

The House That Hope Built

Sara Trollinger has established a much-needed haven for Teenagers who are battered by life's storms.

Published reports on the state of the American family often reveal problems due to parental neglect and teen-age rebellion. But House of Hope, an outreach to teens and their families based in Orlando, Florida, has become a national model for ministries seeking to bring about family recovery and reconciliation.

Sara Trollinger, founder and president of House of Hope, was a schoolteacher for 25 years. Because of her work with emotionally handicapped students, she sometimes conducted classes with troubled teen-agers who were behind bars.

She saw countless young people bound by destructive behavior patterns. Many of them appeared to be hopelessly stuck in the public reform system.

"The same young people would come and go without any lasting help because we weren't allowed to mention the name of Jesus Christ," Sara says. "It was like a revolving door."

She began praying for a way to make a difference, and in 1985 God gave her the vision for a nondenominational residential treatment facility where troubled teen-agers could receive counseling for life-controlling issues, be taught Christian principles and see the love of God in action.

Soliciting the prayer efforts of five others, Sara trusted God for opportunities to move the vision forward. When an affordable property became available, the group took the \$200 they had between them and made a down payment on what would become the ministry's first home.

Believing that God would supply the additional \$95,000 she needed, Sara applied for a grant from the Edyth Bush Foundation. She was told that her chances of getting it were slim, but a single check from them covered the costs for closing on the property, and Sara's down payment of \$200 was returned to her.

During House of Hope's first year an article on Sara's work appeared in a local newspaper on the same day that President Ronald Reagan was paying a visit to the city. The president read the article and wrote out a personal check to House of Hope for \$1,000.

The following day, the Orlando Sentinel carried a report on how a local fledgling ministry to teen-agers had touched the heart of the chief executive. Soon the phones began ringing off their hooks.

FAITHFULNESS IN SMALL THINGS "We started out with lots of volunteers, one staff member and a part-time secretary," Sara says. "I'd work all day at school and then come back at 3 o'clock and work until midnight. I cut shrubbery. I helped wash dishes, cooked—whatever needed to be done, we'd all pitch in and do it."

As the vision became reality, Sara developed the home's procedures manual, combining the knowledge she'd gained as a teacher with godly principles she knew young people would need. She also prayed. Today the home stands as a model for 26 programs across the nation, and plans are being considered for establishing centers overseas.

Sara has come a long way from her hometown of Asheboro, North Carolina, and her dreams of being an educator. But this really isn't a major departure from what she thought her life would be.

Says Sara: "I came from a Christian family who loved the Lord. They always instilled in me that God would be as big in my

life as I allowed Him to be.”

Her grandmother prayed that Sara and all her siblings would go into ministry. In a sense, Sara is continuing the tradition—calling forth the destiny of the teens she helps.

Every week she teaches a class on faith. She also holds weekly “Fireside Chats,” in which she meets with the groups of male and female residents separately for an hour.

“I teach every boy and girl [who] comes here that God has really specifically picked them out for such a time as this,” she says.

“They are the ones who are going to lead their friends. And I believe that we are just on the brink of a great breakthrough with our young people.”

GETTING TEENS BACK ON COURSE House of Hope accepts both Christian and non-Christian teens, ages 12 to 17. The average stay is nine months to a year and a half. Typically, by the time they leave, the residents are all born again—and most are Spirit-filled.

Young people find their way to House of Hope due to the intervention of parents and churches and sometimes at the mandate of the judicial system. Apparently, the court has no problem with the program’s decidedly Christian, Spirit-filled approach—and for good reason.

“We have a 95 percent success rate for restoring teens back to their families,” Sara says. “The parents are so desperate when they come here, they’ll sign papers, anything.”

What parents must agree to are weekly counseling sessions, parenting classes and visits with their teen. Otherwise, they forfeit his or her participation in the program. Ongoing counseling support is available for the family once the teen goes home.

The program is founded entirely on Christian principles, but the gospel is “caught” rather than forced on anyone. Sometimes the change is so dramatic that the teen-ager will become the catalyst for the parents’ conversion or rededication to live for God fully.

While in treatment the 25 boys and 25 girls attend classes in the Accelerated Christian Education program (ACE), an approved, self-paced curriculum. They can earn a high school diploma or junior college credits.

Teens are assigned a routine of counseling, worship, devotions and household duties. Many of the “toughest cases” have already been through several other programs, but “if you ask the teen-agers here what’s different about this program, they’ll say it’s the love of God,” says Sara, who credits her 30 team members for making that a reality.

DEPENDING ON GOD “I have the best staff of any place in the world. They are sold out to the Lord,” she says. “When I hire somebody to come on staff I always tell them we’re a faith ministry, and we may not be paid next month, but we trust in God.” To date, no one has ever missed getting paid.

The ministry has chosen to forgo government funding in favor of donations and grants. Families of residents pay a portion of the costs necessary for long-term treatment. The amount is based on what they can afford.

“We’ve decided we’re going to depend on God,” Sara says. “We don’t ever know where the money’s coming from. We don’t have pledges. It’s exciting when you can see that God is always faithful.”

As a visionary leader, Sara Trollinger has had to endure criticism, but she de-emphasizes those times because the Lord always attended her obedience with healings and deliverances. Sara says, “You just file that away in light of these kinds of miracles.”

Sara encourages other women who desire to make a difference to pursue God's purposes earnestly, to gain all the knowledge they can and to find like-minded people to agree with them in prayer. She says: "God will, in His perfect time, raise you up. He will be as big in your life as you allow Him to be."

Brenda Davis is a former editor of SpiritLed Woman.