

Miracles in a Tough-as-Nails San Francisco Neighborhood

Pop.

The students of San Francisco Christian Academy instantly recognize the noise.

Pop. Pop.

Academy teachers know the sounds too. Gunfire. Across the street.

Tony Bennett may have left his heart in San Francisco—as the famous song goes—but he probably didn’t leave it here in the city’s tough-as-nails Tenderloin district, otherwise known as “the Loin.”

It’s an otherwise pleasant day in the fall of 2013. As is their routine, a number of the academy’s 120 grade school children walk to recess at a nearby public playground. They know the route along Jones and Ellis Streets is dicey, but they’re accustomed to the scene: dealers selling drugs, homeless people pushing shopping carts, panhandlers asking for handouts, and drunks sleeping on broken slabs of sidewalk. This is the Tenderloin. This is home.

“Most of the kids live here,” says Marie-France Ladine, the academy’s co-founder and principal. “This is a tough place to grow up. They see and hear everything.”

Two major crimes take place every hour in this hardscrabble 50-block neighborhood that lies in the shadow of City Hall. Just a week earlier, someone shot a bullet in the night through a window at the academy’s storefront on Jones Street, the building shared with the school’s parent ministry, San Francisco City Impact.

No one was injured in either incident—not even close. “But we realized that we were vulnerable,” Ladine says. “We had to do something more to protect the children.”

What did she do? She bolstered existing safeguards, of course. But she also met with her staff and called for a time of prayer and fasting—exactly what her parents, Roger and Maite Huang, did 29 years earlier when they launched City Impact.

Only back then, it was just Roger, Maite and a bag of bologna sandwiches—50, to be exact. Three decades ago, Roger and his wife ventured into the troubled Tenderloin district of San Francisco with their bologna sandwiches and a prayer, and they haven’t looked back.

Prayerful Beginnings

Roger Huang was born in Taiwan and moved to San Francisco when he was 12 years old. His father was successful in business but violent at home, regularly beating Roger and his siblings. Roger left home at 16 when the violence became too intense and then lived on the streets of San Francisco, finding shelter in doorways and food at restaurants where he sometimes picked up work.

The Huang family was Buddhist, and Roger remembers visiting temples as a child, but he didn’t practice the faith. Rather, he was driven by a desire to succeed financially, to see the American dream come true—so much that he once held down three jobs at one time. He met and married a young French-American woman named Maite, and together they have four children, Marie-France, Philip, Michelle and Christian, three of whom work for the City Impact ministry today.

Maite and Roger came to faith while watching Jimmy Swaggart preach on television. Then they joined a small Pentecostal church in Daly City called Good News Fellowship but soon felt themselves wanting more.

That's when they heard about prayer and fasting for the first time from a visiting evangelist. It was a message that would change their lives.

"When you pray and fast, humility comes in because you have nothing there to offer to God," Roger says. "You are totally depending upon Him."

It's a lesson that would be put to the test, though, as Roger pursued God. North of San Francisco, in Mendocino County, is a former hippie commune called the Lord's Land, which a godly woman named Sabine Ball operated as a Christian retreat center. In those early days of Roger's faith, he often trekked to the center with questions in his heart.

"God was stirring my heart," he says. "I wanted to know: What was my purpose? How could I give everything to God?"

The answer came one night when Roger worked the graveyard shift as a night auditor at San Francisco's five-star Parc 55 hotel. At the end of his shift, he found his car—parked on Turk Street in the Tenderloin—had a flat tire. While waiting for a tow truck, he watched the early morning scene unfold. Drug dealers and prostitutes finishing their day. Delivery trucks depositing goods for mom-and-pop grocery stores and Vietnamese restaurants.

And on the sidewalk near him, a young boy being roughed up.

The altercation unnerved Roger, but he was tired and didn't intervene. Then, on the way home, Roger heard God speak: "What would you have done if that were your child?" God asked.

Roger said he would have done something to help.

"They are all My children," he says was God's response.

The words crushed Roger's heart. He went home and talked with Maite about the boy and the words he'd received from God, and the next morning the entire family got to work assembling

sandwiches. Roger took them with him to work, and before he started his shift, he passed them out to homeless people lining the streets of the district.

A meager beginning, for sure, but Roger kept bringing more and more sandwiches on more and more days.

