

A Sidewalk Shelter

Luis Reyes remembers running the streets at night for fear of losing his life if he returned home. Yet today God is using his journey to create a safe place for thousands of children, giving them a hope they never knew could be theirs.

Luis Reyes grew up on the streets of Waukegan, Ill., one of the roughest parts of Chicagoland, located about 40 miles north of the city.

“I ran the streets,” Reyes says. “I acted out at school, and I was in so much trouble that they parked me in front of the principal’s office in my own cube. They put me in special education all through school. It wasn’t until I got into the Army and took an assessment test that I found out that I had a normal IQ.”

At age 16, Reyes walked into an empty house and found a note on the table that said, “We’ve moved. Go live with your friends.” His bed and belongings were all that was left of his home life.

He moved in with another family, finished high school and joined the Army. After the Army, he joined Church for All Nations in Colorado Springs, Colo., where he served as children’s pastor.

Soon, though, Reyes felt a call to return to the rough streets of his childhood to minister to kids he knew were living in circumstances just like he did, running the streets in the middle of the night because they didn’t want to go home. He recalls how the trajectory of his own life changed the day someone reached out to him in his troubled teen years.

“One day this 20-year-old girl invited me to a Youth for Christ meeting,” he says. “She said there was pizza, and I was hungry so I went to the meeting. I gave my life to Christ at

that meeting, and everything changed.”

And so, in 1997, fueled by a sense of mission that wouldn’t let up, Reyes and his wife, Tricia, packed a U-Haul truck and headed back to the Chicago area, where they started the Church of Joy in Zion, Ill., just north of Waukegan, and launched a ministry called Sidewalk Sunday School.

A Fledgling Start

The Sidewalk Sunday School model was birthed by Bill Wilson, a minister in Brooklyn, N.Y., abandoned by his mother on the streets of Pinellas Park, Fla., as a child and taken in by a Christian gentleman who paid his way to attend a Christian summer camp. Those acts of kindness changed Wilson’s life, and he eventually graduated from Southeastern University in Lakeland, Fla., and pioneered one of the first bus ministries to children in the United States—a ministry that now reaches tens of thousands of children each week and has since spread to other cities across the nation.

Wilson is an essential figure in what has since become Church of Joy’s success, having served as a mentor to Reyes in one of the bleakest seasons in Reyes’ adult life.

“We came with some support from our home church,” Tricia Reyes says of their early days of planting the church. “But as the ministry to the kids grew, we discovered that the adults that joined our church at the time didn’t want these kids mixed in with their kids.”

The kids bused in for the services were usually rough around the edges, and parents from the adult congregation complained they used foul language around their children. Gang members slipped into the meetings, and fights broke out with increasing regularity during services.

“You could count on it like clockwork,” recalls associate pastor Jordan Jones. “Right when Pastor Luis would be in the

middle of his message, a brawl would break out. I'm talking about 11 guys who are 6 feet tall, punching on each other."

"We lost over 50 families," Tricia Reyes says.

With the loss of the adult congregation, funding for the church dried up. Luis and Tricia Reyes stepped in with their personal finances to fund the continued outreach to kids, but they eventually lost their home and their cars and had to move into the church basement.

The impact on Luis was severe.

"[He] went into a deep depression for six months and said he was going to commit suicide," Tricia Reyes says. "Our daughter Madison was 2 at the time. Most days, when I would get home with Maddie, I would check the house first before I unloaded her to make sure he didn't commit suicide. Luis is the type of man that when he tells you he is going to do something, he does it."

Thankfully, Luis didn't follow through with his intent. Instead, Tricia and a longtime church member named Juanita carried the ministry while he recovered from the deep depression.

"I felt like a failure," he says of that time. "I had brought my wife out here, started the church with the backing of my home church, and was overcome by darkness. I didn't see a way out."

But somehow during that trying time, Reyes found the strength to reach out to Wilson with a phone call—which came while Wilson was in the middle of a church service.

"I asked Bill, 'What should I do?' I could hear crowd noise around him, and he shouted to me in the phone, 'Don't quit!' and hung up," Reyes says.

After that, Reyes traveled with Wilson for three years, learning how to raise support for children's programs. Adults who supported the vision of reaching inner-city kids eventually joined the church—but Luis had to implement policies to protect the congregation.

"After one service, there were a bunch of guys in the game room, and I knew something was up," Jones says of the time when change in church policy was imminent. "Suddenly this guy punches this other guy and a brawl breaks out. We call the police and push the guys down and put handcuffs on them. We kicked them out, and they turned around and told Pastor Luis, 'I'm going to [expletive] kill you if I ever see you on the streets.'"

Death threats had become routine, and as the crowd was hauled off by the police, Reyes says he knew things needed to change. They needed to keep the ministry secure for the sake of the children and teenagers who wanted to be there. And so today, a visitor is thoroughly questioned by a security guard before coming into the building. The staff can spot gang colors and mannerisms and can discern whether the person wants to come into the service to fight, to scope out girls or guys, or because they're interested in God.

