

Former New York Gang Leader Fights for Souls

Nicky Cruz is still carrying the message of the cross half a century later through evangelistic events worldwide.



[] After more than 50 years, a former knife-wielding gang leader from New York City is still mixing it up with young people. Only now the 69-year-old fights for their souls.

Evangelist Nicky Cruz has a gut-wrenching story of violent gang activity and the mercy of God. But his tormented past has given him a deep compassion for those caught in addiction and sin. Of the millions he has met over the years, Cruz said he thanks God for the gift and privilege of “seeing the needs of hurting people.”

Raised in Puerto Rico in a family steeped in witchcraft, Cruz moved to New York as a teenager. As the chief warlord of the Mau Maus gang, he was known as a vicious knife-fighter.

He capped off his teen years of gang violence by giving his life to Christ in 1958 at an evangelistic rally conducted by David Wilkerson, founder of Teen Challenge. That organization celebrates 50 years in ministry this month, and the book inspired by Wilkerson and Cruz’s relationship, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, marks its 45th anniversary this year.

During the last half-century, teenagers have jammed altars at his international crusades with tears streaming down their faces. “Nobody can connect like Nicky to young people,” said Michael Chorey, executive director of the Niagara Falls, Joshua Revolution. “When Nicky speaks you feel the love of Jesus coming out of his heart.”

Cruz ministered last December to several thousand at a Joshua Revolution youth convention in Niagara Falls, N.Y., leading to

almost 400 decisions for Christ. While ministering for four weeks in July 2006 in East London, his outreaches generated 1,800 conversions.

Crusades last year in Australia and New Zealand drew crowds of nearly 30,000 people—comprised of gang members and government leaders alike—and resulted in 5,000 decisions for Christ. “There were more sinners attending than Christians,” Cruz said.

At the London outreach gay activists attempted to pressure city officials to deny Cruz access to the public facilities. New Testament references on his Web site critical of homosexual behavior stirred the controversy. Even members of the Church of England, which is currently embroiled in internal disputes over gay ordination, asked that he apologize to the gay community.

Cruz told Charisma that although he opposes discrimination against anyone for any reason, he believes in upholding biblical standards on the issue. He denied reports that he apologized or pandered to the gay community. Other activists in London also lobbied him to distribute condoms at youth meetings, which he refused to do.

Distractions aside, Cruz keeps his eyes on the prize of winning souls. During a 2007 outreach in Reading, Pa., where gangs roam industrial streets plagued by crime and drugs, he quieted a large unruly crowd gathered on a street corner. “I could feel the spiritual warfare,” recalled Craig Nanna, pastor of Reading Dove Christian Ministry Center. “It was a real fight for souls.”

Drunks and junkies mocked Cruz, spewing curses and insults. But the Holy Spirit saturated the crowd as Cruz opened his heart and shared his testimony. “People sobered up immediately,” said Nanna, adding that physical healings and salvations occurred.

Included in Cruz's ministry are school assemblies, television specials, outreach literature and humanitarian projects, such as the Holy Ghost Hospital he opened in Guatemala in 2005. The hospital functions as a drug rehab facility, and Cruz is planning to open more centers like it in El Salvador and Honduras.

A part of his ministry also involves evangelistic events called To Reach Urban Communities Everywhere (TRUCE), which are open-air outreaches where reformed drug dealers and gang members who use dance, rap and drama to evangelize inner-city youth.

In New York City, TRUCE's performing artists often execute three "hit and run" half-hour spots in one night that include songs, preaching, testimonies and an altar call. Those who respond to altar calls are linked with local churches. "Our bread and butter is on the street," said David Ham, New York's TRUCE director.

Cruz has written more than a dozen books, including his 1968 best-selling autobiography of redemption titled Run Baby Run. Convolo Productions and Inferno Distribution are currently working on a PG-13 feature film based on the book ([runbabyrunmovie .com](http://runbabyrunmovie.com)). Scheduled for theatrical release in 2009, the film's budget is \$15 million.

In December 2007 Cruz was diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma, a rare form of cancer. After completing a series of radiation treatments, his prognosis is good. "Faith never tested can never be trusted," he said.

He expected to resume a full evangelistic schedule beginning in April. "I'm going to do everything to give a black eye to the devil," he said. "The tool to hurt the devil is evangelism. As long as I have the breath of life, I'm going to talk about my Jesus the same way that I started."

—Peter K. Johnson