

A church, a camper and a couple in need



A year of 'boondocking' builds bonds

BY NETTE MILLER

When you hear about a congregation's hospitality, you might picture people greeting one another after Sunday services. Or you might picture people chatting around a table in the fellowship hall during a church potluck. Chances are, you wouldn't picture people delivering dog toys and dish towels to a camper parked in the church's parking lot.

But that's just what my husband and I experienced when we stumbled upon the incredible hospitality of Dailey Ridge First Presbyterian Church in Norwood, a historic church nestled in a bucolic village of just 1,592 people in upstate New York.

In late June 2017, the small congregation, with an average Sunday attendance of 12, grew their population by two — well, three. The members — who included veterans, retired teachers, homemakers and farmers — opened their arms to welcome my new husband, Kyle, me and our friendly canine, Chaco.

Our story begins

We were adventurous newlyweds who saw the world through rose-colored glasses. I was in upstate New York attending graduate school at Clarkson University in Potsdam, and my husband was completing his university courses online while working as a substitute teacher. It was my notion to spend the first year of marriage in a camper, and my husband supported the wild idea. We anticipated a challenging winter, but decided we would take it week by week. Kyle and I had been attending worship at Dailey Ridge for a couple of months when we first shared our plans of living at a campground.



A Dailey Ridge member helps build a roof over the camper.
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The Millers' dog, Chaco, was a welcomed member of Dailey Ridge. When not walking up and down the aisle greeting worshippers, Chaco could be found curled up by one of the church's woodstoves.

Shortly after, the ladies of the church began crafting other plans for us. The summer and fall seasons in upstate New York are beautiful, but the winters can be long and brutal. The church members knew we were bound to run into severe dilemmas over the winter months, worse than the challenges we were anticipating ourselves.

With love and sincerity, the members of Dailey Ridge extended an invitation for us to relocate our camper and park on the church property. It was an enticing option we could not decline. We were soon going to be church "boondockers" — people who camp without hookups in a remote area.

The congregation was excited and threw us a surprise party. They showered us with gifts to make our camper a home: a welcome mat shaped like a dog paw, camp chairs for around the fire, dishes, homemade dishcloths, some American flag solar lights and a wooden sign that read "Mr. & Mrs. Miller." Even Chaco was included in the gift-giving, receiving treats and new toys to chew.

Every church member went above and beyond to help us get settled in. From moving the camper to decorating it, members continued to show their generosity. The first night the camper was parked at the church, Kyle and I took a walk around the property. We felt overwhelmed by the

gifts, both physical and emotional, that had been given to us over the past few weeks. The servant hearts of Dailey Ridge, though, were just beginning to demonstrate their love.

Autumn in a country haven

Parked on a grassy knoll behind the church building (circa 1853) sat our camper. We had no sewage hookups. My husband, being the woodsman that he is, was content using the great outdoors. I, however, did not want to go outside at 2 a.m. when the temperature was as low as 5 degrees. So we purchased a "chamber pot" — a potty training toilet — for those moments during the night when you just gotta go.

We also discovered that we had to prevent our water tanks and lines from freezing, which meant going without a water hookup. The idea of living in a camper was becoming less and less grand. It was only October.

Thankfully, the church allowed us to use the restrooms and kitchen inside their fellowship hall and gave us a key to access the church day and night. This gesture is truly what made living in the camper year-round possible. We joined a local gym to have access to showers and for an occasional workout as well. We chose not to install internet and instead utilized the university library as much as possible, learning the value of sharing the day with one another

and reading together before bed.

Chaco learned to love Sundays. Sunday meant friends, lots of attention and, of course, more treats.

Dailey Ridge welcomes dogs, so Chaco was even allowed to join us for worship. One Sunday morning, there were a lot of children Chaco had not met yet running around. Kyle and I thought it might be best to let Chaco stay inside the camper while we attended the church service.

After the service, we went to check on Chaco. To our dismay, she had communicated very clearly how she felt about missing church. Our screen door was scratched to shreds.

