

Genesis Project Transforming Strip Club Into Sanctuary

When your family owns a strip club and one of your young topless dance employees tells you that she has a message from her mother, it's probably not one that sings your praises.

Aaron Bekkela was in that spot nearly 20 years ago, helping his dad run a topless bar in Fort Collins, Colo., home to Colorado State University.

He had just finished working the first shift at A Hunt Club and was wrapping up some paperwork when one of the bar's dancers appeared outside Bekkela's office door.

"I promised my mom to tell you that she and her friends are praying for you," he recalls her saying.

While talk of Christianity was considered taboo and mocked in the Bekkela family, Aaron thanked the dancer's mother, mentally dismissing interest in her church.

As a strip club owner, Bekkela had no business inside a church—unless it was a business deal with the leadership, he would later discover.

In his 20s at the time, Bekkela made good money at the club as the youngest of seven children, and he enjoyed the freedom to go on hunting trips with his brothers whenever he wanted. The smell of a locker room, perfume, cigarettes and booze had been with him since age 12.

Bekkela's comfort with working at a strip club clashed with the opinions of others who were, in his words, "very religious but anything but Christian." He suspected that the praying mother was like others he'd met.

His own mother, who had turned to religion during Bekkela's

senior year in high school, announced plans to divorce her husband, who was running the bar. After the marriage ended, Bekkela noticed that his mother's faith had produced positive changes in her.

After his father died in 2009, Bekkela and a brother took over the bar and, a short time later, another brother gave Bekkela a Bible. About the same time, Bekkela and his wife, Stacy, received fliers from a local church, inviting first-time visitors.

By the time the second flier arrived at the Bekkela's comfortable hillside home, Aaron had read some of his new Bible, and he admitted interest in the church's invitation to visit.

"What? Am I going to ignite in the seat?" he asked Stacy.

When fire and brimstone didn't rain down on Bekkela's head, he warmed further to the idea of visiting the church again. Three pastors welcomed Bekkela, one talking with him as though his business was on the up and up. Another invited Bekkela to a Bible study, no questions asked. The reception gradually shattered Bekkela's earlier negative perceptions resulting from "bump-ins" with religious people.

Today, the 43-year-old Bekkela repeats the praying mother's words she offered 15 years ago when talking about his journey from the strip club into church and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as how he persuaded an Assemblies of God congregation in Fort Collins to buy A Hunt Club's building and property in the fall of 2013.

As a new believer ashamed, broken and humiliated by his past, Bekkela managed to transfer sole ownership of the strip club to his brother while remaining the legal owner of the property in 2009. Still he wanted out completely so that he could begin anew, be baptized in water and enroll in a Christian university.

Thinking the building and land suitable for a church, Bekkela approached leaders of several area churches, offering to sell them A Hunt Club's property.

"I got a lot of 'That's good' and 'We'll pray for you,'" Bekkela says. "I couldn't help [but] believe there was one out there, or a group of churches that could get it done."

In 2010, Bekkela approached, unbeknownst to him, the home church of the praying mother he'd learned about years ago. His offer remained the same: sell A Hunt Club's building and land to the church.

"It was really touching to me to see how God was so real in Aaron," says Dary Northrop, senior pastor at Timberline Church. "He was so tenderhearted, so broken by all this."

Northrop and another Timberline leader, Executive Pastor Rob Cowles, were moved by Bekkela's persistence in trying to sell the land and building to a church. When the two of them met Bekkela at the club in the first half of 2013 to discuss his aim to sell the bar, Cowles surprised himself with what he told Northrop and Bekkela.

"I want to do this, and I have to lead it," Cowles said.

That declaration stirred Northrop and the church's membership to buy the strip club in late 2013 and grant Cowles leadership of the Genesis Project church plant when it opens in mid-2014.

"The thing I see about this building is it's a place where a lot of dreams died and a place where we can see them be reborn," Cowles says.

Like the club destroyed the lives of many patrons and some dancers, Cowles believes the Genesis Project is a metaphor for new beginnings in the lives of people.

"Our mission is to create space for people to discover new beginnings in Jesus, who makes all things new. We want to

serve the most underserved, broken people, the ones who don't 'do church,'" Cowles says.

Besides a 200-seat worship center, the 7,200-square-foot building will house a coffee shop and a commercial kitchen, where professional chefs will provide meals for those who need them and train people for culinary careers.

The Genesis Project shares the DNA of another church by the same name in Ogden, Utah. Both churches seek to meet emotional, physical and spiritual needs. In Fort Collins, the Genesis Project will provide classroom space for instruction in English as a second language. A ministry area for children is also envisioned.

The Ogden church gave the Genesis Project \$5,000 to support the remodel and future operating expenses of the building, and another church in Loveland, Colo.—Resurrection Fellowship—offered \$13,600 for startup costs. The latter was one of the churches Bekkela approached about purchasing the the strip club.

"When I heard about this, I knew right away this story was bigger than one church," says Senior Pastor Jonathan Wiggins. "This is a kingdom story."

"The conversion of a strip club into a church devoted to restoring families is something every believer should celebrate," says Wiggins, who, in 2011, befriended a controversial artist much like area pastors and churches have supported Bekkela.

"We felt compelled to support this kingdom initiative and look forward to the countless testimonies that will result," Wiggins says.

Bekkela, who is an internship and a couple classes away from a master's degree in biblical counseling from Colorado Christian University, believes in the Genesis Project's mission to

restore broken lives.

“When you realize that you’ve poisoned a community, it’s hard to accept,” Bekkela says. “I know that God has paid my debt, but I still feel like I owe a debt.”

Bekkela will get a chance to repay that debt by investing in the lives of people his club destroyed when the Genesis Project opens. When Bekkela found the woman who invested in him through prayer nearly 20 years ago, he offered her his heartfelt thanks.