

**Jaremey Anderson**, 22, is the youngest person ever elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives. Sworn in on his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, Jeramey intends to focus on more public funding for education as he completes his last semester of college online. Asked about his decision to run for state office at such a young age, Jeramey said he was going to stick to municipal government, but then he realized: “It’s go big or go home.”

Gabrielle, James, Jaylen, Carson, Quvenhané, and Jeramey succeeded – doing some truly amazing things – because they didn’t focus on their limitations; they asked for help; they took risks; they had fun along the way; they never gave up; and they dreamed big. They set huge goals and worked hard to achieve them.

These “stretch goals” challenged Gabrielle, James, Jaylen, Carson, Quvenhané, and Jeramey to reach beyond what they thought they could do. They set their sights on targets that were exceptionally demanding; targets that some people thought impossible. To achieve these “stretch goals” they had to dream big, step outside their comfort zones, and push themselves harder and farther, and they wound up doing some pretty impressive things.

The Bible is filled with people who faced stretch goals. Noah built an ark that weathered the waters of the flood. Abraham left his home and followed where God led him. Joseph endured slavery and prison, interpreted dreams, wound up as Pharaoh’s right-hand-man, so he could save his family from starvation. Esther confronted an unjust system and saved her people. David defeated a giant. Daniel did what was right, and not what was popular, and showed the people how to live as God’s people. The disciples spread the word about Jesus’ love to a hostile world that didn’t want to hear it. Paul defended himself against those who accused him, he survived torture and shipwreck. Each one faced adversity and had to stretch themselves to accomplish something great for God.

In Exodus 4, Moses has a decision to make. He is hiding in the wilderness of Midian, tending sheep, keeping a low profile because there is a warrant out for his arrest. Moses killed an Egyptian man and Pharaoh wants his head. There God gave Moses a stretch goal: go to Pharaoh and tell him, “Let God’s people go!” The Hebrew slaves in Israel appealed to God for rescue, and God chose Moses to lead them.

Do you remember the story? Moses makes all sorts of excuses why he cannot do what God asks. First he says, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh? I’m nobody and Pharaoh is king of the world. Why should he listen to me?” Then Moses says, “Who should I say that you are?” If Moses isn’t worthy, he wants God’s assurance that God will have his back. Moses also tells

God that he is not a good public speaker, so could God send someone else to talk to Pharaoh? And finally, Moses says, “They’ll never believe me.” Moses tried everything he could think of to dissuade God from choosing him to go to Pharaoh.

God knew Moses had it in him to do this: the stretch goal God put before Moses was within reach, because God would be with Moses every step of the way. So, God asks Moses, “What have you got in your hand?” Moses looks, and in his hand is his shepherd’s staff – the stick used to herd the sheep. God tells Moses to throw it on the ground, where God turns the stick into a snake. Then, when Moses grabs the snake by the tail, it turns back into a staff.

This is no magic trick: this is the power of God at work; and God says to Moses, “So that they may believe that the Lord...appeared to you.” The rest, as they say, is history: Moses goes to Pharaoh, God sends the plagues to prove that God is greater than Pharaoh, the Hebrew people are freed, and Moses leads them across the desert to the Promised Land.

“What have you got in your hand?” Sometimes the answer is as close as that! The power to free the Hebrews came not from Moses’ stick, but from the power of God. This is the same God who created the universe with a word, parted the Red Sea waters, and raised Jesus from the dead. This is the same God who at your baptism claimed you as God’s own child and promised great things for you. This is the same God who will put stretch goals in your path, and the same God who will walk with you if you choose to accept those stretch goals.

Jesus hands down some pretty big stretch goals in Luke 4. Jesus was in his hometown of Nazareth, reading the Scripture for the congregation during worship. He reads from the Book of Isaiah, where God says of the promised Messiah: *‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’* Jesus ends his reading by saying, *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Jesus tells them that he is the promised Messiah and that the promises of God will now begin to come true.

