

Comforting Others

ANNE STEPHENS' SONSHINE MINISTRIES OFFERS AID AND HOPE TO MANY IN NEED.

Last November Shelley Adams*, suffering from periodontal disease, lost a tooth—and her job as a stripper. However, when the Lexington, Kentucky, woman called Sonshine Mission, located in a two-story house owned by Baptist church, she found something more valuable than rent assistance.

Shelley took with her into the mission a battered past. One of 19 children, all estranged from their father, she had been divorced three times.

At 18, she took up stripping, soon after her first husband took her to a club as a birthday present. “I wanted to see where he was spending all our money,” she says.

A much different atmosphere greeted her at Sonshine, which features a comfortable, navy-blue reception room accented by brilliant white woodwork and draperies. Pictures of Jesus and a large cross adorn the walls, along with the names of Christ in hand-painted, gold calligraphy.

Soon after arriving, Shelley collapsed in a fit of tears. Moments later, founder Anne Stephens led the 34-year-old single mother in a prayer acknowledging Jesus as Savior and Lord.

“I don’t know why I started crying; everything happened at once,” Adams says, voice trembling. “My grandfather was a pastor. I always believed in God but almost felt if I stepped into a church it would burn down. I never denied Him but just talked myself out of going.”

However, the following Sunday she visited a service and

convinced her boyfriend to accompany her. Though she didn't join the congregation—primarily because of a lack of transportation—Adams is pursuing a new life.

She soon returned to the strip club, cleaned out her locker and gave away her gear to surprised co-workers. Now living on about a tenth of her former club income, Shelley is investigating job training and educational opportunities.

Adams hopes the “new her” will convince her boyfriend to follow Christ. Despite numerous frustrations after losing her job, she has remained calm; in the past she would have “flipped out.” For this change, she thanks Stephens.

“I think Anne is one of the most wonderful people I've ever met. Anne has a talent for talking to people. Her faith is so strong it can make you feel so comfortable. I can't brag enough about her or the people she works with.”

A MISSION TO SERVE Despite seeing hundreds of salvations through the years, the former business manager turned evangelist calls this experience the most exciting conversion she's ever been a part of—aside from her own.

“A lot of [strippers] don't want to do what they're doing,” Stephens says. “They feel it's the only way they can make money to help their children.”

Reaching out to those in need—strippers and more—is the specialty of Sonshine, which started in 1986, three years before its winsome leader was ordained at a church in Louisville, Kentucky. It originated with informal help Stephens gave to residents of The Salvation Army, where she had preached for five years.

Her foray into ministry began after her marriage collapsed—just three years after she accepted Christ in 1979. Anne says her husband told her it was him and their lifestyle, or the Lord. Choosing the latter, she watched in amazement as

God provided a new home for her despite her lack of a steady income.

That home played a role in her unfolding path to ministry. Bothered by sleeping in the suburbs while Salvation Army guests slept in bunks, she returned to the city one day to provide transportation to a job seeker.

As she got involved in people's lives, she started doing more, until she had worked her way into a building to dispense food, clothing, furniture, financial assistance and Christ-centered advice.

"I saw a need and tried to take care of it," says the 60-year-old preacher, an effervescent figure with a ready laugh and hospitable presence that puts visitors at ease.

"I was going to [help people at The Salvation Army] while I was waiting for God to open the door for ministry for me—I didn't know what it was yet. All my thoughts were, 'I'll do this while I'm waiting.'"

Sonshine Ministries & Evangelistic Outreach—which includes a weekly radio program—isn't one of Lexington's more high-profile outreaches, but it is one of the steadiest. Taking an average of 7,300 calls a year, it fields requests from individuals, social agencies, hospitals, schools and even The Salvation Army.

For eight years during the 1990s the mission provided aid to approximately 500 families a year, plus another 200 at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The numbers declined after the building housing her mission was torn down, forcing her to operate from her home. But she expects them to rebound this year, thanks to the new building she settled in last year.

Each December Stephens hosts a "Birthday Party for Jesus," inviting some 200 children, parents and relatives to a catered hotel dinner. The attendees not only receive free food and

gifts; between 20 and 30 children and a few adults also take home eternal life.

Stephens accomplishes all she does on a shoestring budget. Although donations peaked at \$67,000, during each of the last two years they dipped to less than \$43,000. She received a \$14,000 housing allowance in 2003 but loaned half that amount back to the ministry.

Such action typifies Stephens, says Vickey Welch, who met her while the Welches were running a similar outreach in rural Kentucky in the 1980s.

