For those familiar with Sewanee, one has probably heard of “The Blue Chair”, a small breakfast and lunch place in town, and if so, has most likely seen or tried their famous granola. Many may not know where this granola comes from. Down the mountain from Sewanee is a place, run by Susan Binkley, called Blue Monarch. Blue Monarch is a place designed to help women who have been involved in illicit drug use or physically abusive relationships to find a new beginning in life. It is a faith-based program that requires the women to take classes in the program for two years. Within that time, the women earn the privilege of working in the granola factory that is located in the basement of their house; however, many of these women do not come Blue Monarch alone. Many bring their child or children to the program with them. During the school year, the children are enrolled and attend school just as any other child their age would do, but during the summer, the options that Blue Monarch has in terms of programming and activities for the children is very limited. This being the case, the children often end up bouncing around from day camp to day camp or being enrolled in programs that they are not particularly fond of. Towards the end of February, I heard recent Sewanee graduate, Katherine Rogers, was planning some type of summer camp for these kids and asked if I could join her. She took me on as her assistant.

For six weeks, Katherine and I worked with the children at Blue Monarch, playing games, going on field trips, swimming, and many other things. Susan was very gracious to give us large amounts of freedom when it came to deciding what we would do with our summer camp, so we were able to go on adventures around the many acres on the Blue Monarch property as well as travel to Nashville and Chattanooga for field trips. Katherine and I served as counselors for a summer camp for these kids that did not require them to travel around to various other places just to have fun. We also helped out the women of Blue Monarch by providing them with an opportunity to focus on their classes and work during the week instead of having to juggle. The simple way to explain my job was
that I served as a camp counselor, mentor, and friend for the children of Blue Monarch this summer.

Having never truly been in charge of any type of program for children, the summer itself was a huge learning experience for me. All types of new skills surfaced as a result of my summer, namely basic childcare, programming, schedule and time management, and also flexible planning given the nature of a program like Blue Monarch were there is a constant potential for changes in dynamic. I found these skills in the day-to-day activities we planned for the kids. We did basic things such as spelling or counting games all the way to field trips to places like Falls Mill where they learned about how a traditional water powered mill works. Many of the activities we planned, such as tye dying shirts or going on a group scavenger hunt to find a “kidnapped” counselor, served as ways to get the kids to work on teambuilding and sharing without them realizing it directly. We also did things like exploring and swimming everyday in order to encourage a healthy and active lifestyle while they were still having fun.

I believe that giving the children of Blue Monarch a summer to remember for the rest of their lives was the biggest achievement we made. From day one, our goal was to get on the same level as the kids in a way that would allow us to become close to them and earn not only their respect but also their trust.

One of the main challenges we faced was almost all of the children lived together at Blue Monarch, therefore we had to make sure that they were as separate from their home, mentally, as they could be during the day in order to keep them from running to their moms every time something went wrong. In that way, we hoped to, if not immediately, but in the long term have an effect on the kids in terms of learning to deal with problems and disagreements between each other. One of the big issues that arose out of this was the carrying over of frustrations from the house into camp. We faced fights and breakdowns that tested our patience and our ability to think rationally in high
stress situations, but tried the best we could to communicate to the kids the differences in the way each situation was handled. Each child brought the table his or her own challenge whether it was anger issues, desire for the most attention, or simply being more mature than a child should be at their age, and it was very hard to handle each case separately when we were in a situation where it was hard to isolate a single child for the given problem. Katherine and I finally realized the most we could do was to provide a stable support system that could potentially foster more positive and healthy responses than the ones happening. Although going in to the camp we were so set on solving all of the behavioral problems or emotional struggles we were faced with, we quickly realized what was more important: providing the children with a summer that was not only fun, but also a summer that encouraged better behavior though encouragement and praise. That being said, it was challenging to recognize when to ignore behavior and when to address it, but in the end, even “punishment” came in the form of positive reassurance that the child was capable of better behavior. We found this particularly effective and very rewarding because, although we didn’t see huge behavior changes, we saw small moments of recognition of positive or negative behavior in each child.

This constant give and take with behavioral issues was definitely trying, but my experience with these kids overall was life changing. Never have I had such admiration for a group of children and the way they are able to deal with the realities of life; however, that did present a challenge because it was very easy to forget that these were children between the ages of 3 and 12. They’ve seen so many terrible things that no child should have to see at their age, yet they are still able to be children, play, and laugh. It was hard to watch one of them break down about their father not being around or finally crying from the stress of the responsibility they felt for their siblings and standing up for them. This made me realize how much patience I lacked and how much I grew over the summer in terms of remaining calm and letting the storm blow through
before I tried to pick up the debris scattered all around. It demonstrated that I could give these kids a representation of the way they should handle situations and treat each other so that one day they may look back and remember that.

Another high point in my experience was feeling so appreciated and welcomed by the children. Going into the summer, Katherine already knew most of the children so I had to work my way in and gain their trust. I remember the moment that touched me the most was when one of the kids, while watching a movie, grabbed a blanket and curled up on the floor next to me to fall asleep. From that moment on, the number of hugs and smiles grew and I immediately saw the trust the children had for both Katherine and me. The women and staff at Blue Monarch were another source of this appreciation. The mothers would sometimes thank us for what we were doing, but at the end of the summer, they all pitched in and threw us a small party to say thank you. Although it wasn’t much, just knowing that we made even the smallest difference in their lives made the summer that much more rewarding.

After I was able to accept that I couldn’t change someone’s life in a day, the summer turned into a wonderful six weeks of getting to know some of the most caring and compassionate children I have ever met. To take them somewhere like Falls Mill and see their eyes light up at the way an entire building is powered by a simple wheel and water made every low point during the summer disappear. Never in my life had I ever considered following a career path that involved children. This summer was such a positive and life changing experience for me that, although I do not know what I want to do with my life after college, I know that I have opened my mind to future opportunities that I would have never thought of before.