

A Light in Louisiana

Tonja Myles used to deal drugs and sell her body. But after she found Jesus and launched a recovery program for addicts, President Bush introduced her to the world as a hero.

When Tonja Myles received an invitation to attend the State of the Union address in January, she was stunned. The former drug addict, prostitute and Satanist-turned-Christian considered it an extraordinary honor to receive a personal invite from the president of the United States.

When Myles arrived at the Capitol she was grateful just at the thought of getting a seat in the back row of the audience. She never imagined that she would be seated in the first lady's box and hear President Bush praise her Set Free Indeed ministry, calling it a prime example of a faith-based program.

"Our nation is blessed with recovery programs that do amazing work," Bush said. "One of them is found at the Healing Place Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A man in the program said, 'God does miracles in people's lives, and you never think it could be you.'"

The president went on to encourage Americans to get involved. "Tonight, let us bring to all Americans who struggle with drug addiction this message of hope: The miracle of recovery is possible, and it could be you."

"I was just trying not to pass out on national TV," Myles recalls, closing her eyes and gritting her teeth to replay the moment. Afterward she met with the Bushes at a reception and received a bear hug from the president. Bush told her, "Tonja, we're so proud for what you do."

"I said, 'Thank you for the shout-out.' Then I thought, Lord, he may not even know what that is."

A shout-out is street slang for a word of praise. The difference in lingo seems to illustrate the vast cultural gap between a south Louisiana former drug dealer and an upper-crust Texas politician, but to Myles there is no difference.

"He had a problem with alcohol and God set him free," she says of Bush. "And even though he's one of the most powerful people on Earth, his daughters have some problems with alcohol. So it affects everyone."

Officials even invited her back to participate in the White House Bible-study fellowship in early July.

"I count it an honor that they asked me to do it," she says. "Who would have thought that one day I'd be ministering at the White House?"

The visits to Washington cap off a story—or set of stories—about Myles' life. Healing Place Church, for instance, started 10 years ago with 12 people. Today it has 4,000 who are gearing up to build a 3,800-seat sanctuary.

The nondenominational church began when a benefactor gave pastor Dino Rizzo \$400 to start a church and advised him: "Take care of the lost, the poor, the hurting. God will build the church."

Set Free Indeed is one of 48 ministries at the church. Myles, 39, and her husband, Darren, 36—a plumber by trade and an

associate minister at the church—started the ministry with 10 to 20 people in 2002. Now, more than 100 people attend the Friday-night sessions. But the most improbable story of all, say folks who know her, is Tonja Myles.

“Tonja’s just an incredible young lady,” Rizzo says. “God has totally and radically changed her life—from the streets, drug addiction, several other tragic events in her life.”

Her broken past now defines what she does for others. She spends her life—she and Darren—helping other people.

The ability to see beyond Bush’s presidential luster to the personal problems he has undergone is characteristic of the Myleses. “They’re not pretentious,” Rizzo says. “Whether you’re rich or poor, black or white, from the country club or curbside, they just draw everybody.”

Dying a Spiritual Death

Tonja Myles was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, an area Darren refers to as a “chemical plant and farm community.” Her life, though, was anything but typical. She was molested at age 7, her mother was an alcoholic, and until Myles’ conversion 17 years ago, life was a catastrophe.

Today, with a successful ministry and numerous accomplishments to her credit, it is hard to believe Myles abused drugs throughout high school and sold “uppers, downers, speed and coke” as a college student. Just one conversation with her, and it becomes obvious that the grace of God and her past failures in life are what qualify this woman to minister to people.

If a woman is struggling through the pain of abortion, Myles can help. Years ago she had two abortions, one from a man who introduced her to Satan worship.

When prostitutes need a way out, she can show them. She once heeded the advice of a friend and tried prostitution as a way to support her crack-cocaine habit.

"It's not like I stood on a corner, but a prostitute is a prostitute is a prostitute. I slept with married men and got money for drugs," she told Charisma.

