

Piercing Pre-teen Armor

-by Kevin Ophoff

Sometimes I get a kid in my youth group whose shell is as hard to break through as an armored car. They don't all instantly warm up to a fifty (plus) year old geezer (even if he is cool). One pre-teen girl had been in my Junior High Sunday School class for almost two years and still avoided me like the plague. When she saw me at church she'd flee in another direction. I sometimes, good naturedly, called her "The Queen" to reflect the aloof attitude she frequently exuded in class. Our breakthrough finally happened quite by accident. I was cleaning my office, a chore I detest, and found a T-shirt and iron-on transfers left over from making a Christmas gift for my wife. It was an apron that said "Queen of Everything" with a picture of her. Just to get rid of the T-shirt and transfers I opened the same file on my computer, substituted the 7th graders picture, printed it, and ironed it on.

I gave this teen the shirt the following Sunday, just before she left for dance camp, suggesting she might use it as a sleep shirt in the dorm. Her eyes almost popped out of her head just before she threw her arms around my neck in a big hug. The wall between us disappeared. What a difference! Oh, she's still the queen, but now she participates in the lesson discussion and frequently uses her "queenly" authority to restore order when the class gets too rowdy. She invites more friends to the class than anyone else.

I used to give Teen Bibles or Christian music CD's for birthday gifts. But most of my students have been buried in religious paraphernalia by parents and relatives so it never had much impact. Now I have been making personalized T-shirts instead. It's very inexpensive and easy to do. Sometimes I enlist the parent's help on the sly to get a quick look at their rooms, obtaining an embarrassing picture, or just to learn a little more about them. On the wall of one girls room was a poster that said, "I didn't ask to be queen, but hey, if the crown fits..." That and her picture made a great T. Her brother had models of Star-Wars space ships on his desk. I used a picture of Darth Vader (can't show it because of copyright laws) opposite a picture of him saying, "My force is stronger than your farce". These T's were very well received too.

I can't tell you how much easier it is to teach kids when they are convinced that their teacher likes them and genuinely cares about them. I've never found a better way of convincing kids that I care about them more than giving them a personalized T-shirt. It really paves the way to reach them.

Notes:

I used Microsoft Publisher to create the transfers. It's a program that came with my laptop. You've probably got something on your computer that can do it.

Many websites offer T-shirts you can have them make and send you but doing it yourself is more personalized.

Remember to set your printer to "reverse print", or "mirror" print so it come out right on the shirt.

After searching the internet for pictures run all your virus, malware, and spyware scans. I picked up some nasty Trojans, and tons of Spyware.

