

A Tough Guy With a Tender Heart

Former prizefighter Charlie Muller now fights with devils in Albany, New York—where he uses a converted ambulance to save souls.

No one has ever seen Erica's mom. The 13-year-old girl's father is in jail. So every day for the last year she has walked several city blocks past gangbangers and drug dealers to get to pastor Charlie Muller's J.C. Club.

Erica takes her 2- and 4-year-old sisters with her to eat the center's freshly prepared, dinnertime meals. "I wouldn't eat that much before, and I found out and I started coming here and eating," the teen says.

Muller feeds hundreds of people like Erica every day. His stationary feeding center, located in the most violent and poverty-stricken neighborhoods of Albany, New York, provides evening meals for 50 to 70 children of all ages, year-round.

But Muller faced heavy challenges from the first day construction began on the facility at 63 Quail St.

"The day we worked on construction to start this building, a young kid was shot dead right here," says Muller, pointing to a spot close to the center's door. The 16-year-old boy was killed minutes after Muller's construction team left the work site. Retaliation occurred the next night when two young men were stabbed on the other corner of J.C. Club's property.

"We were like, 'OK, Lord, if this is where You want us to

be,'" Muller says.

The young evangelist pressed past all potential barriers and completed the J.C. Club in October 2002.

To add to his arsenal against poverty, Muller takes his feeding program to Albany's streets. This visionary guy doesn't wait for the hungry to come to him.

"We make 400 lunches, and we'll go out and take our vehicles and drive in the worst neighborhoods," Muller says. A brightly painted, red-and-white converted ambulance inscribed with such phrases as "For Emergency Call Jesus" and "Doctor Jesus" is driven to at least five scheduled locations each weekday, where hundreds are fed during the summer months. With no subsidized feeding program during the off-school months, many kids are left to go hungry.

"One lady told me in the park, before we started doing this feeding ministry, that some of the kids pick out of the garbage to get a meal," Muller says. "So we're just doing our part."

Muller has always done his part, even before coming to Albany.

In his earlier days, the young preacher faithfully served at Faith and Love Fellowship in Rensselaer, New York. Muller's desire to pioneer a church led him; his wife, Tammy; and daughter Cassie out of their comfortable rural surroundings to look for a church building in the impoverished West Hill-Arbor Hill section of Albany.

Muller initially put in a \$90,000 bid for a building with a caved-in roof. During that time, Muller attended a meeting held by Bible teacher Kenneth Copeland while on a Florida vacation with his family.

“Copeland stopped in the middle of preaching and said: ‘There is somebody here that just put a bid on a piece of property. You’re not going to get that. God is going to give you property at 10 percent of what it is worth. You just believe God.’”

Muller took that as a personal word from God. The \$90,000 deal fell through after Muller returned to New York.

A week after the Copeland prophecy, Muller heard about an old post office-turned-gymnasium that the bank had priced at more than \$400,000. True to the prophecy, Muller, astonishing all onlookers, won the bid at a fraction of the asking price. Muller’s dream church, Victory Christian Church, opened on April 12, 1995.

Friends and family and a lot of curiosity seekers attended Muller’s first church service at 118 Quail St. But when the second Sunday came, three people attended—Muller, Tammy and Cassie. Muller’s fight to pursue his vision had begun.

But fighting is nothing new to this energetic preacher.

At the time of his salvation at age 24, Muller was a 132-pound, semiprofessional boxer representing the capital region of New York at the Empire State Games. His life consisted of traveling, training, fighting and hitting the bars in between.

During that time, friends invited Muller to a home Bible study. "I knew there was something missing in my life," he says. At the Bible study the Holy Spirit touched the prizefighter. Muller cried for the first time in his adult life, and something inside him changed radically.

"When I got saved, I couldn't hit anyone no more," Muller says. But the 46-year-old preacher went from hitting competitors in the ring to fighting against poverty and addiction in Albany's most deplorable neighborhoods.

Though initially it was sparsely attended, Muller's Victory Christian Church has grown to almost 200 adults and 70 to 80 kids every Sunday. The love of God is transforming people who society would consider hopeless.

"I took a chance that Jesus could actually help me and give me a reason to live and have some real joy and purpose in life," says George Fisher, a former drug addict of 30 years.

When Muller and Fisher met, the 44-year-old addict was living in alleyways and on doorsteps. Today he is clean from drugs and oversees and maintains all Victory's church property. He gives a lot of credit to Muller.

"He is like a father in a way, even though I'm older than he is. He is a good balance between being hard and being soft as far as his counsel," Fisher says. "He never gave up."

Fellow ministers in Albany are learning from Muller's prototype ministry. Youth pastor Paulie Tebbano of Harvest Church in nearby Clifton Park has been taking his youth group to the Albany ghettos every Friday during the summer months

for the last three years.

“It really was an [eye-] opener that only down the road there is that much need,” Tebbano says. “It’s basically like a 10-week missions trip. Kids have been totally transformed just to see that they don’t have to go to Mexico or around the world to see the need. It’s right in their own community. I look forward to it every year and so do the kids.”

The team of 20 to 30 youth split up to feed children on the streets and run puppet shows and outreach in some of the parks and lots owned by Victory Christian Church.

Muller’s desire is for other churches to catch the vision of missions for children.

“If I was to look at Houston, or look at places where the Bible Belt is, and they have 10,000 people in their church, they can literally take a city. We’re living week by week, and we’ve done so much with so little.”

Muller says he, Tammy and their daughters, Cassie and Chelsie, are paying a price. “The reason why God brought us here was to literally affect the city. We’re apostling. We’re just beginning to execute the plan that God has.

“Lord, just let us spread this thing into Schenectady and Utica and New York. Let there be missions for children where a child can come. We [the body of Christ] are so mission-minded. But look at the cities of America. Less and less people are knowing Christ. My heart still cries out. There’s just more.”

Paula Hornberger is a freelance writer based in Quakertown, Pennsylvania.

For more information about Charlie Muller's ministry, call 518-434-6100. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.