Did you catch those promises? Bring good news to the poor. Proclaim release to the captives. Recover sight for the blind. Let the oppressed go free. Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Those are some impossible sounding stretch goals! Jesus gives these goals as the directive for his disciples, the command for His Church. We know Jesus can do these things, but what about you? Can you speak good news to the poor? Can you release the captives? Can you restore sight to the blind? Can you set the oppressed free? Can you proclaim God’s favor?

Actually, you can! We all can! When we help a neighbor with a chore, or give financial assistance to someone in need, or hand out a food parcel in a village in Guatemala, we offer the good news that God is love and God's blessing is abundant. When we talk with a friend who is depressed, showing that we care for them, we offer release from their captivity and hope for their future. When we do what's right, instead of what's popular, we open blind eyes to the way things should be. When we stand up for a friend who is bullied, we offer freedom for the oppressed. When we share our faith story, we proclaim that God is greater than the problems and the Pharaohs of this world. These are all things you can do, every day, with the gifts and tools you already possess. All you need do is rely on God and God's power to back you up.

So, I challenge you – Brayden, Jackie, Jozee, Tucker and Ryndel – to stretch yourselves in life. The way will be tough and you'll have to work hard, but the rewards will be tremendous. Just remember the lessons of Gabrielle, James, Jaylen, Carson, Quvenhané, and Jeramey: don't focus on your limitations (ask what you've got in your hand to use); if you're scared and unsure, ask for help (God and your church family are always there beside you); take risks (shout down Pharaoh from time to time); never give up (remember that Moses traveled forty years to reach the Promised Land); go big or go home (dare to dream); and have fun along the way (God has something amazing planned for you).

We're proud of you and excited to welcome you as members to our church and partners in God's Kingdom work. We need your ideas and your energy if we're going to stretch ourselves to reach God's goals. May God bless you on your journey, wherever it takes you!

Prayer: Goal-setting God, may we say 'yes' to you so that the Spirit in our hearts will once again be set ablaze. Spirit of Wisdom, guide our actions so they tell of God's love. Spirit of Truth, open our eyes to see the world as it really is. Spirit of Power, enthuse us to work for justice throughout the world. Spirit of Love, inspire us to respect the dignity of each person. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful. Amen

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## Stretch Goals

**Confirmation Sunday, February 26, 2017**

**Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Exodus 4:1-5 and Luke 4:14-21**

Gabrielle Turnquest dreamed of becoming a lawyer. James Ward dreamed of attending Howard University. Jaylen Bledsoe dreamed of starting his own IT company. Carson Huey-You dreamed of attending Texas Christian University. Quvenzhané (Kwah-ven-ja-nay) Wallis dreamed of acting. Jaremey Anderson dreamed of becoming a politician.

What do all these dreams have in common? They all came true. Here's the rest of the story: **Gabrielle Turnquest** passed the bar exam at age 18, making her the youngest barrister in the United Kingdom's history (average age: 27). Gabrielle succeeded because she worked really, really hard. She didn't know she was doing something remarkable: "I didn't fully realize the impact of it," she said.

**James Ward**, 19, a homeless teen from Los Angeles, created an online account called "Homeless to Howard" and received enough donations in one week to cover the first year of school. Asked how it felt to be part of such a massive undertaking, James answered: "No matter who you are or how scared you are, as long as you ask for help there's always someone out there who is willing to help you."

**Jaylen Bledsoe**, at 15, started an IT company that specializes in web design and other basic IT services. Within two years his company grew to a net worth of \$3.5 million. Jaylen's advice to other young entrepreneurs? "Take risks."

**Carson Huey-You**, 11, is Texas Christian University's youngest student ever. He is studying quantum physics and hopes to have his Bachelor's degree before he is old enough to drive and his Ph.D. by age 20. Carson scored an impressive 1770 on his SATs, speaks fluent Mandarin, and plays Beethoven on the piano; but right now, his Mom still has to drive him to school each morning and pick him up each afternoon. Asked about college life, Carson said, "It's fun."

**Quvenzhané-Wallis**, 10, is the youngest person ever nominated for a Best Actress in a Leading Role academy award. She began acting at age 5, and when asked why she keeps acting, she said, "I just keep doing what I'm doing and don't ever give up."