Rescuing Kids Like Kiki

One of the kids who came because of an interest in God was Kiki Lee, 18, who began attending the Sidewalk Sunday School ministry when she was 4 years old. By age 10, she was one of hundreds of kids who would get up and dressed on their own to wait outside in varied conditions—snow, cold, rain or sun—for a bus to pick them up to attend services.

"I was living with my grandmother at the time because my mom couldn't take care of us," she says. "During a Wednesday night service, God spoke to me that He had a plan for my life and I'm not going to be what I see outside of these walls."

That moment changed Lee's outlook on life, but at 14 years old, her mom took her from her grandmother's home to move to Sterling, Ill.

"I thought it was going to be stable, but my mom started drinking a lot and got into a lot of trouble," Lee says.

Eventually, she and her family of six siblings found themselves living out of a van, and they moved back to Zion when she turned 16. Her mother dropped her off at her godmother's place of employment—a godmother she hadn't seen in three years—and told her she'd be living with her godmother from that point forward.

While her godmother let her attend church, Lee's mother fell back into the pattern of living with abusive boyfriends—and she abused Lee as well, sometimes waiting for Lee to return from church so she could beat her. When Reyes saw the bruises, he told Lee he was going to get her out of her home. The church, her schools and her siblings called the child abuse hotline many times, but when officials followed up on the calls, the home was always clean and her mother deflected accusations of abuse.

"That's why we started a girls' home and a boys' home," Reyes says, referring to a beautiful two-story home with five bedrooms where Lee was eventually invited to stay.

"I remember opening the refrigerator, and there was food!" Lee crows, having been accustomed to living in homes with empty refrigerators.

Similarly, Demetrius Hollins was 16 when he moved into the boys' home—a home that offered him a completely different world from the one he knew.

"I went to sleep every night hearing gun shots," he says. "My brothers would push me down and hold me so I would miss the bus to go to church. I always managed to slip out of their

arms to get to church.”

Today, Lee and Hollins are young leaders in a revival that has erupted and is attracting thousands of African-American children and teenagers to Church of Joy. Lee is the drummer for the worship band and attends Bible college. Hollins also attends Bible college and is a young adult leader.

“For our kids, our services [are] the only piece of Jesus they have to hold on to during the drama at home,” Hollins says.

He should know—that “piece of Jesus” kept him from succumbing to the pressures of joining a gang while growing up, which his brothers did and are now serving time in prison.

“I would cry and would call [the church] until I got picked up,” Hollins says of those early days of attending church while living in his troubled home.

Jones affirms the importance of the church’s outreach to kids. “Most of these kids are walking past their big brothers smoking weed on the porch or mom passed out in bed from being too drunk to get to church,” he says.

“I tell my drivers that when you pick up a kid, you’re picking me up,” Reyes says. Today, the church’s fleet of 18 buses and vans pick up 500 to 600 kids in 11 cities in the tri-city area every week.

The Spirit of Elijah

At a recent Thursday night service that targets teens ages 12 to 18, Jones exhorts those in attendance to be fathers who have hearts for their children.

“Most of you don’t know where your dads are at today,” he says. “Don’t expect their hearts to be turned toward you. God’s heart is turned toward you, and He is your father. You be the father that has turned your heart toward your children.”

Jones and Reyes believe God is using them to bring the spirit of Elijah through these children.

"In Malachi 4:5-6, it says, 'Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse,'" Reyes says. "This is a sign of Jesus coming back to His church. The father is where the child receives his or her identity. If they don't have fathers, they don't have an identity."

For most of these children, Reyes is the only father they know. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, two out of three African-American families have no father. Reyes believes African-Americans are in crisis, given the widespread fatherlessness and the 1,800 abortions performed on African-American women each day.

"If there isn't a change in the current trend, the African-American man will be extinct by 2040," he says.

Reyes believes God has called him and his church to fight this trend of fatherlessness and abortion. As such, he has launched Black People Against Abortion, which leads protests in the area with a different attitude.

"We tell moms that they can raise their child," Tricia Reyes says. "Most of these moms are frightened young teenagers who want to do what's right, but they feel trapped into getting an abortion. We encourage them to be a good mom and give their child life. We will help them by connecting them with organizations that work with moms in crisis."

The organization is leading Pack the Park on Sept. 20-22, 2013, at Shiloh Park in Zion, with 1,800 African-American teenagers and young adults expected to participate. Reyes is challenging teens and young adults across the nation to join

him in bringing young people back to biblical Christianity.

“Men are being raised up who will gather children to turn their hearts toward Christ,” he says. “Children gain their identity from their father, and the biggest ministries to youth right now are led by men such as Mike Bickle of the International House of Prayer. We’re the next generation of young pastors building ministries for African-Americans that’s appealing.”

As of press time, Church of Joy is in negotiations for a multimillion-dollar building being donated to the church. Reyes sees the gift as a reward for the church’s faithfulness to give a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name to children in desperate need of such compassion—something he knows firsthand can change a life.

Leilani Haywood is a Kansas City, award-winning writer and columnist. Her work has been published in the Kansas City Star, Metro Voice and other publications.

Find out more about Luis Reyes’ Sidewalk Sunday School ministry and how it’s impacting thousands weekly at