

Hard-Core Teens Encounter Jesus at 'The Refuge'

Some kids seem so wild and hopeless that even the Church can rarely reach them. But a 26-year-old Altoona youth pastor has found spectacular success connecting with these tough teens.

Pastor Micah Marshall goes right after the very kids who scare some churches.

"Jesus hung 'with the least of these.' They were all the ones at the bottom of the barrel," the Pennsylvania pastor told CBN News.

"So, many times, my wife and me, that's where we like to do our ministry," he said. "We love the unlovable and love to touch the untouchable, and just be around those who need Jesus."

Teen's Radical Transformation

One of those "untouchables" is Sinclair Rodgers, who gained some national notoriety after a video of her viciously beating a girl went viral.

"She ended up with a minor concussion, some teeth were missing, black eyes and a broken nose," Rodgers said of her victim.

Back then, she was a ball of rage. But that anger seeped away as she began attending Pastor Micah's Tuesday gathering called The Refuge. There she found God and His transforming power.

"Now I'm always smiling and everyone's like, 'Why are you always so happy?' And I'm like, 'I don't know. I just love Jesus,'" Rodgers said.

The old Rodgers partied hard. Now the new Rodgers prefers wild

worship.

"We have our own parties," she explained. "But it's not like SIN parties."

One reason The Refuge has become a big hit is because it centers on love and acceptance, not judgment of even hard-core cases.

"We open it up to pretty much anybody of any lifestyle," Marshall said. "We have a lot of homosexuals, a lot of crack addicts or drug addicts, a lot of kids who smoke a lot of weed, young moms. We kind of targeted kids who don't fit in anywhere else."

'Letting the Spirit Do the Rest'

The purpose isn't to approve of their wayward lifestyles or choices, but to give God plenty of room to minister.

"When I first came here, I just really prayed, 'God, what do you want me to do?'" Marshall remembered asking. "And He said, 'You go out and get them and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.'"

He rounded up members of his church to drive buses into Altoona's toughest areas and seek out the lost.

What began as a couple of dozen teens coming to his church blossomed into around 200.

"God named this place The Refuge for a reason," Marshall said. "It's so they could come here and feel safe and secure, and know that God loves them and people love them."

Teens Witness 'Miracle'

This youthful wild bunch has witnessed faith in action, like when Rj Ott – born with one side of his heart shriveled up – faced emergency surgery because of a chest infection that

could have ravaged his heart and killed him.

Everyone at The Refuge, including the non-believers, prayed over Ott for healing. Then when he went in for his surgery the next day, the doctors were amazed to find no infection.

"They went in to see if there was an infection there before they started the procedure, and nothing was there," Marshall said, grinning.

"When my doctor went in to clear everything out, he couldn't find anything," Ott stated. "Makes me believe more that all things are possible through God."

"Even the doctors said that this was a miracle that had happened," Marshall said.

While the worship may be loud and wild at The Refuge, Marshall also throws in large doses of Bible teaching. It's led to tremendous results.

Embracing Forgiveness

One example: the embracing of forgiveness. Jesse and Matt McElhinney watched as drug overdoses took both their mom and dad.

Then the day after Christmas Jesse's best friend, Sean Kyle, was goofing around with a gun and accidentally shot Jesse to death.

"I didn't check to see if it was loaded because I was just positive it was unloaded," Kyle admitted. "And I was just putting it to his head and trying to get him to wake up, and just fired and that was it."

Kyle ran down the stairs from Jesse's room to find Matt.

"He kept saying, 'I shot him. I accidentally shot Jesse. I'm so sorry,'" Matt recalled.

Already fatherless and motherless, Matt was now brotherless, too. He said if he didn't know God, this tragedy might have killed him, too.

"I'd probably have taken my own life," he said.

Kyle said he couldn't forgive himself, much less expect it from Matt.

"If the shoes were on the other feet, I don't know how I would react," he said, looking over at Matt.

Matt called those days after Jesse's death his darkest. But he finally made a crucial decision, saying "I'm going to put all my full-hearted faith into God."

That gave him the love and power to totally forgive his own brother's killer.

"Forgiveness is the absolute key," Matt said, then hugged Kyle. "And that's why I'm still best friends and best buds with this guy."

A Powerful Witness

That's the kind of witness that drew Abi Taylor. She was a depressed suicidal teen.

"There were a few times that I came within inches of ending it," she admitted.

But each time, Taylor said she heard a voice saying, "Don't do that. You're meant for so much more."

"It scared me at first," Taylor said, "because I'm like 'I'm hearing things. I must be going crazy.'"

She finally confessed to her parents what was going on. They assured her the voice was God and helped her plug into The Refuge.

There she's come to know both the Lord and much love.

"It gives me a lot of hope that it doesn't matter if I screw up because these people are never going to turn on me," Taylor said. "That even if I were to get all hopped up on drugs or whatever, they're not going to be like, 'Ooh, you're dirty. Get away.' They'll be like, 'Dude, come on: let's get you clean. Let's get you back to it.'"

With its atmosphere of open-armed acceptance, The Refuge's success suggests if you'll just let kids be who they are, they're going to end up being who God wants them to be.