

FORTY YEARS ON THE STREETS

by Peter K. Johnson in "Charisma" magazine



It was Feb. 28, 1958 when the 26-year-old Pentecostal preacher from rural Pennsylvania disrupted a highly publicized murder trial in New York City. David Wilkerson had made the eight-hour drive from his quiet mountain village to downtown Manhattan for a simple reason: to speak to the seven accused gang members about their salvation.

In a grave attempt to share the love of God, Wilkerson had rushed to the front of the courtroom at the close of trial proceedings and pleaded publicly with the judge for permission to meet the teenage defendants. News media were everywhere, and Wilkerson unwittingly made himself the source of headline news throughout New York City.

The judge had been receiving death threats during the trial, and Wilkerson was almost arrested as a presumed assailant. The judge later refused Wilkerson's request to see the boys and ordered him never to return to his courtroom.

Today the one-time rural preacher is known as the founder of a international drug rehabilitation program called Teen Challenge that has one of the highest success rates anywhere in the world. Since it first center opened in New York in 1960, Teen Challenge has grown to over 150 centers nationwide and over 100 centers in 60 countries. In Puerto Rico the organization is building an AIDS hospital, the first of its kind. Wilkerson also founded a global evangelistic ministry, World Challenge.

Yet the Pentecostal preacher remains today what he was 40 years ago—a man dedicated to preaching the gospel in the heart of New York City. He pastors Times Square Church in Manhattan, which he founded in 1987. Wilkerson made more than the news back in 1958—five months after his discouraging day in court, his compassion for teen-age gangs and drug addicts make history.

Posted Between Life and Death

In 1958, Nicky Cruz was known throughout Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx as a vicious knife-fighter with 16 stabbings to his record. He was chief warlord for a Brooklyn gang called the Mau Maus—the most brutal teen-age gang in New York. Local news editors had dubbed him "The Garbage-Can Fighter" because during "rumbles"—street warfare between rival gangs—he would put a trash can over his head and wade into battle swinging a baseball bat in deadly arcs.

Nicky had threatened to kill David Wilkerson from the first day the two met. David, on the other hand, had responded each time to Nick's threats by saying, "Jesus loves you, Nicky."

"David haunted me constantly," Nicky remembers. "I thought he was from the Twilight Zone." Nicky was filled with raging hatred from a childhood steeped in witchcraft and voodoo. He believed he was the son of the devil. Wilkerson had scheduled an evangelistic rally for New York gangs at the St. Nicholas Boxing Arena in July 1958. Nearly every member of Nicky's street-tough gang showed up.

Dressed in Alpine hats with narrow brims, sunglasses and bright red jackets marked with their double M insignia, the Mau Maus were tense as they shared coveted turf with rival gangs. On any other occasion, a rumble would have been certain, but this day the power of god fell as Wilkerson prayed, and nearly all of Nicky's gang surrendered their lives at one moment to Jesus.

Nicky was among them. Ironically, it was inside a boxing arena that Nicky, the wild street fighter, was changed into a powerful preacher. "David Wilkerson came with a message of hope and love," Nicky says. "I felt the power of Jesus like a rushing wind that took my breath away. I fell on my knees and confessed Christ." Today Nicky is an internationally respected evangelist who has preached to more than 34 million people.

Wilkerson's first years of ministry in New York are chronicled in the best seller *The Cross and the Switchblade* and the movie made subsequently from the book. His story has been told in 30 languages to 50 million people in 150 countries. Wilkerson and Cruz have stayed close for 40 years and still burn with compassion for the down and out.

Evangelizing with Nicky recently on the streets of Harlem, Wilkerson said: "I heard Nicky here today. His burden is just as fresh as the first time he preached with me." Wilkerson had himself prayed with a young woman whose father was a Pentecostal minister. She was running from God. "She was marvelously brought back to the Lord," he said. "Nothing changes as far as the gospel."

The seeds for establishing the highly successful Teen Challenge drug rehabilitation ministry were planted during that daring period in Wilkerson's life 40 years ago. Wilkerson hit the tough neighborhoods of New York broken with compassion for ghetto kids ravaged by violence and drugs. "I would stand on the streets weeping," he recalls.

Between March and June 1958, he drove 350 miles each week from Pennsylvania to New York City, using his day off from his job as a pastor of a small mountaintop church. He pounded the city pavement, observing, meeting gang members and drug addicts, seeking God's direction, and sleeping in his car on dangerous ghetto streets.

