

Indianapolis' Inner-City Innovator

With his unique educational program, Kenneth Sullivan is helping troubled kids find a way out of poverty and crime in a neighborhood known for drive-by shootings and drug deals.

In 1968, when he moved from a small rural town in Tennessee to Indianapolis, Kenneth Sullivan became part of the problem. A bored high-school dropout, Sullivan was like many other young African American men in the area. He spent most of his time partying, hanging out and moving from one job to another.

"My life was very unstable," Sullivan says. "I was looking for something to do, wandering aimlessly."

Thirty years later he has found something to do, ministering to 100-plus youth who are much like he was. He now oversees a campus that houses Charity Christian Center Family Church where he pastors, Little Ducklings day care, North Star Christian Academy for grades K-6 and Nehemiah Christian College, which trains people to be teachers and to plant churches with day-care centers and schools.

At North Star Christian Academy, an urban Christian school serving approximately 170 children, the mission is clear. "The parents, the teachers and the students understand we are not just Christian in name," principal Alexia Ellis says. "We are Christian in the way we do business. We are Christian in how we teach the children. God is the head. We are training them so that they can grow up and be all that God has created them to be. We teach them that God has a plan and a purpose for their lives, but it's up to them what they do with that."

In the midst of an educational system that is understaffed, under-equipped and sometimes unwilling to deal with children who do not fit nicely into the classroom mold, North Star is

often a welcome refuge for desperate parents. The staff makes a point of seeing potential where others see problems.

"A lot of times special talents come with special needs," says Sullivan's wife, Joyce, referring to the core group of difficult children who receive ministry at North Star. "We try to recognize those [students] and channel them to be productive."

Seeing the progress students make is what motivates them forward, both on an individual and global level. Take Justin, for example. In just one year, he had been in four different schools. Admittedly, the 13-year-old was a handful; teachers say he had a temper, got into fights, was disrespectful and lacked self-control.

"My life has changed so much," says Justin, who left North Star to begin seventh grade this year. "I am on a basketball team and in the Sea Cadets. I am a Christian. I did not expect that to happen. My mom and I get along way better now. The pastor, my teacher and my principal are, like, my best friends. Everybody here I love and respect."

He wants to go on to college and now has big dreams. "Miss Ellis and Pastor Sullivan said they would both come see me when I go on to seventh grade and see how I am doing," he says. "I really want to do well."

When he first came to North Star, Robert was much like Justin. "My mother sent me here because I was getting in a lot of trouble," the 13-year-old says. "If I stayed at that school I would have been expelled. I used to not want to be around anybody and would talk back to the teachers. Here they let you express yourself as long as you respect people."

"Teachers are more patient here. The school I came from had 46 kids in the class. Here I only have nine [classmates], so it's easier for the teachers and us."

Robert wasn't looking forward to going to public school to begin seventh grade, but he was hopeful that he would make good choices. "Teachers here taught me to be patient," he says. "I don't have to worry about the same things any more. I'll just respect the teachers and not talk back. Just do what they say no matter what they say, even if I don't like it, because it's the right thing. I have God in my life now. That helps."

Sullivan can relate to the turnaround the boys experienced. In 1970, two years after his move to Indianapolis and his subsequent wandering, Sullivan answered God's call and immediately became part of the solution. Wanting a stable family, he prayed that God would send him a wife. In 1972, Sullivan married Joyce, his partner of 30 years.

The Sullivans believed that in order to be effective in ministering to families, they had to be faithful within their own household and then extend that outward. Observers say the couple lead by example. "They really love each other," says longtime friend Marita Gordon. "I have never seen them be anything less than totally supportive of one another. It truly is amazing."

Sullivan, the high-school dropout, eventually returned to school, this time as a teacher. He spent 12 years in the Indianapolis Public School System, but soon realized that children in the traditional school setting were not getting the nurturing necessary to help them become successful, particularly youth in the urban neighborhoods.

"Kids need spiritual and moral instruction," Sullivan says. "The public school system tries to educate them in a values-free environment. We have a tremendous opportunity to impact these kids since they are at school such a large part of the day."

The Sullivans have taken their love of children, Jesus and

each other into a troubled community known as Brightwood, where Joyce says drugs, alcoholism, drive-by shootings and broken families were rampant.

Sullivan's passion now is to work with other pastors around the country to help them establish similar ministries. "There is a great need to perpetuate the vision and impact the country, particularly in the urban areas," he says. Sullivan works with the Urban Christian School Coalition to help spread information about how to offer children in urban communities a Christ-centered education.

He's convinced these restless youth can be reached. He's living proof because God turned him around.

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For more information about Charity Christian Center, write 5330 E. 38th St., Indianapolis, IN 46218. Send tax-deductible donations to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.