Then one day, while watching a child enter a building, he realized more than homeless people and druggies inhabited the crime-splattered district—families lived there too. In fact, today 37,000 residents occupy 586 high-rises mostly called single-resident-occupancy apartments (SROs). These SROs are mostly one-room units with no kitchen—once hotel rooms—that host entire families in their small spaces with rents running \$1,500 a month or higher.

Before long, Roger and Maite were trudging to the district on Saturdays, handing out food on the streets and then picking a building and knocking on doors. Soon enough, all four of their children joined in.

“We would just offer some food or to pray for them,” Roger says. “We grew together. I don’t even want to call it ministry. It was our lifestyle.”

As the Huang family connected with more Tenderloin families, especially children, they began sensing a need for a place for all of the people they met to gather together. At first they congregated on the sidewalk for what they called Super Church, then moved to an abandoned ballroom in the formerly majestic Cadillac Hotel (where boxer Muhammad Ali had once trained). From there, they found quarters in a storefront on the corner of Eddy and Jones Streets, where three young Christian women had launched a similar ministry.

In 1993, City Impact had the opportunity to purchase the historic Musicians Union building at 230 Jones Street, one of the buildings in which they had been renting space. But there was no money for purchase in the ministry coffers.

What did Roger do? He fasted and prayed for 40 days. And God answered.

Unbeknown to Roger, for 30 years a group of Asian Christian women had been praying for God to send somebody to the Tenderloin. They invited Roger to their prayer home, which was 20 blocks up Jones Street, in the affluent Nob Hill neighborhood. When he arrived, they prayed, sang Cantonese hymns, gave him a sack full of gold coins and said, "You're the one we have been praying for."

Their gift served as the down payment on the building that houses the ministry headquarters, the academy and City Impact Church today.

More recently, when the building needed fire code upgrades and faced closing its doors, City Impact leaders prayed and fasted again—and God answered, of course, this time through a team of volunteers from Community Presbyterian Church in Danville, Calif., who offered to help. In the end, the entire Jones Street building was renovated at a value of \$8 million.

Praying for Change

In 2004, Roger went on a prayer and fasting "hunger strike" to bring attention to the problems of the Tenderloin. He sat on a chair in front of City Hall for 33 days, protesting the opening of a homosexual strip club right next to City Impact's offices on Jones Street and asking for a crackdown on drug and liquor sales in the Tenderloin.

"Roger is committed to the heart of the hurting and has stayed true to the gospel," says Michael Brodeur, who pastored churches in San Francisco for 33 years and now serves with Jesus Culture. "I know what it costs to see a ministry through in San Francisco, and City Impact is not only surviving but thriving."

Roger has prayed and fasted many times through the last three

decades, but he says he rarely hears an immediate word from God.

“It’s all faith,” he says. “It has nothing to do with emotion. When you pray, you know that He hears you. And you walk away and you know that He is going to do it.”

“When I pray and fast,” he adds, “the majority of the time it is never to ask for favors. It’s always to ask God to restore my brokenness—and then give me His will. Most of my prayer and fasting [has] always been on restoring me, not so much on what’s next, because I came from a very broken background. I had to deal with loneliness, anger, hatred, resentment, insecurity.”

Today Roger sees himself as pastor to the people of the Tenderloin—including the 8,000-plus homeless individuals who pass through its streets daily.

“Long ago I decided that I want to worship with them,” he says. “There is no way that I want to leave them behind when it comes to spiritual worship.”

And so since its founding, City Impact has done all it can to stand with the Tenderloin’s people. The ministry has opened a rescue mission, a medical clinic, a dental clinic, a thrift store, a homeless cafe, a food bank, several spiritual recovery programs, a school, a church and a small manufacturing business called TLMade that creates jobs while bringing restoration to residents.

What’s more, each City Impact program seeks to instill core values in those being served in order to take the gifts offered beyond mere donation. At the homeless café, for example, a person who wants a meal must be seated in the dining room 30 minutes before serving time. At the academy, while tuition is covered for most students, every family must pay at least \$1 to demonstrate commitment.