At one point in her life, Myles says, she attempted to end it all with suicide. Though her memories of that moment are still foggy, she says she wound up at her grandmother's house hysterically insisting that "the devil" was trying to kill her. But as her grandmother began to pray, Myles allowed the Holy Spirit to turn things around. She made a vow to the Lord to dedicate the rest of her life "to helping others get set free."

"I always thought it was about religion and not about relationships, but it's not," she says. Holding true to her words, Myles developed a relationship with God and with others. Then she met Darren Myles.

"After the Lord, he's been the best thing that ever happened to me," she says. "He knew I was a new creature in Christ. He knew about my background."

The two come from different backgrounds. He was raised in north Louisiana in a church family, had accepted God as a

teenager and believed he was called to preach. Yet they hit it off as friends and fellow believers with a heart for ministry. Together they began preaching on street corners in “bad parts of town.”

“We just went with a message of hope,” Myles says, adding that people were generally receptive to them. Street corners weren’t their only venue.

“We just began to minister in prison, nursing homes, anywhere people would have us,” she recalls. “We always knew that deliverance and people being set free was what it was all about.”

They preached at The Salvation Army (and still do), spoke in schools and canvassed neighborhoods in “the worst drug-infested areas of Baton Rouge,” Myles says.

Her boldness wasn’t confined to low places. She called the governor’s office and managed to get funding for her efforts. She and Darren got corporate sponsors to provide prizes to give away at a “day in the park.” Those prizes included free airline tickets—“airline tickets in the ‘hood,” she says with a chuckle.

As their ministry grew, Myles heard about pastor Rizzo and Healing Place Church. She approached him with an idea for a ministry to help addicts. The name Set Free Indeed comes from John 8:36, “‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’” (NIV).

Transforming Lives

A little before 7 o'clock on a Friday evening, Tonja and Darren shut themselves into an office to pray while the Healing Place praise and worship team strike up mellow music in the 1,200-seat sanctuary.

People trickle in as slides show slogans such as: "Where will you spend eternity—smoking or nonsmoking?" and "Hell—Don't even go there." The slogans continue with messages that reach the heart.

"LIFE: Live in Freedom Everyday"; "Wal-Mart isn't the only saving place"; "Jesus is my anti-drug"; "Don't give up if you mess up"; "We are called to stand out, not blend in"; "Jesus beat the devil with two sticks (a cross)"; "While faith makes all things possible, love makes it easier. We love you. The Set Free Indeed Ministry Team."

It's at meetings like this where people such as team leader Chuck Wallace get free from past problems. Wallace describes his sense of failure after losing a leadership position in a Baptist church because of his divorce.

"I partied, had a good time and tried to drown my sorrows," he tells the crowd. "But because God did not condemn me but pronounced me useful, I am able to stand before you tonight."

Then Myles addresses the audience: "Tonight we're going to renounce some of the root causes of why you've messed up." She holds up a poster with strips of paper bearing the words rejection, fear, pride, rebellion, anger, depression, self-doubt, deception, jealousy, unmet needs, unresolved issues, unhealed hurts.

She tears them away one by one, saying: "I don't care what you've done in the past. God will forgive you if you ask Him. God can heal you. He can set you free."

The audience divides into several groups. In one, about 20 men—black and white, rich and poor, young and old—cluster at the back of the sanctuary, talking about their problems, defeats and victories. One has been in prison five times and currently beds down at The Salvation Army. Another is a public official who's had problems with alcohol. One man has been substance-free for five years, another for 29 days, while one may be under the influence, judging by the way he keeps nodding off.

This night, a latecomer shows up, red-faced and distraught. This is a first-time meeting for him and he's suicidal, he says, because his girlfriend left. He spends his days in bed; he's let his business go; he's been in and out of the hospital. The group offers attention and sympathy, and the leader gives words of encouragement with information about follow-up help.

