

Houston minister officiates funeral of prostitute with AIDS

It's easy to be overlooked in a big city like Houston, the fourth-largest U.S. city. But Doug Stringer, founder of an innovative inner-city ministry called Turning Point Ministries International (TPMI), wants to make sure that no one in Houston is forgotten.

In an unusual act of compassion last April, TPMI claimed the body of a homeless prostitute and raised \$2,500 to pay for her funeral. County officials failed to find the girl's relatives after an extensive search, and "Brandy" was buried in an indigent's grave.

But to Stringer and TPMI, Brandy was not just another nameless street denizen. She was someone they had tried to help—one of hundreds of teens they had ministered to during weekly outreaches in some of Houston's roughest neighborhoods.

"The reality is, Brandy lived on this earth," Stringer told Charisma after her funeral on April 19, which he officiated. "We

weren't going to let her go down as a nobody. We need to bring light to the plight of the street kid. There are multitudes out there."

When TPMI first met Brandy, she was a 14-year-old tough, outspoken, homeless teen struggling to survive the cold

streets of Houston. She first encountered Turning Point's ministry team in the mid-1980s. TPMI evangelists spent hours talking with the runaway and her friends, getting to know them, sharing the gospel with them and offering help to any of them who wanted a way out of life on the streets.

"I'm a prostitute—that's all I know," Brandy told them as she turned to walk away. But before she could leave she was handed a small card with Turning Point's 24-hour phone number. She would call that number for help many times during the next 13 years.

But by age 27 Brandy was dead. She had just been released from jail to spend her last days in an AIDS hospice. One of her street friends contacted TPMI on April 7 to let them know Brandy had passed away.

The memorial service was attended by TPMI staff, several pastors, many of Brandy's friends and some street youth. The event caught the eye of the media, prompting inquiries from the local Christian TV station, several secular TV stations and The 700 Club. Even the local health department called the Turning Point office to ask why the ministry would sponsor the funeral of a prostitute.

"Our secretary told them, 'Because of what Jesus did for us,'" Stringer said. "She said, 'We became her spiritual family.' The people from the health department said that maybe next time something like that happened, they could do more themselves."

A desire to do more is exactly what compelled Stringer to found TPMI. The ministry, although incorporated in 1984, began

in 1981 when Stringer, then the owner of a fitness center, opened his business and home to people who needed a place to stay and get their lives in order. In those early years, Stringer, who has never been married, personally took in 115 people.

The upbeat 43-year-old minister, who is licensed with both Independent Assemblies and

Foursquare denominations, has a distinct sobriety in his voice when he talks about his call to reach the lost.

“As much as I enjoy my walk and am a joyful person, a part of me is always hurting and aching for those who are distant from Christ,” Stringer said. “I can almost hear the cries of hell when I pray. It compels me to be driven, to go to my knees.”

That passion is what has made TPMI one of the most successful inner-city outreach ministries in the United States. TPMI and its subsidiary ministry—the Somebody Cares Houston Network (SCHN)—have received commendations from the police department and the mayor’s office. A gang intervention handbook was developed by youth leaders in SCHN and was adopted by the mayor’s anti-gang task force for use in their curriculum and training programs.

Stringer launched SCHN in 1995 under the parent ministry of TPMI. Since that time SCHN chapters have been established across the country, including networks in Colorado, Florida

and California. The purpose of each chapter is to bring churches of all denominations, races and cultures together to reach the lost in their city.

Stringer also founded Ambassador Missions International (AMI), which oversees missionaries who raise their own support. AMI has affiliates in more than 35 countries including South America, Zambia, Vietnam and Germany.

But perhaps Stringer's heart is closest to the streets of the inner city.

"If we had never been on the streets for Brandy or others, they would not have known where to turn. I have to believe the seeds never come back void."