As autumn slipped by, it was soon time for the church's annual work day to ensure plenty of wood was split for winter, the kitchen deep cleaned, and the overall facilities given a little extra attention. It was a joy to see so many hands contributing to one cause. Despite rain on the day scheduled for work, the members of Dailey Ridge proceeded to split, carry and stack wood for hours.

November came, and Kyle needed to build a roof to protect the camper from snow. Once again, our church family showed their support by offering their insight, tools, resources and time. One man helped Kyle brainstorm how to get started with the project and allowed us to borrow his tools. Another man came to the camper on his only day off to help Kyle build. With the roof completed, Kyle skirted the bottom of the camper with bales of hay, which we later discovered the mice and rabbits would be grateful for. We found ourselves enjoying the camper life during the fall months: frequent campfires, evening walks, sleeping with windows open to let in the crisp air, and being blissfully unaware of the winter challenges ahead.

Winter wonders and woodstoves

Winter arrived. New York had a record streak of low temperatures. Condensation from our breath froze

to the inside walls of the camper. When we entered the camper, the snow that was stuck on our shoes would freeze to the floor. The humidity in the camper built up and damaged our textbooks. The urine inside the chamber pot had a thin layer of frost on it from just sitting overnight. We laughed — and at times grumbled — our way through the struggles. I channeled my inner Laura Ingalls Wilder and prayed that time would fly.

Our church family helped make the harsh winter pass by quickly. They invited us over to have dinner, or to just hang out, or to attend community events and sometimes just to use their internet or watch TV. Our frequent visits to their warm homes provided enough stamina to get through the cold nights in the camper. Kyle and I kept looking forward, acknowledging that this was only a short-term living experience. We stayed positive and grateful for everything the church had provided us with.

The Dailey Ridge sanctuary is heated by two woodstoves that have a unique chimney design expanding over the pews to distribute the heat. It is up to the members to wake up early and get the stoves going for the sanctuary to be warm by service time. The dedication and motivation of the church family at Dailey Ridge are fervent. When many churches had to close their doors on Sunday mornings due to the cold temperatures and inability to keep their sanctuaries warm, Dailey Ridge remained open.

Chaco especially enjoyed the woodstoves, spending most of her time during the church service curled up by a stove. Aside from soaking in the heat, Chaco loved to greet each member in their pews. She knew where everyone sat and would look for them on Sundays when they were not in attendance. Chaco considered her church members to be part of her pack. When the pastor would shake



COURTESY OF DAILEY RIDGE

Dailey Ridge First Presbyterian Church threw a shower for the boondocking Millers. Among the gifts were dog toys and treats for Chaco.

each member's hand, Chaco was first in line.

The annual ham dinner was another community outreach event hosted by Dailey Ridge that we got to experience. Each family contributed different items. The women behind the scenes worked diligently to ensure guests were pleased with their dining experience. Kyle and I enjoyed getting to experience this occasion. As with hosting any event, stressors and moments of chaos occurred, but the church members continued to strive for quality service. When there were no more guests, the members sat down together and ate the leftovers. The stress had vanished, funds had been raised and the laughter began. It felt like a casual family dinner, and we were right at home.

Farewells

The love Kyle and I felt as participants of this church was an answered prayer. I grew up in Texas and have lived in a few states where

I attended church, but my experience at Dailey Ridge was one-of-a-kind. It was also my first experience with a Presbyterian church, and what I found was a beautiful example of Christ's servant heart, hospitality and love.

Kyle and I do not regret our decision to live in a camper, because it led us to an invaluable church family. The time we spent living in Dailey Ridge's parking lot will be held close to our hearts forever — and Chaco's too. The examples of faith and service in this spirited country church have taught and encouraged us beyond words.

Nette Miller is completing her field work in occupational therapy in Houston. She graduates in December 2018 and plans to pursue a career in neonatal therapy. In her free time, Nette enjoys rehabilitating wildlife and spending time outdoors with her husband, Kyle. The family is now enjoying indoor plumbing.