

Will Graham Celebration Targets Youth

Jacklyn S. knows too well that life can be hard. A single mother of three young ladies—24, 20 and 15—Jacklyn's journey has been marked by grief and alcohol abuse.

After completing a degree in substance-abuse counseling and becoming a grateful believer in Jesus, she wanted to help others find the peace and joy that is found in a relationship with Christ—and avoid some of the pitfalls she encountered.

So Jacklyn volunteered to serve as a special counselor at the Red River Will Graham Celebration.

On the night of March 17, she was blessed beyond her wildest dreams. Still beaming minutes after the experience, Jacklyn described how leading an emotional 16-year old to Christ was one of the most exciting things that has ever happened to her.

"I know we are in the last days and time is short," Jacklyn shared. "There is nothing more important I could be doing right now—salvation is urgent."

Thinking of her own daughters, Jacklyn described some of the issues that youth in Gainesville, Texas—much like anywhere in the U.S.—face: "So many teens are having sex before marriage. There has been a 40 percent increase in HIV among 13- to 24-year-olds in Dallas County. Sexually transmitted diseases are common."

Local pastors say that drugs, alcoholism and marital problems are on the rise in Gainesville and gang activity has multiplied. The Spanish population has grown considerably in the last 10 years; consequently, the racial tension in the community is more noticeable.

The Celebration Youth Committee has been working on unifying church youth groups in the area for the past year. Most of the churches have small youth groups averaging in size from around five to 10 teenagers. Only a handful of churches in the Gainesville area have paid youth pastors/workers and even their youth groups only average around 30 to 40.

The need for last weekend's emphasis on reaching the youth of Gainesville, therefore, was great.

Featuring Irish musicians Rend Collective Experience, hip-hop artist Tedashii, and area favorites The Afters, Saturday's line-up perfectly complemented the gospel message shared by Will Graham.

Using the Gospel of John as his text, Graham talked about finding purpose in life: "When you don't understand your purpose, you get dissatisfied with life. 'There has to be more to life. What am I here for,' you might wonder."

Graham spoke about the many ways the world tries to offer substitutes for God's purpose. "People will tell you to try drugs or to try alcohol—to drink your misery away. They may tell you it's OK to have sex outside of marriage.

"But God has a unique purpose for your life. Before He formed you in the womb, He knew you by name. He wants to take away your pain once and for all."

Graham went on to explain how sin keeps us from God's purpose, how Jesus overcame sin and how to begin a relationship with the Son of God.

"It's not about religion," he said. "Man came up with religion. Religion tells you that if you just teach Sunday school, memorize a verse, help an old lady across the street or go to the Will Graham Celebration, you can earn your way to heaven.

"But none of these things restore our relationship with God," Graham added. "There is nothing we can do on our own to get back there, so He sent His son Jesus to die in our place. Tonight you need to repent—which means to change direction—and give control of your life over to Him."

For 23-year-old Zachary, the message made sense. "It really is about control," he said. "I wanted to run my life without God, but I made a big mess of it. I guess my pride didn't want to give up, but if someone like Will Graham or Tedashii can do it, then I can. They are cool guys and they aren't ashamed to be Christians."

"I told God tonight I was ready too."

That Saturday night, more than 1,450 heard the gospel and more than 80 made decisions to give their hearts to Christ. During a morning service geared for younger kids, 650 parents and children came out for fun, balloons and gospel truth, with almost 40 making decisions for Jesus.

Used with permission of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.