Now traveling with her husband and son to sing and teach about Christians' biblical ties to Israel, Vickey says during the years Stephens has helped her connect with people, as well as providing prayer and spiritual boosts.

"She could tell how I was feeling when I couldn't put it into words," says Welch, adding that Stephens does the same thing for everyone who comes to the mission. In her eyes, Stephens is doing far more than "handing out stuff."

"She just loves them and cares so much," Welch says. "She wants their life to be better than they think it can be. She imparts that."

CARING FOUNDER Volunteers at the eclectic outreach a mile east of downtown tell similar stories. They describe a caring founder and a ministry that—while supplying physical essentials—is more concerned with guests' spiritual needs.

One helper is an old friend. Mary Margaret Gridley, a nurse and clinic research coordinator at the University of Kentucky, met Stephens 23 years ago when they lived in the same neighborhood.

Gridley recalls that even then Stephens opened her home on Christmas Day so a young, impoverished couple could enjoy

dinner and presents.

"Nothing is too big or too much," says Gridley, whose family lends their truck to transport gifts and food to the Christmas party. "Anne is always trying to do whatever she can to meet a need.

"She also has a boldness in ministry. Nothing keeps her from sharing the salvation message and the love of Christ. She would be as bold in the White House as she is with the homeless. When she ministered at The Salvation Army, alcoholics got delivered and people were saved."

Kathryn Grayson, a grandmotherly type who started helping sort clothes and sack groceries in 1996 after her husband died, says Stephens' love shows through her actions.

It also impresses her that nobody who comes for food will leave without hearing about the Bread of Life who can satisfy their eternal hunger.

"At one time we had a refrigerator with names of people who had gotten saved [written on paper] and there were over 1,000 names on it," says the 79-year-old woman. "There's fulfillment in knowing I'm helping someone and seeing people's lives changed."

Ministry advisory board member Julie Hahn, who met Stephens in Women's Aglow, credits Stephens' obedience for empowering Sonshine. Hahn has seen Stephens continually respond to God's direction, including His mandate to start the radio program that airs twice each weekend. Sonshine Today has been on the air since 1989 despite having a sponsor for only five of those years.

"She has a heart to believe and steps out in faith for things most people wouldn't try," Hahn says. "Her radio program is extraordinary. God has gifted her with talking to people."

"She's telling in a microcosm what's happening around the world," adds counselor David Jaffares, Stephens' pastor during the mid-1980s. "Her selfless inclusion of people [from many denominations] says a lot. I like the program and the fact it has struck hearts across denominational barriers."

UPWARD TREND Though pleased with her mission's multifaceted outreach, Stephens points to the radio outreach as an equally important aspect of her work. She believes that besides touching the lost, it unifies Christians by reminding them of their common bonds.

Normally she features guests from around the state. But last year she interviewed Bob Garner, director of filming for Focus on the Family, while visiting the ministry's headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Recording sessions have become easier, too. Instead of traveling to an independent engineer's office in the suburbs, she now tapes from her new office, which includes a radio studio.

The studio is only one sign of an upward trend. Earlier this year she secured her first secretary in 16 years. Tim Pendleton, a Lexington businessman, recently assumed the duties of volunteer assistant director and instructor of new men's discipleship classes.

Such steps are significant after the obstacles of recent years. Her funding struggles have included having a food pantry reject her request for Thanksgiving baskets last fall. Instead of supplying 175 families with dinner fixings, she could raise enough money to buy only 50 turkeys.

A month later, the hotel that previously had supplied free dinners for the mission's Christmas party charged \$8 a plate, sparking another scramble for funds.

Stephens grapples with other frustrations, such as her concern

about those who pray to receive Christ but whose lives exhibit no evidence of change. As she puts it, "I turned around on a dime and I'd like to see them do the same thing. People want God's blessing but their own will, and that is very frustrating."

Then, too, there is dealing with the aftermath of several failed marriages, one after she was born again. Her experience has shown her that it's unwise to do anything, even if you think you've heard from God, unless you have His perfect peace.

Then there are the demands of running a ministry with no paid employees. Yet Stephens remains hopeful, believing that 2004 will be the year God fulfills a promise to create new opportunities.

"Today Jesus is saying to me, 'Don't worry about anything. Just keep helping the people,'" Stephens says. "[He's saying], 'I'm with you no matter what it looks like.'"

Ken Walker is a freelance writer and past contributor to SpiritLed Woman. His wife, Janet, is an inner-city missionary.