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A Passion for Service

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▲ Nehemiah is majoring in Communication with minors in Leadership and Marketing.

Darren Heslop



A PASSION FOR SERVICE

Nehemiah Sitler lived with his family in the Chicago area. He was used to the hustle and bustle of the city and the close proximity to pretty much any type of store or food imaginable. When his dad received a job offer in a relatively rural area of Tennessee, the resulting move was quite an adjustment. Thankfully, Nehemiah found one bright spot: the opportunity to attend Heritage Academy, which offered aviation training.

BY MORIAH MCDONALD



Saul Dominguez

▲ Nehemiah (front row, right) completed training with the other 2019–2020 student missionaries before they left for their respective assignments.

Nehemiah saw this training as a way to pursue a career as a missionary pilot. “The reason I went to Heritage Academy was because they said they could make me a commercial pilot by the time I graduated,” shares Nehemiah. “I felt like it was my calling.”

During Nehemiah’s sophomore year at Heritage, he began flying. When his instructor wasn’t available to fly, Nehemiah used his free time to prepare for the written exam required to earn his pilot’s license. “I got a really good score,” he remembers. “I was proud of myself because I had worked hard on it, and it was a fairly important test.”

The summer after his sophomore year, Nehemiah continued flying as often as possible. “I was taking the final steps before I could actually take the check ride with the inspector and receive my pilot’s license,” he explains.

Then, during his junior year, the unexpected happened. “I was wrestling with my friend on a bottom bunk. We were having a good time. Then I fell off the

bunk. When I opened my eyes, I was extremely disoriented,” says Nehemiah. “I saw the assistant dean, the science teacher and the principal of the school all looking over me. They said I couldn’t move and told me I had to stay still.”

Eventually, an ambulance arrived. Nehemiah found out that in his fall he had broken his left clavicle, sustained a concussion and had had a seizure. He says, “That’s when things started to fall apart. I went to an orthopedist to have my clavicle fixed. But he wouldn’t do surgery until I saw a neurologist so they could determine if my brain was stable enough to endure a surgery.”

The neurologist informed Nehemiah that, by law, he wasn’t allowed to fly for six months. “I was disappointed. I eventually flew with my instructor again during the second semester of my junior year. But, during spring break, I got a call from him — he said I shouldn’t come back to lessons until I had the seizure situation sorted out,” Nehemiah says. “To become a pilot, I had to pass

PASSION

IN THE MIDST OF THESE CHALLENGES, NEHEMIAH EXPERIENCED GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FROM A NUMBER OF PEOPLE.

a medical exam and declare on paper whether or not I'd had a seizure. Typically, the government assumes that you have epilepsy if you've had a seizure. I was disqualified."

Nehemiah was devastated. His family had dedicated so much time and money to the aviation plan, but it would have cost thousands of dollars to fight the disqualification. They concluded they would have to figure out something else.

In the midst of these challenges, Nehemiah experienced guidance and support from a number of people. Both the vice principal and the head boys' dean at Heritage Academy were particularly impactful figures in his life. "The vice principal said that God would help me find something to do with my life that was even better than aviation, and the head boys' dean encouraged me to pursue all of my interests," he says.

With senior year came the pressure to choose a new career path. One of his academy jobs, working as a resident assistant (RA), played an integral role in helping him to arrive at a decision. "I was all over the place, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. But I also was thinking about how I loved being an RA. It was so much fun being able to interact with others. So I decided that I really wanted to be a dean," he notes.

To accomplish his new goal, he decided to major in Communication in college. "I knew I wanted to work with people," he says, "and I felt like Communication was a very open and broad field that would allow me to do that."

Next, Nehemiah began searching for a college to attend. He and his parents visited several Seventh-day

Adventist schools during the spring break of his senior year. Andrews University was the last place they visited. "I remember walking in through the entry of Buller Hall. I saw a friend I knew, and Shelly Erhard, director of Student Visits, greeted me. That's when it clicked. I decided to go to Andrews because of the community. At Andrews, people cared about me," he says.

As Nehemiah started his freshman year at Andrews, he began to create more and more connections — through his classes and professors, his job on campus, and in the residence hall.

He and a group of friends also became interested in traveling to Europe through Student Missions. When they looked into possibilities, however, there weren't many organizations that offered opportunities for a group of students to travel to a destination together. Additionally, the only opportunities available were in Spanish-speaking countries. "Before I knew it, all of my friends had backed out. I had to make a decision, so asked myself, *'Do I really want to be a student missionary or is this just a passing thing?'*" he remembers.

Nehemiah decided to move ahead and pursue a job as a student dean in Europe. "I loved being an RA so much in high school, so I thought this would be a good opportunity to test it out," he says. "But the application process took a while. Before you get accepted, you have to get a reference. While that was happening, I looked for calls that I was interested in."

