

In the Age of Hillsong, 'The Ramp' Brings God to Rural Youth

Hamilton, Ala., is about 90 minutes west of Birmingham and three hours south of Nashville. It's a small town that's seen better days, and although it does have more than one stoplight, the arresting thing about the town is the state prison conveniently located on main street. (Well, officially it's behind the McDonalds, which makes me think what torture it must be for prisoners to stare at the line of Big Mac customers all day.)

In the age of the Hillsong Conference, Catalyst, Passion and more high-profile Christian events, something amazing has been happening in Hamilton for the last 10 years, and it's right under our noses.

It's called The Ramp, and it's a youth conference that happens once a month in a former grocery store across from the abandoned Hamilton movie theater. Over the last decade, it's been estimated that more than 300,000 high school kids have attended, and each month as many as 1,200 kids pack into the standing-room-only arena.

But here's the thing: *This isn't summer camp*. These middle and high school students don't come to swim, hike or ride horses. They come to the two- to three-day conference to worship God and sit under a wide variety of pastors and Bible teachers.

Excuse me, but is this happening anywhere else in America?

Gospel singer Karen Wheaton founded it. Her Wikipedia entry says, "Her singing voice is classified in the Mississippi Delta style, which is fused with blues, urban contemporary gospel, and bluegrass gospel influences." She was a staple of

major Pentecostal evangelistic events in the 1980s and still makes regular guest appearances on Christian television. But in the mid-90s, after her husband's infidelity and eventual divorce turned her life upside down, she packed up the car, grabbed her two daughters, and in 1998 came back to her hometown—Hamilton.

Her father and grandfather had farmed there for nearly 100 years, so she moved back to the homestead with no idea what to do or where to go. But it wasn't long before she felt the tug to reach young people.

She started renting a dilapidated local space, but soon it was obvious something serious was going on. Call it the "Rural Hillsong Conference" if you want, but the truth is, major Christian events have been focused on urban areas for the last 20 years, and maybe it was just high time something happened for rural America.

Whatever it was, it was a lightning strike. Young people started pouring in, and a typical Ramp monthly conference will see more than 1,000 teens from as many as 20 different states.

Clearly, something powerful is going on. But it wasn't exactly easy. Early on, one church actually picketed the event. Another local pastor preached a sermon outlining all the issues he had with what was going at The Ramp. But the flood continued.

Now the Hamilton Police Department loves Wheaton because she's attracting young people who'd rather share the gospel than get involved in drugs or violence. Local Hamilton business leaders love her because she's filling local hotel rooms and restaurants.

But in spite of the popularity, one big challenge continues: funding. As anyone who's involved in youth ministry knows, teenagers can't offer much financial support. If it was a ministry to adults, she would be on easy street. But even

after enormous success with kids, she still struggles.

So, what should we make of Karen Wheaton, The Ramp, and what's happening in Hamilton? Here are a few thoughts:

1) When something devastating happens, your life isn't over.

Even after a divorce shattered Wheaton's life, it wasn't long before God revealed the greatest project she'd ever envisioned.

2) Rural America just might be undergoing a revival. We tend to only think of major cities when we think of Christian events today. But Wheaton is a testimony that God isn't finished with rural America. In spite of crushing poverty, meth addiction and rampant promiscuity throughout America's farmland, The Ramp is proving that there is an answer for rural America.

3) The real tragedy is that thousands of young people are leaving these meetings fired up to share their faith at hundreds of high schools across America, and yet The Ramp still struggles financially. Why the church as a whole hasn't recognized the potential of this phenomenon and stepped in to support the effort is puzzling.

One can only wonder about the number of America's young people Wheaton could reach if she had a healthier bank account. But one thing is for sure: Karen Wheaton has faced opposition before, and it hasn't stopped her yet.

Something is definitely happening in Hamilton, Ala.

Phil Cooke is a media consultant focused mainly on the Christian market, as well as a vocal critic of contemporary American and American-influenced Christian culture. For the original article, visit .