"It's all about helping somebody else, extending your hand, because when you start helping somebody else you help yourself as well," says Troy Cooper, a recovering cocaine and gambling addict who today is one of 25 Set Free Indeed volunteers. Cooper has tried other rehabilitation methods, and nothing has worked except reliance on the Lord and fellow Christians.

"People who have been in addiction know that time and time and time again you've tried to quit on your own and you can't do it," he says. "You've got to have a source, and this place is a source."

A Media Whirlwind

When a local newspaper reported on Myles' ministry, White House speechwriters read a quote made by a Set Free Indeed participant, and President Bush wanted to use it in his State of the Union address. Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and assistant to the president, called Healing Place Church to confirm the quote. He wound up talking with Myles, and the rest is history.

"My attention quickly moved from the quote to the person because here she was, an individual who had bottomed out on the streets that had been lifted up by the Lord and was now spending her Friday nights with her husband trying to help other people while they ran a plumbing business," Towey says. "And I thought, This sounds like an exceptional woman."

As the date for the speech neared, officials asked Towey if he could recommend anyone to sit in Laura Bush's box during the State of the Union address.

"I thought of Tonja because she was the living embodiment of the faith-based initiative. ... President Bush has said repeatedly that his faith-based initiative is not about religion but results, and here was a woman whose life was turned around by the Lord and was now out there trying to turn other lives around," Towey says.

"Our lives changed just that fast," Myles says, snapping her fingers. "It was just like one big media event. ... It was the biggest media circus we ever saw."

From The 700 Club to National Public Radio to The New York Times, all types of news outlets sent reporters to interview her. "It's been mostly favorable, but there have been people who don't really care for the president, so they've tried to make us look bad to make him look bad," she says.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State protested, insisting Bush was promoting evangelical Christianity. One syndicated columnist called such programs "religious indoctrination dressed up as social welfare." But Rep. Sharon Weston Broome, D-Baton Rouge, disagreed.

"I think that they are a shining example of what can happen in a support or outreach group," she says of the Myleses. "They've had tremendous results, and they haven't really had any government funding. So, I think if they were afforded an opportunity to get a government grant, they could probably double or triple the results that they're getting.

"I've met people in their program, and they are getting results. It may not be the conventional approach, but they're getting results."

But Myles doesn't worry about the negatives. She is currently working with Louisiana state officials to develop a method of documenting those results. "This time next year when someone says, 'Can we see your documentation?' we'll say, 'Here you go,'" she says. "But the proof is in the changed lives."

Mike Duffy is one of those state officials she's working with. As acting deputy secretary for the Office of Addictive Disorder, he plans to contract with Myles to expand faith-based programs in Louisiana.

"We both are about attempting to help suffering people," Duffy says. "I support her ministry 100 percent—not financially, you understand, but I applaud her efforts to minister to those individuals who are struggling with addiction."

As Set Free Indeed progresses, Duffy expects it will include leaders with state credentials, such as licensed clinical social workers or board-certified substance-abuse counselors. Duffy says he sees no conflict in using a religious program to treat addicts.

"Those of us who are involved in the provision of treatment throughout this country recognize that without a spiritual element—and we're certainly not defining that spiritual element—there in fact is no real recovery," he says.

Yet, Myles cites statistics that show most churches in the nation lack drug-addiction recovery ministries. One positive result of the media spotlight is that many have contacted her for help in starting one. She and Darren are devising a manual to help operate such programs.

Set Free Indeed is not a 12-step program, and it's not just for drug addicts, Myles says. Though she's not opposed to 12-step programs, she says they originate from biblical principles, so why not go to the source?

Set Free Indeed offers help to anyone who is physically or spiritually bound, whether by drugs, alcohol, pornography, gambling, depression, anger, homosexuality or other problems.

Having been in the grips of more than one such evil herself, Myles is a prime example of a seemingly hopeless life

transformed by the power of God.

“I tell people I went from the crack house to the White House, from the gutter to greatness,” she says. Though media attention may come and go, she is determined to follow through on the vow she made to God when He rescued her from the jaws of hell: “I’ll die—I mean it—getting people set free.”

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