

Drama draws almost 4,000 to Christ in New Orleans

Victory Fellowship's re-enactment of fatal high school shootings is grabbing the attention of area teen-agers

Evangelistic Drama Draws Almost 4,000 People to Christ in New Orleans

A Halloween drama that sparked thousands of salvations and generated dozens of encores will continue throughout the summer, including a performance at Rodney Howard-Browne's upcoming crusade in Shreveport, La.

Beyond the Grave: Class of 2000 is staged at 7:30 each Friday night at Victory Fellowship, an Assemblies of God church in suburban New Orleans. A re-enactment of the nation's wave of fatal school shootings, Beyond the Grave was scheduled for the last weekend of October. But the response has stimulated ongoing performances and a Web site ([http://www.beyondthegrave.com](#)).

The church estimated that more than 26,000 people had attended the production through March 31, with 3,800 salvations recorded. The accompanying enthusiasm shocked and pleased organizers.

"The wild thing is every week I ask who's here for the first time, and 95 percent raise their hands," said associate pastor Ty Tyler, the minister of music and productions who wrote the script. "We have testimony after testimony from churches about people getting saved and families touched."

During July, the cast will present two performances at Good News Shreveport-Bossier at Hirsch Memorial Coliseum. The June 20-July 29 outreach will include street evangelism and distribution of 200 tons of food. Howard-Browne issued the invitation in March after watching a performance during a three-day crusade at the church.

Victory recently invited youth groups around the region to summer weekend outreaches starting June 1. In addition to the play, young people will attend special prayer and worship sessions and do street evangelism.

"We don't know how many youth groups will be coming, but the play is definitely going through the summer," Tyler said.

One girl called Tyler in early March, tearfully describing her brother's accepting Christ at Victory days before a gang shooting claimed his life. Crowds of 1,000 to 1,500 have been common, and converts are being offered the chance to be baptized in a makeshift pool. By early spring, 650 had accepted, including one weeping woman clothed in a finely tailored pantsuit.

The awakening also boosted weekly youth group turnouts to approximately 200, one-fourth of them newcomers.

Located in the racially mixed city of Metairie, La., Victory Fellowship's stucco and aluminum building looks like an office complex. Neighbors include a Budweiser distribution center, the New Orleans Saints' training camp and a minor league baseball stadium.

While that doesn't define a normal church setting, neither

does the reaction to the play in a locale famed for Bourbon Street nightlife.

“New Orleans is known for sin, Mardi Gras rallies and Super Bowl parties,” said youth pastor Bernie Moore. “For this to have happened here has taken us by surprise.”

Yet the reality-based drama has clearly touched a nerve. Moore constantly heard comments about the performances at two schools in New Orleans where he led Bible studies the last year. Beyond the Grave deeply affects young people because of the prevalence of violence in today’s society, he said.

“It’s just real,” the youth pastor commented. “There’s no way to sugarcoat it. New Orleans is a tough city. These kids relate to it every day. They relate to [depictions of] mom screaming at them before school and dad giving them money before school.”

Students with roles in the play or altar counseling said the drama has affected their lives as well.

Melissa Waghorne stepped down as captain of her squad last January after cheerleading seven of the last eight years. Although she said God had already led her to take that step, doing it gave her more time to attend performances and invite classmates.

“People who ridiculed it beforehand are showing up,” she said. “One girl got saved [in March], and now she’s at church every time it opens. Once people come, they bring their friends back.

“It makes you more aware,” added Waghorne, a recent graduate of Crescent City Baptist High School. “It gives you an incentive to go out and witness. You can’t stay quiet.”

A student at Metairie’s Lutheran High said half the people at her lunch-period Bible study accepted Christ as Savior after seeing the play. Despite the school’s religious roots, many aren’t believers, explained Kathryn Dal Corso.

“God has highlighted why it’s so important to witness to people,” she said. “Life is so short. I see all these people every day, and only 5 percent of them are going to heaven. It’s a big opportunity for me [to] invite them to the play.”

Tyler expects Beyond the Grave to have a similar impact in Shreveport. “I tell students, ‘Don’t scare ’em and bite ’em—invite ’em.’”