And then there's the Adopt-a-Building program, launched in 2011 by Roger and Maite's son, Christian, with the help of Francis Chan. Christian grew up in the ministry and at one point led its youth, but he left City Impact as a young adult to take a job selling medical equipment. He had it made: a nice house, a wife, two children with one more on the way, and two Mercedes in the driveway. But one Monday morning he received a Facebook message that changed his life.

The message was from Ana, who grew up in the Tenderloin, the daughter of Mexican immigrants. Ana had attended City Impact events and was one of their "kids." Now she needed help. As a 20-something adult, she had fallen into sketchy and dangerous hands. She had been trafficked into sexual exploitation and become addicted to Oxycontin. A pimp had held her captive and beaten her, but she had escaped and was now turning to Christian and his wife, Cori, for help.

"Ana told me that when she was captive in that hotel room in that closet, she was naked, beaten for a few days, tormented and victimized," Christian recalls.

She told him all she could remember while she was held captive was that he used to preach that Jesus would never leave her. So she prayed, "Jesus, Christian said You wouldn't leave me, and I need You."

Within days of receiving Ana's message, Christian quit his job. Weeks later he was back at City Impact full time and has since been named executive director.

Upon his return, Christian dove straight into the launch of City Impact's Adopt-a-Building program. Volunteers from 13 churches around the Bay Area come to the Tenderloin each Sunday afternoon for two hours of ministry. After a time of prayer and worship, they fan out in small groups to knock on doors and visit people. Some do canvassing work, others deliver hot meals to immigrant families and offer prayer, and

still others help with small repairs in apartments. The ministry has adopted 20 buildings—and has its sights set on many more. Christian envisions 50 churches sending teams to the Tenderloin each week, with each one adopting one or two buildings.

“It’s the church’s time to shine,” he says. “It doesn’t matter if you are Baptist or Pentecostal. The most unity I have ever seen is when we go on mission together.”

And so unity of the broader church undergirds the effort. Each spring, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church sends a team of more than 600 people to the Tenderloin to work with City Impact for two days, which usually includes hosting a street fair. They close a city block, bring in a worship team and offer free services—including haircuts, food, medical aid, foot massages and prayer.

“These are people who God loves, and we are called to serve them,” says Mark Swarner, missions pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian. “Not only do we get to bless the people, but they bless us.”

Other churches—including Reality SF in San Francisco; Bayside Church in Roseville, Calif.; The Journey in Boise, Idaho; and Salt Church of Laguna Beach, Calif.—have sent in volunteers as well.

“We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves,” says Dave Lomas, pastor of preaching and vision at Reality SF. “The homeless in San Francisco are quite literally our neighbors. They may live on the streets or in the Tenderloin’s SROs. Either way, it’s a privilege for Reality SF to partner with Adopt-a-Building to serve our neighbors.”

Through it all, prayer sustains every aspect and initiative of the work. The staff prays for the slumlords who own the rundown buildings in the Tenderloin to receive changed hearts or for new owners to come in. They pray that the sex club next

door to the ministry headquarters will close and that those owners will also have a change of heart. They pray for the safety of the children who have no place to play in the area.

“Ultimately, prayer and fasting has been the thing that is the glue to the family and the ministry,” Christian says. “On Wednesdays, it is a day dedicated to prayer. Every department stops their operations and comes in and specifically prays with my dad for their department and whatever personal needs they have.

“It is really an inefficient way to run things, if you think about it in a secular way. However, in God’s economy, it is absolutely needed.”

Miraculous Answers

When Ladine called for a time of fasting and prayer after the school’s brush with gunfire last fall, everyone joined in. Within two days of calling for the fast, she received an unsolicited email from a project manager on the San Francisco Bay Bridge extension who had heard about the school and offered help in any way he could.

Ladine told him about the need for a rooftop playground so the school’s children no longer had to walk the violent streets of the Tenderloin for their recess breaks, and he offered to spearhead the project at no cost.

To date, the ministry has raised \$75,000 of the projected \$150,000 needed for equipment. Volunteers will build it, and the children in San Francisco Christian Academy’s K-8 school will finally have a safe place to play.

Ladine says, “Sometimes when we try to do it on our own, we quickly get a roadblock that says we cannot do it on our own and we have to call out to God. He always shows up.”

Her husband, Clint, who serves as associate pastor of City

Impact Church, agrees.

"A lot of people have written off the Tenderloin," he says. "I'm here to tell you that there is hope."

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