

The Prodigal Son Turned Preacher

Since January 2018, the Capital Area Dream Center (CADC) in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has been meeting the tangible needs of the city's underprivileged while reaching thousands of people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the last four years, CADC has served 18,000 meals and led over 900 people to Christ on the streets of Harrisburg.

The CADC volunteers go out on the streets every Saturday where they pray for individuals and families. Without a pulpit, sound system or large tent, hundreds of inner-city people have experienced miraculous healings. Cancers leave, tumors disappear and crippled limbs straighten.

For example, one Saturday, they met a man named Jeff who was scheduled to have surgery a few weeks later to remove a baseball sized lump under his jaw. As the team prayed for him, they didn't see anything happen immediately. When they saw Jeff a few days later, he reported that the lump started shrinking the day after they prayed and two days later it was completely gone!

A few months ago, the "Dream Team" prayed for a man with such severe back issues that he had to crawl on his hands and knees to get to his bathroom. The man returned to the Dream Center to tell them that he woke up the next morning completely healed and has been pain free and able to walk ever since.

Week after week the poor of the inner-city of Harrisburg testify of the saving and healing power of Jesus Christ.

From Drifting to God-given Direction

At the helm of the CADC ministry is a one-time prodigal named Richie Lewis, who was born again near the age of 22 after 10

years of running away from God, his parents and his church. Born in the capital region of Montpelier, Vermont, Lewis was raised by Christian parents who loved him and took him to church every week. Although his grandfather and uncle were both preachers, he decided church was boring.

"I went through a rebellious stage from 12 to 22 years of age," Lewis says. "I drank, smoked pot, got in fights and was full of hate and anger."

Lewis dropped out of high school, fell into drugs and alcohol and eventually left home. His parents always told him they were praying for him, but at the time he didn't think their prayers would make a difference.

When he was 21, his dad (Richard, senior) invited him to a men's prayer breakfast. Richie went with his dad, wondering if these Christians who knew him as a child would judge him or condemn him.

"They knew my life," Lewis says. "I went not knowing what to expect, but I felt loved and accepted. I didn't get saved, but their acceptance planted a huge seed in my life." He accepted Christ only months after the prayer breakfast. He found his old Bible that his parents gave him as a child.

Richie says, "I read the whole book of Matthew. It became real to me. I thought wow, what I was taught about Jesus in Sunday School is true! He did come to earth, He died for my sins and arose from the dead. I gave my life to the Lord after reading the book of Matthew." He called his parents that night and asked, "Can I go to church with you tomorrow?"

Richard and Valerie Lewis had been praying for their son to come to Christ for a decade, and they were ecstatic. From that day on, Richie didn't want to put the Bible down when he read it. He stopped drinking and smoking and he couldn't help telling his unsaved friends what Jesus had done for him.

One day while experiencing a frustrating day working in a local bakery, he went outside on his break and cried out to God, "Lord, I don't want to do this the rest of my life. What do You want me to do?" For the first (and last) time in his life, Lewis heard the audible voice of God. "I want you to be a preacher."

Elders at his uncle's church prayed over him and suggested that he go to Bible college. Richie's grandparents had gone to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and his parents met at Wheaton College, also in Illinois. Someone in his church suggested a smaller Bible school that was closer to home—Elim Bible Institute in Lima, New York, about 30 miles south of Rochester.

Lewis says, "I put all three (Bible school) applications on my dresser one night. The next morning, the only application on the dresser was Elim. I took that as a sign from the Lord—that's where I was to go."

Persecuted for the Gospel

Richie started at Elim in September 2001 with a major in Bible and a minor in pastoral ministry. He loved Elim, but it was hard to be inside what he calls "a Christian bubble" and secluded from the unsaved world. One day he met another student, Randall Williams, who invited him to share the gospel on the streets of Rochester, New York, the next weekend. What started that weekend with four Elim students on East Avenue in Rochester, extended into an evangelistic inner-city ministry that lasted for the next five years.

After an internship at New York School of Urban Ministry, the Lord sent Lewis to Monroe Avenue in Rochester, an area he had evangelized before—unsuccessfully. For the first six months they didn't see one person saved on Monroe Avenue.

"People yelled, swore, spit on us, the whole nine yards," Lewis says. "Sometimes I felt like giving up, but I hung on to

Isaiah 40:3-5.”

The harassment from nonbelievers continued, but six months after they started the floodgates opened. People began coming to Christ on a weekly basis and in the next two years, the team counted over 300 people that gave their lives to Christ in the Monroe Street area. Bars and nightclubs shut down and churches opened up. The people from the neighborhood who previously yelled and spit on Richie and his friends now approached them in awe. They admitted that they felt the atmosphere change in their city.

Lewis graduated from Elim in 2004 and in April, 2006, married Bethany Hess, also an Elim student originally from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. The couple decided to settle in Harrisburg, which is close to Bethany’s family and Christ Community Church, where she has served as the children’s pastor since 2005.

In Harrisburg, Richie worked several day jobs, but his focus was on his inner-city outreach at Center for Champions, a Christian after school program.

“I always had a desire since Elim to start something of my own and do something evangelistic in the inner-city,” Richie says. “I didn’t have any details or in-depth idea of what that would look like. In December 2008, my wife Bethany woke up and said she had a dream that we were to start a dream center in Harrisburg. I said, ‘What’s a dream center?’”

Launching a Dream Center

Lewis researched online and found the Los Angeles Dream Center (LADC), founded by father and son team, Tommy and Matthew Barnett.

“I had no clue how to start something like this,” Lewis says. “They have a 15-story hospital they renovated. I naively thought you needed millions of dollars and a huge building.”

