved me that I wanted to serve Him with all my new heart, so I quit my job at the time and was looking for something that would please the Lord."

It was then that her mother's church received an email from MMS that they were hiring and Began applied.

"After visiting and falling in love with this place, I was hired," she said.

Began is close with her mother, her stepfather and sister.

"MMS is everything I ever dreamed of and more," she said. "The whole culture here is one of love and community. I absolutely love the children; the staff are incredible; and everybody is instant family. I have everything I need here. This place has God's hand all over it and I'm so grateful to be a part of this mission."

Haymanot Zeleke

MMS, where Zeleke graduate in 2002 was one place she said she always felt safe. After graduating from MMS, she went to Concord University and also attained a certificate of Massage from the National Massage Therapy Institute. She practice massage therapy for more than 10 years in Atlanta, GA.



"I was in Atlanta, Georgia feeling lost," she said. "I felt that God literally fork lifted me to be here."

Zeleke has two children, Eva, age seven; and Kaleb, age six.

"What I like best about being here is having a sense of purpose, peace of mind and a great community," Zeleke said.





MMS ALUMNI, TEACHERS REUNITE

★ FOR HEARTFELT WEEKEND IN WASHINGTON, D.C. ★

What began as a simple idea for a MMS reunion turned into something far more meaningful—it became a multi-generational celebration of friendship and gratitude which emphasized the enduring spirit of Mountain Mission School.

It all started when Hareg Tadesse (MMS Class of 2004) reached out to Kalki Mulugeta Gizaw (MMS Class of 2005) about hosting a small alumni gathering in the Washington, D.C., area. Together with fellow alumni Markos Moges, Tegest Mesfin, Haile Eyob Nessibu and Makael Mekonnen, the idea quickly blossomed into a full reunion weekend, complete with a family day at Cameron Run Regional Park in Alexandria, VA and a Sunday brunch at Encore Clubhouse.

“We started talking about the reunion and thought how special it would be to invite our teachers to the D.C. area and have alumni host them in their homes, just like the church families who opened their homes to us during choir trips at MMS,” Gizaw said.

That idea became the heart of the weekend. The team reached out to former faculty and staff and began inviting alumni through the Mountain Mission School Facebook groups, hoping that word of mouth would spread and reach as many former students as possible.

As planning got underway, the committee decided it would be wonderful to involve MMS alumni in providing food, beverages and photography for the event.

“Our caterer was one of our alumni members, Ephrem Abebe, owner of the popular Baltimore restaurant Ekiben,” Gizaw said. “Many of our former teachers were already familiar with Ephrem’s restaurant, so it felt like the perfect choice to have his team cater for us. Although we initially planned for about 50 people, we ended up serving more than 100 guests, including children, at our Saturday lunch.”

The weekend’s beautiful moments were captured by Mathias Seifu, who graciously volunteered his photography services to document the reunion.

The team faced a last-minute challenge when the original venue, Fort Hunt Park, closed due to a government shutdown just two days before the event.

"We had to scramble to find a new park," Gizaw said. "Thankfully, Cameron Run Regional Park was available and we quickly sent out the new details by email."

Eight beloved MMS teachers made the trip to D.C.:

- Mr. Platt, hosted by Lili Haile;
- Mr. & Mrs. Hood, hosted by Haile Eyob Nessibu;
- Mr. & Mrs. Peters, hosted by Markos Moges;
- Mr. & Mrs. Hertzog Jr., hosted by Mimi and Ephrem Abebe; and
- Mr. Hertzog Sr., hosted by Makael Mekonnen.

The teachers traveled in on Friday from Grundy and were warmly welcomed by their host families upon their arrivals in the D.C. area. That evening, they enjoyed a relaxed dinner with their hosts and families. In some cases, host families joined together and invited nearby alumni to share in a welcoming Friday night meal.

"It was such an emotional moment for me when we finally gathered," Gizaw reflected. "Some of these teachers I hadn't seen in so many years. The whole idea was to show our appreciation and to let them know just how deeply they touched and impacted our lives at Mountain Mission School and how their influence continues to shape us today. It felt like a long-overdue 'thank you' for all they had done."

Saturday morning brought everyone together at Cameron Run Regional Park, which many agreed was the perfect backdrop for laughter, connection and nostalgia.

"What stood out to me most was the number of families present," said Mark Hood. "I have always looked at MMS as a way to change family trees. This was very evident."



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Alumni reconnected, children played and teachers watched with pride as they saw the families and lives their former students had built.

"It was great to be together," Gizaw said. "I think it was nice for the teachers who got to see the fruits of their labors and the different generations."

After such an exciting and emotional day, Saturday evening was intentionally kept relaxed -- a chance for teachers to catch up with more alumni, enjoy good conversation and share laughter with their host families.

"I was nervous and anxious on the day of the reunion, unsure of how it would turn out," Teshome said. "But the moment I saw the teachers, a wave of warmth and nostalgia washed over me. I realized just how much I had missed them and MMS. The reunion was better than I ever imagined. MMS will always be my home and everyone there will forever be my family."

