

Tennessee Ministry Helps Troubled Teens

Dozens of young men have accepted Christ while receiving treatment at Youth Town

Beth Miller was glad her son had limited phone privileges after she enrolled him in Youth Town, a Christian residential treatment center in Pinson, Tenn.

In his first weeks in the boot camp-like program, Stephen Wallace was limited to just five minutes twice a week. "Then we didn't have to hear him berate us too long," Miller said.

She and her husband sought help after they learned Stephen was smoking and selling marijuana. By the time Stephen was eligible for a pass, he had a new perspective. "I understand why you sent me here," Stephen told his mom, "because if you didn't, I was going to end up dead or in jail."

Youth Town has been helping troubled youth since 1962 with its highly structured and physically challenging programs. Some young men are there under a juvenile court mandate. Others, such as Stephen, who has graduated from Youth Town and is now drug-free, are placed by worried family members.

Youth Town was founded by a group of Jackson, Tenn., men as a home for orphaned boys. Through the years, the outreach grew to include girls, and in the late 1980s began to specialize in substance-abuse treatment. In 2004, it began reaching out to young men with addiction problems exclusively.

Youth Town's eight-week program, Youth Challenge, is designed

to deter first-time offenders. The teens live in barracks with no air conditioning, chop wood for heat, shower outside and use portable toilets. "The greatest way we learn lessons is through experience," said Mark Baldwin, director of programs at Youth Town.

"[Living like this] teaches them the difference between what is a right and what is a privilege. Then they have a greater respect for what their parents-most often just their mom-have provided for them."

Youth Town's 90-day substance-abuse program is called River Quest. The boys live in dorm-like rooms and are physically challenged by former professional basketball player Kendall Dancy. Although the program isn't a quick fix, the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported in 2002 that any program less than 90 days is ineffective, as it takes the first 30 days to "clear the fog."

Youth Town staff said they combine the best components of 12-step programs and Christian recovery ministries to create their own technique. Today the ministry, which is available through some insurance providers, has an 80 percent success rate and has earned the sought-after stamp of approval from the Counsel on Accreditation (COA).

"When an organization such as Youth Town takes the initiative to seek accreditation from a third party it demonstrates a willingness to take a close look at itself and says to its donors, the community, and the kids themselves that when it comes to these vulnerable kids, good enough is not good enough," said COA President Richard Klarberg.

Roughly 100 young men went through Youth Town's treatment programs in 2004. All of them accepted Christ, and most were baptized. "Here we are impacting kids," Baldwin said, "and yet the denominational differences we have don't get in the way because we know what the important issue is: to take a kid and lead him to Christ."

The women working in the cafeteria are considered the campus prayer warriors. "Everyone's always praying for you," resident Justin Porter said. "It's amazing."

Director Nick Pappas, a former football coach and salesman, was once hooked on gambling and alcohol. After he was converted and baptized in the Holy Spirit, he said he heard about a job opening on the 250 acres south of Jackson, Tenn.

A prophetic word led him to take it seriously. A guest speaker at his church told him he felt God was calling him to a place that was spacious in land and involved young people. "If you'll honor Him," the man said, "He'll send you the most destitute of heart and hope, and in the name of Jesus you'll see them healed."

Pappas took the job, sight unseen.

He says addicts bury what's bothering them. The anger-management training Youth Town offers shows teens how to substitute fits of rage with more positive solutions. "The inability to accept things we cannot change only leads to frustration, anger and anxiety," counselor Lynn Landrum said. "For the young men in our care, these emotions often lead to self-medicating-using alcohol or drugs to relieve emotional pain or discomfort."

Methamphetamine tops the list of addictions, as one in seven teens experiments with the drug, and 99 percent of users become dependent after one use.

Youth Town staffers believe Christians are missing some opportunities to help troubled teens. "I would love to see the church begin to acknowledge that mental health and addiction problems are affecting their church," Baldwin said. "They're either not willing to see it, or people are hiding it."

Marsha Gallardo in Pinson, Tenn.