

Beauty From Ashes

Because of the compassion of one brave woman, former prostitutes are finding the gospel—and a way off the streets.

Aida Bowers is on a mission to rid Daytona Beach, Florida, of prostitutes—not by sending them to jail, but by rescuing and rehabilitating them. A year ago she founded Heaven's Garden—a nonprofit, community residential home in the heart of Daytona's red-light district—to provide a sanctuary and training ground for the women she snatches from the street. Since then she has worked tirelessly to reach her goal.

Although never a prostitute herself, the 44-year-old mother of three claims she has a heart for these women because, like many of them, she was “used and abused” by men all her life until she became a Christian.

“I've always had a passion for females because of what I went through,” she says.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico by adoptive parents who practiced spiritualism, Santería and witchcraft, and married twice to men who were deeply involved in cults, Bowers knows what it is like to be at the mercy of those who are living for the devil. So since she gave her life to Jesus seven years ago, she's been out to make the devil look bad. That's why she goes right into his territory to get the prostitutes.

“I just stand out here [in front of Heaven's Garden],” she says, “and if I see them walking down the street, I walk over and say: ‘Hey, you hungry today? Wanna put some shoes on?’”

When the women say yes, Bowers takes them into the house,

feeds them and gives them clothes. She nurses them if they are sick or wounded. Then she offers them the opportunity to stay and participate, at no charge, in the voluntary yearlong program she provides.

Bowers first got a vision for the home a few years after she gave her life to Jesus. Singing for Him and preaching as an evangelist—even on the radio—wasn't enough for her.

"The more I did, the more I wanted to do," she says.

She began telling God she wanted to work full time for Him. Through her job at Serenity House, a state-funded substance abuse agency, Bowers took an interest in prostitutes.

"From where Serenity House is to my house is seven minutes, and that strip was packed up with women on the streets," she says.

On her own time, Bowers began to go out and do research. She didn't preach to the women; she befriended them, asked why they were working the streets and fed them. As she reached out, "the burden got bigger."

After receiving a prophetic word at a conference in June 2003 about being released to do what God was calling her to do, Bowers knew it was time to implement the vision. Miraculously, everything she needed was provided for her. By August she had a 10-by-10 storage unit filled with donations.

Even the house itself, a two-story Victorian model on a street known for drug trafficking and prostitution, came to her

supernaturally. The owner purchased it in 1991 with the idea that it would one day be used for women's ministry. Within two months it was leased, furnished and stocked with all the essentials—entirely through the donations of people, churches and organizations in the community.

Bowers opened the doors of Heaven's Garden last November, and it is now at full capacity with five residents. But many more women need the program. Statistics from the Volusia County jail show that in the first nine months of 2003, 326 females were arrested for commercial sex. The cost to the state of incarcerating 123 of these women—not including probation fees, court costs and medical expenses—was \$242,784.

Bowers, recently married to a godly man who supports her in ministry, believes she can do more for less—by helping these women break, once and for all, the cycles of drug abuse and prostitution that keep them going back to the streets. Her one-year program consists of two phases.

The first is the "detachment" phase, during which a new resident detoxifies from drugs and alcohol, breaks old patterns of behavior, receives medical assessments, and re-establishes her identity. The second is the "restoration" phase, a time to learn or relearn the basics of how to care for oneself, run a home and so on. At the end of the second phase, the women go to a career center and prepare for either work or school.

Throughout the program they receive in-house teaching and counseling from Bowers and representatives of various agencies. In addition, they attend church regularly as well as Bible studies and local home meetings of Aglow, a Christian women's organization.

They also serve at the Daytona-area Coalition for the Homeless.

Though Bowers does not force her faith on the women, she says she “exposes them to different angles so they will see for themselves what God is able to do in people’s lives.”

Bowers is seeing that as well. The first resident to graduate from Heaven’s Garden arrived in a desperate state from jail last year. The woman now has a full-time job and is ministering to women outside the home.

“I’ve seen this woman transformed right before my eyes,” Bowers says. “This woman is radical for Jesus, and you can tell that the changes are permanent.”

Bowers is all about changes. Her goal is to take every hurting woman in Daytona Beach off the streets, free her from the grip of sin, give her a taste of how much God loves her and help her fulfill her destiny. To do that, she hopes to increase her capacity to 100 rooms and expand her facilities to include a crisis unit, a detoxification unit and a learning center for continuing education.

“I want a hospital setting, a hotel setting, something large enough to make a difference,” she says. “I know there are a lot more people hurting out there. There are women I have to turn away because there’s no room.”

Bowers, who is an ordained minister, is not put off by a lack of funds or even the lack of support of some local churches and city officials. She believes God will provide the larger

building—and the staff she needs—just as He did the original home.

“I know it’s around the corner,” she says. “We’re always trusting God to do it. He always comes through.”

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For more information, call 386-323-7488. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Heaven’s Garden, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248