Sunday's brunch, thoughtfully organized by the Alumni Committee, brought everyone back together for a morning of gratitude and reflection. Teachers shared heartfelt words and messages of encouragement, reminding alumni of the deep bonds that connect the MMS family.

"It was a nostalgic moment for us," Gizaw said. "It felt like we were back home at Mountain Mission School."

"Attending this well-organized two-day event was the most encouraging, meaningful, and loving event I ever attended," said MMS Vice President Ernie Hertzog. "To have so many alumni attend, solely to be reunited with so many MMS family members and their families in an atmosphere of love, evolved into a great celebration of what God has done and is doing on the campus of MMS. I got to see and hear firsthand the success stories and witness a collective statement of living out one's faith. My only regret was for all our staff and alumni who didn't get to be a part of this amazing event held in our nation's capital."





CROSSROADS MEDICAL MISSION CONTINUES 20-YEAR LEGACY OF PROVIDING HELP FOR MMS STUDENTS



For the past 20 years, Mountain Mission School students have benefitted from the health and wellness services provided by Bristol-based Crossroads Medical Mission.

"We first learned of Mountain Mission School through Frank Kilgore, who was then the county attorney in Buchanan County," said Cindy Rockett, recently retired executive director of Crossroads Medical Mission. "He met us in Grundy and showed us Mountain Mission School. By the time we were ready to leave, everybody was talking about what a wonderful place it was and figuring out how we could be in partnership with them."

In 2005, Crossroads began providing student physicals for MMS students and today, 20 years later, every spring, the Crossroads team is on campus to do it again.

Rockett and current Crossroads Executive Director Erin Faust noted they and other staff members who also volunteer at the event, refer to "Mountain Mission Day as our favorite day of the year."

Not only does the visit provide MMS students with the physicals they need, but it also provides opportunities for volunteer service, which Faust said includes not only a Crossroads cadre of regular volunteers, but also nursing and pre-med students.

"Within just five to six hours, every residential student at MMS receives a physical from a caring provider -- completely free of charge," said MMS Director of Education Jessica Hertzog. "Crossroads' commitment

to help the least of these and to let the little children come beautifully reflects the heart of Christ Himself."

"We love Mountain Mission School and the amazing work they are doing with students," Faust said, adding, "we love being able to do this."

Crossroads Medical Mission began in 2001 when Dr. Paul Derden and Dr. Tim Schwob, longtime friends and family practice physicians, founded Crossroads Medical Mission. The two doctors met during their medical school residency and throughout their training and early careers, treated patients who often faced significant barriers to accessing affordable healthcare. Distressed by the widespread inability of many patients to access or to afford care, they began dreaming of a way to make a difference and in so doing, began the work of Crossroads Medical Mission.

In January 2002, Crossroads launched a mobile medical clinic designed to bring free preventative and urgent care directly to underserved communities. The mobile clinic afforded Crossroads the ability to reach individuals in need, including those who are uninsured, underinsured, or who otherwise lacked access to healthcare.

In 2022, Crossroads expanded its reach by opening a stand-alone clinic in downtown Bristol, VA. A Behavioral Health Clinic, HOPE at the Crossroads, was launched this year to provide integrative care and support for mental health needs in the community.



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

*For Tsion Tilahun,
MMS Is Family*

Tsion Tilahun was eight years old when she and her older sister, Tigist, arrived at Mountain Mission School. Now, some 28 years later, she is living and working in Charlotte, NC, where in addition to her day job, she owns and manages four properties which she rents out as short term and long-term rentals.

A newlywed, she married Quentin White just this past Labor Day weekend.

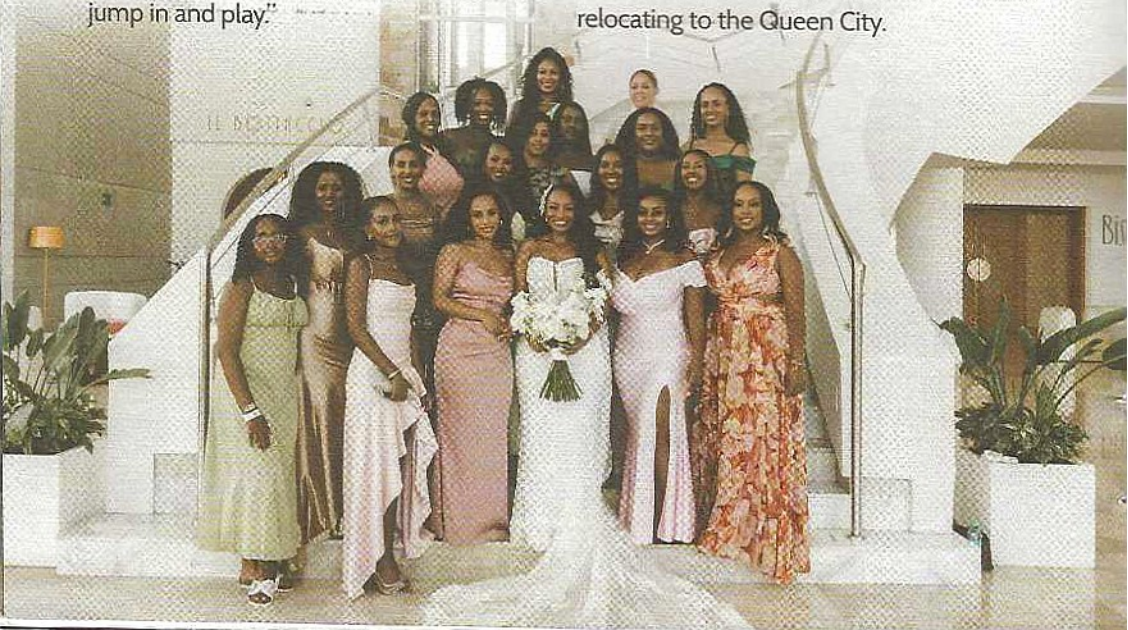
"I still remember walking on to campus and had no idea what to expect," Tilahun said of her first impression of Mountain Mission School. "I saw the playground and the kids outside and all I wanted to do was jump in and play."


