

# THE CREATION OF A PEACEMAKER



“I have heard the muffled words of those who cannot cry out from under the weight of oppression, and I yearn for peace.”

—*Letters from 'Apartheid Street'*, Michael McRay



## Michael McRay ('11) began his college career at Lipscomb as a typical English major looking forward to his study abroad experience in Vienna, Austria. He emerged from Lipscomb as a peacemaker.

Less than eight months after his graduation, McRay began a two-month stint with the organization Christian Peacemaker Teams, serving in Hebron, the most volatile city in the West Bank. During his internship, he worked to de-escalate potentially violent everyday situations, to protect Palestinian children walking to school and to tell the stories of everyday life within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That was just the beginning of McRay's advocacy for nonviolent resolution since his graduation. He has also earned a Master of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Studies from Trinity College Dublin in Belfast, Northern Ireland; published his book *Letters from 'Apartheid Street'* about his experience in Hebron; served for a time as a volunteer chaplain at Tennessee's Riverbend Maximum Security Institution; started a monthly community storytelling event held in Nashville, and co-founded the No Exceptions Prison Collective (noexceptions.net).

He is currently working on a second book, "Where the River Bends," inspired by his work in Nashville's prisons, exploring what can be learned about forgiveness by talking to people in prison. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has written a foreword for this work. Next, he will assist Cynthia Vaughn in narrating her journey toward forgiving her adoptive father, a man currently sitting on Tennessee's Death Row after being convicted of killing her mother. Christian author Shane Claiborne is expected to write the foreword for that book.

McRay brings his perspective gained from these experiences to the Lipscomb classroom as an adjunct professor in the department of history, politics and philosophy as well as the law, justice

and society department. He has also taught in the Tennessee Prison for Women and Riverbend prison as part of the Lipscomb LIFE Program (Lipscomb Initiative For Education).

McRay's journey to become a peace advocate began before he was born. His grandfather, **John McRay**, an archaeologist and professor who made regular trips to Israel, was a member of the Lipscomb faculty in the 1960s and early '70s, where he was a strong advocate for racial equality and Christian unity, said McRay.

"My grandfather was known for teaching his students to relentlessly pursue the truth. My father taught me the sacredness of questioning everything. So I was always open to exploring new ideas," said McRay.

During his college career, McRay studied abroad in Vienna and then spent an extra week in Europe with his father David. The pair visited Krakow and Auschwitz concentration camp.

"As we were sitting there in Auschwitz in silence, my dad said, 'Whatever you believe about God has to make sense here or it can't make sense anywhere.' It shattered my idea that God just rescues us from our problems when we are in need and made me wonder if God actually exists in the midst of our suffering, perhaps even hanging on the gallows, as Elie Wiesel wrote."

Back in Nashville, McRay began taking courses taught by **Richard Goode** and **Lee Camp**, two Lipscomb professors he credits with shaping his passion for promoting Christian nonviolence. Goode introduced McRay to Christian Peacemaker Teams as an after-college option.

McRay, who hails from Jellico, Tenn., was certainly familiar with Israel as he had traveled there with his father and family a couple of times while growing up, once as part of a family sabbatical overseas. His father, a physician, now takes medical students and residents for one month each year to do clinical rotations in Israel and the West Bank.

During his internship with Christian peacemakers, McRay corresponded back home "to reflect upon and process what I was seeing and experiencing. My letters portray the raw truth of my feelings and observations," he said. These letters became his first book.

In both books and in his teaching, McRay said he tries to fight stereotypical thinking by bringing "a look from below, an opportunity to hear the stories of a misunderstood and misrepresented people."

McRay refers to a novelist who calls stereotypes "single stories," a story that represents only one side of a person or situation. He tries to show students that stereotypes are not necessarily untrue, but they are incomplete stories. "I want to present them with accounts that complete the story, because part of what it means to be human is to be complex, not one-sided," he said. For him, presenting a platform for the telling of stories that people rarely hear, whether through his own narration or facilitating that of others, has become a core vocational pursuit.

That pursuit also fuels his latest venture, the Tenx9 (pronounced ten by nine) Nashville storytelling event. The weekly gathering at Douglas Corner Cafe is based on the original Tenx9 storytelling event established in Belfast. Each session, nine people have up to 10 minutes to tell a real story from their lives based around a theme. (tenx9nashville.com)

"People from a variety of backgrounds participate," said McRay. "The only criteria are that the story must be true, about his or her own life and less than ten minutes long. Many of the storytellers are incredibly vulnerable, which I think is one of the marks of a truly great story."

Stories play a major role in all his writing and teaching, McRay said. "Most important to me is teaching students to pay attention to the stories that are being told to them, to understand that we are affected and formed by the stories we are told and those we choose to tell," he said. ■