The problems of New York teen-agers staggered him so much he almost quit. Only the Holy Spirit kept him going, at one point telling him: "They [the teenagers] have got to start over, and they've got to be surrounded by love."

In 1959 Wilkerson relinquished his Assemblies of God pastorate in Philipsburg, Pennsylvania. A year later he established the first Teen Challenge center in one of the roughest areas of Brooklyn. Addicts and other troubled youths poured into the center and were delivered by God's power. One skeptical psychiatrist observing the program remarked, "It seems to me you're just using Jesus as a crutch." "Then give me two of them," a resident of the center responded. "What is the program?" the psychiatrist asked. "God in the morning, Jesus in the afternoon and the Holy Ghost at night," the resident replied.

The good news spread quickly, and Wilkerson was deluged with pleas for help with drug problems from all over the country. "I raised funds for the first 10-12 centers that started," he said. Answering appeals got so demanding that he allowed the ministry to come under the Home Missions department of the Assemblies of God. His brother Don then took over as director of the center.

Based on strong Christian principles, the intensive program runs from 6 to 14 months. Residents come from the streets, detoxification facilities, hospitals or jails. Some are referred by pastors and counselors or court-ordered into treatment by judges. HIV-positive students are normally accepted. Teen Challenge teaches that the key to abstinence from substance abuse is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Says Wayne Keyton, president of National Teen Challenge (NTC), Assemblies of God: "Our philosophy is still Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever."

Compassion, love and discipline resonate loudly in every program. Love is what made the difference for Canzada Edmonds, a recent graduate of the Brooklyn center. "When I was ready

to give up, they showed me love," Canzada says. "They showed me compassion. They showed me through Christ I could live a victorious life. Then they taught me how to be a lady."

Gang-raped at age 13 by seven men, Canzada tried to numb her pain with alcohol and drugs. Facing a felony charge and a long stretch in prison, she was allowed to enter Teen Challenge in 1994.

The drug cure rate for men and women who complete the entire program has remained consistently at about 70 percent. This figure is miles above secular programs, which offer a success rate from 5 percent to 15 percent. The program is primarily free to residents. Funds come from individuals, churches and foundations. Support cuts across denominational lines, with 60 percent coming from outside the Assemblies of God. Teen Challenge meets a dire need for a residential program that puts troubled people into a safe, structured environment. "The street will swallow you up," says one New York City police officer. "We need these programs."

Emptying Hell

The story of Teen Challenge is a story of transformed lives. People with no hope, labeled as incorrigible, have been dramatically changed through the power of the gospel and now are delivered and serving God.

One of them is Mariano Acosta. Mariano was waiting for a subway train in the Bronx, lighting a cigarette, when he glanced at the ground and noticed a clean white business card on the dark platform. "When I picked it up, the first thing I read was, 'Jesus Loves You,'" he recalls. The name and phone number of the Brooklyn center were printed on the other side of the card. He couldn't believe his eyes. Was God speaking to him?

Mariano was desperate. He had battled a 21-year drug habit and had been fired from the U.S. Postal Service for stealing. He owed money to drug dealers who wanted to kill him. He had sold everything he owned, except a broken alarm clock, to buy crack cocaine.

Shortly after finding the card, he hobbled into the Brooklyn center on crutches with a broken leg. Four years later he's still there, a handyman and counselor. "I love working here," he says. "God set me free." Most men and women entering Teen Challenge are from the inner city, but they also represent the suburbs and rural towns. Educational levels run the gamut-some people are illiterate; some have graduate degrees. Ages range from 18 to 65.

Harry Davis discovered Teen Challenge in 1989 at age 63. "I did every drug in the world for 50 years," he said. He is 71 now and works in the kitchen at the Brooklyn center. "Teen Challenge has the love of Jesus," he says. "If it wasn't for Teen Challenge I'd probably be dead and in hell."

Teen Challenge is a last chance for many, reports Steve Janes, director of the Chicago center. "They come in homeless with no place to go, sick and tired and worn out-their bodies hurting and desperate," he says.