Nehemiah found a call from England to be an assistant boys' dean. He emailed the school and included his cover letter and résumé, and they sent him an application in response. "I excitedly filled out the application

SERVICE

“TRUST WHAT GOD HAS IN STORE FOR YOUR LIFE AND TRUST WHERE HE IS LEADING YOU.”

thoroughly and waited, but I never heard back. We were getting to the end of the school year and a lot of people had already gotten calls,” he says. “I was really discouraged and didn’t know what to do.”

Eventually, Nehemiah determined that he would focus on trying to find a position in the United States instead. He went to the student missionary call board and looked up every position available. “I found every single school website, looked for every dean and principal, and wrote down all of the organizations and contact names,” he recalls. “I emailed the boys’ dean and principal of every school with my cover letter and résumé.”

Nehemiah received emails back from Ozark Adventist Academy in Gentry, Arkansas, and Gem State Academy in Caldwell, Idaho. The dean from Ozark Adventist Academy was interested in a phone call. The dean from Gem State Academy shared his number and said they would talk when he returned from a school trip.

At that point, April of Nehemiah’s freshman year had passed. It was May. At the beginning of June, he would begin summer camp and would no longer have access to Student Missions opportunities.

When the dean from Gem State Academy called Nehemiah, they found that they had both grown up in Illinois as kids. Additionally, the dean’s parents had worked with Nehemiah’s dad, who was a pastor. “We connected over that,” Nehemiah recalls. “At this point, I was thinking to myself, *‘This has to be it.’* I wasn’t hearing back from anyone and I was done searching the call board. He called me a few days later and said I could have the job.”

Although Nehemiah was excited to have the job as assistant boys’ dean, it was part-time. He quickly discovered that working part-time meant that he would

have free time. He began trying to volunteer for different programs, but not many opportunities were available. He felt as though he wasn’t connecting with the Academy and became discouraged.

After a couple of weeks had passed, Nehemiah traveled with Academy staff to Camp Ida-Haven, a summer camp in Valley County, Idaho. While there, Nehemiah talked to a staff member who was the recruitment director at Gem State Academy. He became interested in her career and asked if he could help with her work. “She agreed. When we returned to the office, I called all of the elementary schools in the area and scheduled appointments for us to visit and do presentations. We went to a bunch of schools near the Academy and three schools in Oregon,” he remembers. “We had initially decided to do only one or two, but then we decided to do a whole string of schools.”

It was their visit to a high school in Oregon that played a vital role in helping Nehemiah realize that he wanted to work in recruitment. The recruitment director and Nehemiah entered a classroom and began telling the students about Gem State Academy. Then they invited the students to ask questions. “I told them they could go anywhere they wanted and do anything they wanted. It was a really powerful experience to talk to them and see their reactions,” Nehemiah says. “Those kids live in such an isolated part of the country, away from all sorts of amenities. It was amazing to tell them that they had the potential to be something more than they’d imagined.”

With the arrival of COVID-19, Nehemiah’s recruitment trips came to an end. “It was one of those things where I wasn’t able to have closure with it and see it to the end,” he says. “but I was thinking about it a lot during the summer. That experience with the students in

Oregon had been so energizing. I realized that I enjoyed recruitment more than deaning.”

Inspired by his experience in recruiting, Nehemiah decided to pursue both Leadership and Marketing minors in addition to his Communication major when he returned to Andrews. He credits Student Missions for helping him to discover his interest in recruitment. “Student Missions is like a gift that keeps giving,” he explains. “When you come back to Andrews, you’ve discovered new things about yourself and others. The Student Missions club becomes a family. We had all experienced and learned different things but, at the end of the day, we all had that passion for service and saw things that God could use us for. Student Missions shows you how you can be a World Changer.”

Nehemiah wants to use his newfound talents and interests to help others. “I see missions as service and service as ultimately giving of our resources to help other people. That can take a lot of forms — helping someone struggling in class, giving food to a homeless person, giving money to ministries or leading a small group,” he explains.

Nehemiah has pursued jobs on the Andrews University campus that will help him learn more about recruitment and enrollment as well. During the

2020–2021 school year, he worked with the Student Visits team at Marketing & Enrollment Management. Additionally, he works at the ITS help desk. These jobs have taught him to stay calm while working through challenging issues. He also works for Student Activities & Involvement and is helping to develop the AUSA website. He believes that learning how to develop a website will be useful in terms of understanding how marketing works.

From Chicago to Tennessee to Michigan, from pursuing aviation to deaning and finally to recruitment, Nehemiah has learned to trust in God’s plan for his life. “I was upset for a while that I ended up going to Gem State, but I realized it was for the best. It didn’t work out with other mission calls because God had a plan for me to go to Idaho so I could realize that I enjoyed recruitment more than deaning,” he recalls. “By trusting the process, I was able to discover the passion that God has given me for my life. Trust the process, even if you’re not a student missionary. Trust what God has in store for your life and trust where He is leading you.” ■

Moriah McDonald, University Communication student writer, Andrews University



Jackson John

◀ On Tuesday, March 16, 2021, during the evening World Changers Week program, Nehemiah shared about his experience serving as an assistant boys’ dean in Idaho.