

Giving Women A Way Out

BEFORE AIDA BOWERS CAME ALONG, LIFE ON THE STREETS WAS A FRIGHTENING LAST RESORT FOR DESPERATE WOMEN IN DAYTONA BEACH, FLORIDA. NOW, THEY HAVE AN ALTERNATIVE.

To the casual observer, South Ridgewood Avenue in Daytona Beach, Florida, looks like many other city streets caught in transition between residential and commercial zoning—a panorama of aging homes resolutely standing their ground between newly constructed businesses and hotels. But to Aida Bowers, a fiery evangelist who believes she's on assignment from God, it is a hot spot for ministry: the location of choice for a number of the city's prostitutes, who work the area even in broad daylight.

Bowers' mission is to rid the street, the city and even the state of prostitutes—not by sending them to jail, but by rescuing and rehabilitating them. A year and a half ago she founded Heaven's Garden—a nonprofit, residential home in the heart of Daytona's red-light district—to provide a refuge and training ground for the women she snatches from the street.

Though never a prostitute herself, the 44-year-old mother of three claims she has a heart for these women because, like many of them, she was “used and abused” by men all her life until she became a Christian. “I’ve always had a passion for females because of what I went through,” she says.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico by adoptive parents who practiced spiritualism, Santería and witchcraft, and married twice to men who were deeply involved in cults, Bowers knows what it is like to be at the mercy of those who are living for the devil. So ever since she gave her life to Jesus eight years ago, she's been out to make the devil look bad.

That's why she goes right into his territory to get the

prostitutes.

"I just stand out here [in front of Heaven's Garden]," she says, "and if I see them walking down the street, I walk over and say: 'Hey, you hungry today? Wanna put some shoes on?'"

When the women respond affirmatively, Bowers takes them into the house, feeds them and gives them clothes. She nurses them if they are sick or wounded. Then she offers them the opportunity to stay and participate, at no charge, in the voluntary yearlong program she provides.

Sometimes Bowers takes women into her program from the jail, after they have served time for prostitution; sometimes she gets them through the courts; sometimes she takes referrals. But mostly, she says, she seeks them out on the street.

BIRTH OF A VISION

Bowers first got a vision for the home a few years after she gave her life to Jesus. Singing for Him and preaching as an evangelist—even on the radio—wasn't enough for her.

"The more I did, the more I wanted to do," she says.

She began telling God she wanted to work full time for Him. Through her job at Serenity House, a state-funded substance abuse agency, Bowers took a particular interest in prostitutes.

"From where Serenity House is to my house is seven minutes, and that strip was packed up with women on the streets," she explains.

On her own time, Bowers began to go out and do research. She didn't preach to the women; she befriended them, asked why they were working the streets and fed them. As she reached out, she says, "the burden got bigger."

After receiving a prophetic word at a conference in June 2003 about being released to do what God was calling her to do,

Bowers knew it was time to implement the vision she had of a place for women who wanted to leave prostitution to come and be restored. Miraculously, everything she needed was provided for her. By August she had a 10-by-10 storage unit filled with donations.

Even the house itself, a two-story Victorian model on South Ridgewood Avenue, came to her supernaturally. The owner had purchased it in 1991 with the idea that it would one day be used for women's ministry. Within two months it was leased, furnished and stocked with all the essentials—from beds to linens to toilet paper to food—entirely through the donations of people, churches and organizations in the community.

In answer to Bowers' prayer that she be able to serve her first residents a Thanksgiving feast, God made it possible for her to open the doors of Heaven's Garden on November 17, 2003—the week before the holiday. All three of the women who enjoyed the home-cooked meal had been in jail for prostitution.

The home is now more than full with 12 residents. But many more women are in need of Bowers' program. And Bowers, married last August to a godly man who supports her in ministry, believes she can do more for them than the jail can for less money—by helping them break, once and for all, the cycles of drug abuse and prostitution that keep them going back to the streets. Her one-year program consists of two phases.

The first, which lasts three months, is the “cleanup” phase. The second is the “empowering” or “restoration” phase. At the end of the second phase, the women go to a career center and prepare for either work or school.

Throughout the program they receive in-house teaching and counseling from Bowers and representatives of various agencies. In addition, they attend church and go to Bible studies and home meetings of the local chapter of Aglow, an

international Christian women's organization. They also serve at the Coalition for the Homeless.

Bowers wants the women to "see for themselves what God is able to do in people's lives." She too is seeing that firsthand. The first resident to graduate had arrived at Heaven's Garden in a desperate state, after Bowers picked her up at the jail in November 2003. The woman now has a full-time job and is ministering to other women.

"I've seen this woman transformed right before my eyes," Bowers says. "That is a woman is radical for Jesus, and you can tell that the changes are permanent."

Bowers is all about changes. Her goal is to take every hurting woman in Daytona Beach off the streets, free her from the grip of sin, give her a taste of how much God loves her and help her fulfill her destiny. To do that, she hopes to increase her capacity to 100 rooms and expand her facilities to include a crisis unit, a detoxification unit and a learning center.

"I know it's around the corner," she says. "We're always trusting God to do it. He always comes through."

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