Richie and Bethany were blessed with a son, Micah, in 2009. As they raised their son, Richie continued evangelistic outreaches at the Center for Champions and his own street ministry for the next few years. Then one day at his church bookstore, he picked up a book titled, *The Church that Never Sleeps*, by Matthew Barnett.

“I bought it and cried the entire time reading it,” he says. “I realized that Matthew had the same heart that I do for the inner-city.”

In December 2016, a woman from Nevada came to one of Lewis’ weekend outreaches in the inner-city of Harrisburg. She helped a friend of hers start the Northern Nevada Dream Center and gave Richie three tips that pointed him in the right direction:

Forget about the million-dollar building, Nevada’s dream center started with a minivan packed with sandwiches. They went to the streets, gave away lunches and prayed with people.

Keep doing what you’re doing, but start sharing the vision with people.

The LA Dream Center has a network. If you apply to be part of it, they will give you wisdom on how to start something like this.

Lewis sent an email to LADC and the head of the national network loved his vision for the Capital Area Dream Center in Harrisburg. Upon request, Richie sent LADC a five-year business plan and pastoral references, and then he and Bethany visited LADC. While in Los Angeles, the couple went on outreaches and walked through their buildings. By June 1, 2017, the Capital Area Dream Center was accepted to be part of the LADC network, founded by Tommy and Matthew Barnett.

Funding

Richie saw that the LA Dream Center had 100 staff, but only 20 of them were paid. He asked, "How do you find 80 unpaid staff members?"

"We have retired people who want to donate time," they answered.

Until 2017, Richie worked other full-time jobs and did his Harrisburg outreaches on weekends or after work. In order to lead the Capital Area Dream Center, he knew that he would eventually need to take the leap of faith and raise enough funds to pay himself, the cost of the ministry outreaches and his future staff.

For the next year and a half, Richie met with friends and relatives over a cup of coffee. He shared his vision for the Capital Area Dream Center and asked them if they could contribute \$50 a month. He raised enough funding to go part-time at first, then full-time and eventually stepped out in faith and bought a building.

"It was the same exact scenario each time," says Richie. "In the natural, you think you have to have funds before you buy a building. In my experience, you step out and buy the building and then the funds come."

Living the Dream

The new building is three floors, with the second and third floor stocked with clothing and hygiene supplies such as deodorant, shampoo and soap for the community. Two ladies put in 20-plus volunteer hours a week to sort out the donations—all in good condition. Every Saturday the doors open to the community, and it's crowded with people in need. The items are free, but each person is limited to four articles of clothing and four hygiene items.

CADC hosts a café every Saturday, with free coffee, pastries and sandwiches. The building is packed and some people

volunteer to serve food while others volunteer to talk to people, pray with them, and lead them to Christ. Every Saturday Richie sends teams out onto the street to pray for people.

Lewis is an evangelist at heart and does not feel called to pastor, but he often speaks at other churches, usually invited to share on the topic of healing. Although they did not start a church in Harrisburg, many of the locals consider CADC their church and attend Tuesday and Thursday Bible studies and luncheons. Thursday evenings are dedicated to prayer—a night he considers the backbone of their ministry.

Meeting the Needs

Harrisburg's inner-city families are, for the most part, fatherless. Addictions, mental illness, poverty and homelessness plague the area. Twice a year CADC shares the gospel during large block parties and every December the center hosts a Christmas toy giveaway to about 400 neighborhood children. Every August the center gives away hundreds of backpacks as local news stations cover the CADC events.

One 13-year-old girl came to Christ about a week before the toy giveaway. When she was gifted a bike, she burst into tears. She said, "I was praying all week. The only thing I wanted was a bicycle and now I've got one."

One day Lewis was outside at a nearby bus stop when a man got off the bus, looked at their CADC sign and said, "What is this place?"

His eyes lit up when Lewis told him what they did.

The man said, "I just got released from prison three days ago. I got a job, but I need size 12 steel-toed boots. Do you have those?"

Lewis replied, “We aren’t a department store, and that’s a specific request. Let’s go see what we have.”

Sure enough, the center had just one pair of size 12 steel-toed boots.

“You’d think we gave him the world,” Lewis says.

Bosco’s Story

Right after CADC opened in 2018, Richie and his team met Bosco, a man in his early sixties, during a street outreach. Bosco had been in prison for 38 years, yet the power of the gospel gripped his heart and he surrendered to Christ.

Bosco came back to the center the following Saturday and said, “I got to tell you guys a couple things. Since I came to Jesus last week, some strange things have happened to me. I used to be full of hate and I don’t have hate now—I love people. Since last Saturday, I haven’t touched drugs or alcohol.”

Today, Bosco comes to the Dream Center every time the doors are opened. One day while walking in the neighborhood, he saw a lady having a difficult time bending over to get groceries out of her trunk.

Bosco stopped and said, “Is everything okay? Can I help you?”

The woman explained that her back was in severe pain. Bosco prayed for her and she was instantly healed.

“He comes and volunteers every time our doors are open,” Lewis says. “Bosco will literally do anything we ask him—serve food, clean bathrooms, go to the street and share the gospel. He is just there to serve.”

What’s Next?

Like Bosco, the majority of the people touched by the CADC outreach are taking ownership of “the dream” to meet the

tangible needs of the inner city's underprivileged while reaching thousands with the gospel. Incredibly, 60% of CADC's volunteers are people in the neighborhood who were touched by God and today come to the center to serve, not to be served.

What's next?

Lewis says, "I feel like what we're doing here is super effective and meeting the needs already. If we do anything else, I'm leaning toward starting another site in some other city like York, Pennsylvania, and multiplying."

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