



VESTAVIA VOICE

Neighborhood News
and Entertainment
for Vestavia Hills

[ABOUT US](#) [NEWS](#) [PEOPLE/PLACES](#) [SCHOOLS](#) [SPORTS](#) [BUSINESSES](#) [OPINION](#) [EVENTS](#)

Search

[About Us](#) [Advertise](#) [External Link](#)

[Connect with Us](#)

Reel to Real

by [REBECCA WALDEN](#)

February 11, 2014

[RSS](#) [Print](#)



Photo courtesy of Michael O'Neal.

Given the choice of spending one week's vacation on self or spending that time serving others, the answer that appeals to many, though few would admit it, is obvious.

It was the same answer Michael O'Neal would have given, at least prior to 2009, when he launched the 501c3 organization Reel Life Adventures.

"My world of comfort, entertainment and relaxation collided with a harsh reality during my first trip

View past issues

[May 2014](#)

[April 2014](#)

[March 2014](#)

[February 2014](#)

[January 2014](#)

[December 2013](#)

[November 2013](#)

[October 2013](#)

[September 2013](#)

[August 2013](#)

[July 2013](#)

[June 2013](#)

[May 2013](#)

[June 2014](#)

Upcoming Events

Windows 8

May 29, 2014 5:00 PM

[Library in the Forest](#)

KIDS & FAMILY

five years ago," said O'Neal. "During this trip, the Lord began to bless me with a greater perspective of the reality in which we live."

A Birmingham native and a 1993 graduate of Samford University, where he also played football, O'Neal joined State Farm as an adjuster shortly after graduation. After six years in the role, he opened his own agency in Vestavia Hills in 1999. Happily married to his college sweetheart, Summer and enjoying young fatherhood (they are the parents of three children, son Griffin, age 10; son Anderson, age 8; and daughter Collier, age 6), O'Neal kept busy building a comfortable lifestyle for his family.

It wasn't until the 2009 trip that O'Neal said he fully understood how to achieve personal fulfillment and purpose. He said it came with a realization that he is called to do more than take care of what comes naturally.

"Since that time, the time abroad has proven to be a valuable time of personal renewal and reflection; it helps me maintain an accurate view of what is truly important," he said.

He added that not a trip goes by that this ancillary benefit of mission work isn't further reinforced. This past fall, O'Neal witnessed what he described as unimaginable selflessness in the midst of a level of poverty that most would find unfathomable.

"We were there to construct a food pantry with a gentleman named Santiago, a pastor with a young family serving in a very poor barrio," said O'Neal of a Fall 2013 trip to Southern Baja, Mexico. "As we worked with him to build a 14 by 14 concrete block structure, I saw that his own home consisted of various scraps, boards and tarps. The floor was dirt and water flooded his home with nearly every rain."

Rather than ask the mission team to help him improve his own living conditions, the pastor requested only their aid in constructing a stable food pantry.

"At the end of the week, we left our new friend with a block structure as his most valuable possession," said O'Neal. "A structure not used for personal gain, but rather a tool allowing him to better serve the hungry children in his community."

True to its name, Reel Life International connects its participants with a one-day recreational expedition on the final leg of each trip (activities include sport fishing, as well as other adventures for attendees with hobbies and interests outside that world).

But for O'Neal, a sports fishing devotee himself, the last day's recreational reward pales in comparison to the real purpose of Reel Life International.

"These trips help me be more effective in my role at work, as a husband, father and friend," he said. "Spiritually, these short-term trips give me a greater understanding of what God meant when He commanded us to Love Him above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves."

While some parents may blanch at the idea of involving their children in such work, O'Neal was eager to start.

"Being involved in this work has had a tremendous impact my own life as well as that of my family," he said. "My three children began joining me when they were as young as age five."

On this topic, O'Neal is clearly passionate, holding back little.

"As parents, I believe we need to model our faith to our kids," he said. "The church is shrinking in America largely due to the apathy of its members. Our faith has become more of an event than a lifestyle, and this is unappealing to the youth across America today. A short-term trip is an opportunity to live out our faith. It is an opportunity to experience life-altering spiritual growth. I wish it didn't cost us anything, such as a week of vacation or the cost of travel, but this is unavoidable. Perhaps we would have more participation, but the fact is that one's willingness to sacrifice time and resources to create unencumbered availability to be used by the Lord is honoring to Him."

For more information about short-term trips or other ways to get involved, please visit reel-life.org.

Tags

[Michael O'Neal](#), [Reel life adventures](#)

Summer Reading Kick-Off with Roger Day

Jun 1, 2014

[Library in the Forest](#)

EDUCATION & LEARNING

Resume 101

Jun 2, 2014 1:00 AM

[Library in the Forest](#)

RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

VBS: Ultimate Conquerors

Jun 2, 2014 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM

[Shades Mountain Baptist Church](#)

KIDS & FAMILY

Maker Mondays

Jun 2, 2014 10:30 AM

[Library in the Forest](#)

EDUCATION & LEARNING

Introduction to the Computer

Jun 2, 2014 1:00 PM

[Library in the Forest](#)

TALKS & READINGS

Vulcan Voices Toastmasters

Jun 2, 2014 6:30 PM - 7:30 PM

[Vestavia Hills Board of Education](#)

KIDS & FAMILY

Together with Twos

Jun 3, 2014 9:30 AM

[Library in the Forest](#)

KIDS & FAMILY

Together with Twos

Jun 3, 2014 10:30 AM

[Library in the Forest](#)

KIDS & FAMILY

Acting out Academy Workshopds

Jun 3, 2014 1:30 PM

[Library in the Forest](#)

[Submit Yours](#)

Comments

Type subject here...

[About Us](#) [News](#) [People/Places](#) [Schools](#) [Sports](#) [Businesses](#) [Opinion](#) [Events](#)

[About Us](#) [Advertise](#)

Starnes Publishing LLC

Built with [Metro Publisher™](#)