Founded in 1961, the 45-bed Chicago residential program operated on a budget of \$309,000 in 1996. This represents a planned expenditure of \$18.81 per student per day. Comparable programs in Chicago charge \$300 or more per day. The center requests only a \$125 entrance fee for 12-14 months. Nationwide the average monthly cost to operate Teen Challenge residential programs ranges from \$650 to \$3000 per student. This is a bargain, compared with the annual federal drug-alcohol budget-a staggering \$16 billion. State and local governments spend almost the same amount.

Like those at other centers, Chicago residents go through a four-month induction phase before transferring to a training center where they learn Christian growth and receive academic and

vocational training. The first training center, called "God's Mountain," was purchased in 1962 in Rehrersburg, Pennsylvania. It began with eight men and today comprises 260 students and 65 staff members on 350 acres. Its more that 10,000 graduates include street people, teachers, businessmen, doctors and well-known professional athletes.

Students learn trades such as printing, furniture building and auto mechanics. About 25 percent of the annual \$4.5 million budget comes from income-producing projects. The students raise beef and dairy cattle and chickens. Every seven weeks 14,000 broilers are sold. Plants and vegetables are grown in six greenhouses.

"The key characteristic of the farm is the faith that grows in both staff and students in their relationships with Christ," says John D. Castellani, executive director. "I believe that God can do anything. It's a 100 percent miracle."

Ronald Frederick, vocational shop supervisor, knows the pain of living like an animal, strung out on cocaine. A burned-out, abandoned macaroni factory in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn was his home for three years. Hunched over, he shuffled along the streets pushing a shopping cart, collecting cans, bottles and scrap metal to sell to buy drugs. He scavenged rotting chicken and sandwiches from dumpsters behind a fast-food restaurant and a school. Sometimes he fought off packs of angry dogs with a stick to get at the food. "It was rough," he said. "I got violently sick many times. Many nights I cried and cried until my head and stomach hurt."

During the winter of 1990 a Christian invited him to Teen Challenge, where he committed his life to Christ. After completing the farm program he joined the staff. Encouraging the 125 men he supervises, he tells them: "I know what you're going through. You can make it."

Teen Challenge's real impact is impossible to calculate, despite being one of the most successful drug and alcohol abuse treatment programs. The NTC conservatively estimates that more than 50,000 addicts and alcoholics have been delivered through Teen Challenge programs. However, this figure runs in the hundreds of thousands or more when other Christian programs modeled after Teen Challenge are also counted. The fruit of evangelism is yet another story. It's safe to claim that millions of souls have been won through the ministry's impact.

Don Wilkerson spent 26 years at the Brooklyn center before joining his brother David's Times Square Church in 1987. He left several years ago to form Teen Challenge International in Locust Grove, Virginia, which advises individuals on starting new centers. "We get more requests than we can keep up with," he says, noting that a new center will open soon in Moscow, the third on in the former Soviet Union.

A Reason to Live

Scores of pastors, inner-city missionaries and evangelists have graduated from Teen Challenge. Evangelist Steve Hill of Brownsville Assembly of God in Pensacola, Florida, was probated to a center as an alternative to prison. He spent 12 months at Mid-America Teen Challenge in Missouri.

"Its greatest impact was in the area of discipline and structure," he said. "If it wasn't for Teen Challenge, I would either be dead or in the penitentiary."

Jimmy Jack's background doesn't fit the usual inner-city poverty scenario. Raised in affluent suburbia, his parents were well-educated teachers. Yet eight family members ended up drug addicts. He started smoking marijuana at 10 and turned to alcohol and hard drugs while in high school. "One of my friends who I got high with jumped off the Empire State Building naked," he said. "I knew it was a matter of time before I would die."

Without God's intervention through Teen Challenge Jimmy would have been another grim statistic of a drug overdose or violent death. Instead, he is an Assemblies of God minister and founder of Long Island Teen Challenge in West Babylon, New York, one of the largest centers in the United States. The center also planted a church where the majority of worshipers are Teen Challenge graduates.

The drug scene hasn't changed much in 40 years, except to entrap kids at a younger age. Heroin use is increasing among those under 25, statistics show; the number of new users of cocaine is up, too. There were about 433,500 drug-related episodes in hospital emergency rooms in 1992, a 10 percent increase over 1991.

But there is hope. Wilkerson says: "Teen Challenge is probably more important today, because all the secular programs have proven to be failures. When Jesus changes you, He changes you. ***You're not still a drug addict. You're transformed!***" (bold, italics added)

"Looking back 40 years I rejoice in what the Lord is doing and in seeing Teen Challenge grow."