

Luis Palau Reaches Spring Breakers

Note: This story originally appeared on in May 2003. A total of 300,000 people gathered in South Florida for Luis Palau's record-breaking Beachfest event that spring, indicating the incredible reach of the Latin American evangelist's ministry. Today, Palau is 80 and he is still effectively reaching souls for the gospel.

While several major events such as the Oscar awards vacillated on canceling at the onset of the war in Iraq, Oregon-based evangelist Luis Palau, 68, never even considered postponing his Beachfest Spring Break outreach in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

"Now it is more important than ever for people to gather to pray, to recommit their lives to Christ, and turn to Him for salvation," Palau told a local Christian radio station before the event.

With roughly 300,000 people in attendance, the two-day event became Palau's largest U.S. festival to date and one of the biggest religious events to hit the area, *The Miami Herald* reported. Six thousand volunteers from 1,100 churches were on hand to receive the 4,500 attendees who reported decisions for Christ.

Though it began with a sobering prayer for coalition troops in Iraq, Beachfest was marked by Palau's unique style of festival evangelism reminiscent of the Jesus Movement.

Some of the nation's top Christian artists were on hand for concerts, including Third Day, Jaci Velasquez, Mary Mary, Pillar, TobyMac, Jump5, Avalon, and the Blind Boys of Alabama.

Thirty-foot inflatable VeggieTales characters were available for the children, as costumed volunteers offered them a full-fledged stage show and photo-ops.

A world-class, 10,000-square-foot skateboard park surrounded by three-story bleachers sported both local amateur and pro boarders and bikers who alternately thrilled and exhorted the crowd with their skill and testimonies.

“I am proof that you can be drug-free and alcohol-free, and still be a professional skateboarder,” said Anthony Carney from California, who has been a full-time boarder for 16 years. “With Christ living in me and the talent He has given me—it draws kids in. It’s such an awesome tool to reach kids with the gospel.”

The event was broadcast live on 1,400 radio stations and sent via satellite to 300 beach parties in the United States and Canada, which recorded more than 3,000 decisions for Christ. Palau also planned to air a one-hour Beachfest radio special to coalition troops.

Since his Luis Palau Evangelistic Association began in the 1960s, Palau has preached in 70 countries—with a record 1 million people near his native Buenos Aires, Argentina. He told *Charisma* an encounter he had with the Holy Spirit during graduate school has played a critical role in the ministry’s success.

“Someone came to chapel to speak on the power of the Holy Spirit,” he said. “I realized this is what I needed. ... I skipped three classes and went on my knees. I experienced what it is like to live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. ... Now people are turning by the thousands to Christ, and it has been 48 years since that day.”

Elsewhere, residents of a small Arizona town joined forces to offer an alternative to typical Spring Break fare. Local church and community leaders in Lake Havasu pooled their

resources for the 10th consecutive year to sponsor Teen Break, which kicked off its weeklong celebration in March with snowboarding and sledding in the desert atop a mountain of imported snow.

In 1993, MTV turned Lake Havasu into one of the Southwest's hottest Spring Break party spots, drawing more than 20,000 college students per week over a six-week period. "The publicity put us on the map, but for all the wrong reasons," said Donna Carlton, a committed Christian and recreation management specialist with Lake Havasu's Park and Recreation Department. "Our teens were being drawn into the college party scene with devastating results."

The next year residents launched the first Teen Break program, which in August won the Arizona Park and Recreation's Most Outstanding Program Award for a town under 60,000. This year, Lake Havasu invited Christian rave artists MC Production Company and DJ Bobby Dendy of Club Lighthouse in Phoenix, along with several alternative rock bands to provide a Christian music outreach. The music, coupled with dirt bike jumping, wall climbing and lots of food drew thousands of teens.

"Terrible things were happening to our youth," Carlton said, "but out of it all has emerged a miracle. Normally, church and government is not something that works together, but we had no other alternative. The whole event is supernatural."