The year was 1997 and Tilahun was getting ready to start second grade. She began her studies that year and remained at Mountain Mission School until her graduation in 2008.

From there, she went to the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, NC where she earned a degree in accounting with a minor in management information systems (MIS).

She spent a semester abroad in Italy finishing up electives in cooking and photography and while there, she said, it was an immersive experience as she and her roommate, Amina, an MMS classmate, lived with an Italian family in Florence, learning much about the Italian culture. She also holds an MBA from Pfeiffer University. After she graduated, Tilahun got an accounting job and now works for Marriott International in Charlotte.

She shared it has been rewarding to give back in a small way by hosting several Mountain Mission staff members during their time in Charlotte. Her homes are also available as temporary housing for families displaced by insurance claims after a fire or natural disaster, as well as for those relocating to the Queen City.





Her memories of Mountain Mission School, including that first day, are happy ones, she added. "At Mountain Mission School we never had to worry about food or shelter," she said. "We knew it would always be there."

She remembers Christmases at the school and receiving countless bags of toys and clothing through the generosity of so many who donated to the school. And, she has fond memories of the activities in which she was involved while in school, including choir, basketball, soccer and yearbook.

"I loved taking pictures and editing," she said, adding that being a part of chronicling the Mountain Mission story in the yearbook was one of the things she liked best about being part of the yearbook staff.

Like many alumni, she was happy to attend an alumni reunion event in Washington, D.C. this fall (see related story, this issue).

"It was something I did not want to miss and I booked my flight to be there," Tilahun said. "Most of my closest friends, even today, are from Mountain Mission School!"

She and her sister took old yearbooks with her to the reunion, enjoying the opportunity to look back on those memories with former classmates and friends.

"I see Mountain Mission School like family," Tilahun said. "Mountain Mission School is a beautiful, ordained and God-appointed place. I'm forever grateful to God that MMS is part of my life's journey."

In Charlotte, she attends church at the Restoration Place and is a Carolina Panthers football fan.

"It amazes me how all of us from Mountain Mission School have stayed so close," she said. "From that day in 1997, standing on campus and looking at the playground, Mountain Mission became my family -- and so many years later, it's still family today."

ILL PUT JESUS FIRST



BECOME A PART OF
THE SAM HURLEY SOCIETY

For those who are looking to contribute to the legacy of hope at Mountain Mission School, a special opportunity exists to become a part of the Sam Hurley Society.

Hurley, who founded the school, more than 100 years ago, was a self-made man who started the school with one simple vision, that being "reclaiming the child." Generations later, it is noted his vision continues and has been further expanded to not only focus on reclaiming the child, but also to "rescuing children, raising leaders and reaching nations." It's a call we do not take lightly and one we are happy to advance in what we do here every day.

MMS accepts no government funds and relies on its donors to help sustain its Christian mission.

Consider becoming a part of the Sam Hurley Society and by doing so, allow your legacy to intertwine with the MMS Legacy of Hope. By including MMS in your will, your own legacy lives on and at the same time, you make it possible for children to live a life filled with faith, hope and love.

Planned giving options include specifying a particular gift to MMS in a will or trust; designating MMS as the beneficiary of a life insurance policy; establishing a charitable remainder trust; assigning retirement assets to MMS, or conveying real estate holdings to MMS. Your financial advisor can provide more details.

For more information about joining the Sam Hurley Society, please contact us at 276-935-2954 or president@mmskids.org

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OPERATION *Christmas Child*



Mountain Mission School students, faculty and staff had the opportunity to learn more about Operation Christmas Child in September when representatives of the Mid-Appalachian Area Operation Christmas Child organization visited on campus. Schimea Nquessan, who received a shoebox as a child, told his story about receiving the shoebox as a young boy while living on the Ivory Coast. Mountain Mission has participated in packing shoeboxes for several years and on December 10, a group of students are scheduled to travel to the Operation Christmas Child processing center in Charlotte, NC to volunteer their time once again.

