

Teen Challenge Celebrates 50 Years

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[] Hundreds are gathering in New York this week to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Teen Challenge, a drug-recovery program founded by David Wilkerson. Each year thousands of people find salvation and overcome addiction at the 1,000 Teen Challenge centers located in 78 nations. "All over the world I still hear about people getting saved through Teen Challenge," says Wilkerson, now an author and founding pastor of Times Square Church in Manhattan.

The three day celebration, held at Wilkerson's church, will include seven services with featured speakers such as Wilkerson's first convert, Nicky Cruz of Nicky Cruz Outreach; Teen Challenge graduate Sonny Arguinzoni of Victory Outreach International; and Steve Hill, pastor of Heartland World Ministries in Dallas. All will share their personal testimonies of transformation from addiction to ministry.

"At Teen Challenge we have witnessed men and women transformed from hopeless drug addicts to incredible assets to society," said Mike Hodges, president of Teen Challenge USA. "Graduates include doctors, military leaders, ministers, motivational speakers, missionaries . . . good parents and role models. "

Hodges recalls his own transformation from a lifestyle of addiction.

In 1968 he says he hit rock bottom while living in Grass Valley, Calif. After swallowing a piece of chocolate laced with peyote, he raced his motorcycle home in the darkness with no headlights on. Although he miraculously made it home in one piece, he was plagued by hallucinations later that night.

"I saw this guy with a pitchfork and felt the pitchfork in my arms," he says. "He was the devil. I cried and woke up whimpering in my wife's arms."

Several years passed, but he finally surrendered to Christ at a crusade Wilkerson sponsored. He later joined the ministry's staff and has been helping others beat drug addiction for 25 years.

Despite decades of progress, drug abuse remains a critical problem in the U.S. In a 2006 study, the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration estimated that 19.2 million people had used illicit drugs within the last month. Heroin and cocaine still dominate the drug scene, but methamphetamine use and prescription drug abuse is surging. In 2004 roughly 25 percent of federal inmates were incarcerated for crimes committed to get money for drugs.

Although numerous addiction recovery and rehabilitation programs exist, Teen Challenge enjoys an enviable success rate. Studies show that 65 percent to 75 percent of those who complete the 12-month live-in program remain drug-free from six months to 15 years later. However, about 75 percent of those who enter the program drop out, usually within the first 30 days.

"Every person who enters the doors of Teen Challenge is a high risk," says Dave Batty, chief operating officer of Global Teen Challenge based in Columbus, Ga. But leaders say they have seen God intervene in what seemed to be impossible situations.

Serious conflicts with her father and stepmother pushed Jazmin Donati, 16, over the edge into drugs when she was 12 years old. "We hated each other," she says. With anger, depression and rebellion ruling her life, Donati tried numbing her pain with pot, cocaine and pills.

Overdosing once on pills didn't stop her from using, and her rebellious behavior got her kicked out of school several times. "I couldn't have a healthy relationship with anyone and

was a constant liar," she says.

She was on probation and under house arrest for possession of cocaine when in 2006 she entered Teen Challenge in Jupiter, Fla., at the age of 13. "I didn't want to go into the program," she says. "I was freaking out."

The Teen Challenge staff showed her tough love. "The staff disciplined me for my own good," she says. "But I knew that they loved me."

Slowly she realized that her actions bred nasty consequences. After about 10 months, she cried out to God, "I can't live like this anymore." She says He flooded her life with grace and forgiveness. "I am a totally different person today," she says. "Jesus is my Savior. He still disciplines me, but He's my best friend."

She has reconciled with her family and tries to share Jesus wherever she goes.

In the 50 years since he founded Teen Challenge, Wilkerson says some things have changed, but the answer to addiction remains the same.

"Drugs change, but the problems remain the same," he says. "The need still brings people to their wits' end. It has always been a sin problem." – **Peter K. Johnson with Felicia Mann**