

David Wilkerson's Amazing Challenge

✖ It has been 50 years since Pentecostal preacher David Wilkerson moved to New York City to reach violent gangs. His message has restored hundreds of thousands of lives.

Fifty years ago, David Wilkerson seemed an unlikely candidate to attack the Goliath-like monster of drug addiction. He was an obscure 26-year-old Assemblies of God preacher from rural Pennsylvania when he traveled to New York City in 1958 to share Christ with seven teens accused of murder.

At the time, he knew little about drugs, addiction or New York's gang-infested inner city. What he did know was that the Holy Spirit could destroy any stronghold, even one as insidious as drug addiction.

Today thousands overcome addiction each year through Teen Challenge, the drug-recovery program Wilkerson founded a half century ago this year. "All over the world I still hear about people getting saved through Teen Challenge," says Wilkerson, now an author and founding pastor of Times Square Church in Manhattan.

With more than 1,000 affiliated centers in 78 countries, including 227 facilities in the U.S., Teen Challenge produces a steady stream of testimonies. "Teen Challenge is a miracle a minute," says Mike Hodges, president of Teen Challenge USA in Springfield, Missouri.

He knows about miracles firsthand. He says for years he was a psychedelic drug user. "I was a freak," he says.

Hodges hit bottom one night in 1968 while living in Grass Valley, California. After swallowing a piece of chocolate laced with peyote, he raced his motorcycle home in the

darkness with no headlights on. Although he miraculously made it home in one piece, he was plagued by hallucinations later that night.

"I saw this guy with a pitchfork and felt the pitchfork in my arms," he says. "He was the devil. I cried and woke up whimpering in my wife's arms."

Several years passed, but he finally surrendered to Christ at a crusade Wilkerson sponsored. He later joined the ministry's staff and has been helping others beat drug addiction for 25 years.

Hodges isn't alone. Many Teen Challenge graduates have distinguished themselves by founding churches and ministries of their own. Wilkerson's first convert, Nicky Cruz, has preached to more than 40 million people since the early 1960s, and graduate Sonny Arguinzone leads Victory Outreach International, a global network of 600 churches and outreach ministries.

Hope for the Addicted

Despite decades of progress, drug abuse remains a critical problem in the U.S. The Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration estimates that 19.2 million people have used illicit drugs within the last 30 days. Heroin and cocaine still dominate the drug scene, but methamphetamine use and prescription drug abuse is surging. In 2004 roughly 25 percent of federal inmates were incarcerated for crimes committed to get money for drugs.

Although numerous addiction recovery and rehabilitation programs exist, Teen Challenge enjoys an enviable success rate. Studies show that 65 percent to 75 percent of those who complete the 12-month live-in program remain drug-free from six months to 15 years later. However, about 75 percent of those who enter the program drop out, usually within the first 30 days.

“Every person who enters the doors of Teen Challenge is a high risk,” says Dave Batty, chief operating officer of Global Teen Challenge based in Columbus, Georgia. But leaders say they have seen God intervene in what seemed to be impossible situations.

Serious conflicts with her father and stepmother pushed Jazmin Donati, 16, over the edge into drugs when she was 12 years old. “We hated each other,” she says. With anger, depression and rebellion ruling her life, Donati tried numbing her pain with pot, cocaine and pills.

Overdosing once on pills didn’t stop her from using, and her rebellious behavior got her kicked out of school several times. “I couldn’t have a healthy relationship with anyone and was a constant liar,” she says.

She was on probation and under house arrest for possession of cocaine when in 2006 she entered Teen Challenge in Jupiter, Florida, at the age of 13. “I didn’t want to go into the program,” she says. “I was freaking out.”

The Teen Challenge staff showed her tough love. “The staff disciplined me for my own good,” she says. “But I knew that they loved me.”

Slowly she realized that her actions bred nasty  consequences. After about 10 months, she cried out to God, “I can’t live like this anymore.” She says He flooded her life with grace and forgiveness. “I am a totally different person today,” she says. “Jesus is my Savior. He still disciplines me, but He’s my best friend.”

She has reconciled with her family and tries to share Jesus wherever she goes.

Donati once represented a typical Teen Challenge resident. Today, however, the average age of those entering Teen Challenge programs has increased from the teens to the mid-30s

as drugs have become more accessible and more commonly used by people of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

A businessman and scion of a wealthy family, Craig, 61, wasted years addicted to drugs and alcohol. After three failed marriages and several stints in rehab, he sought help at Teen Challenge. He graduated in 2006 and is now special events coordinator at the training center in Rehrersburg, Pennsylvania. "Jesus is my life today," he says. "I'm at peace now."

Harry Davis says God delivered him from a heavy heroin habit at age 63. The 82-year-old exudes joy as he encourages residents at the original Teen Challenge center in Brooklyn. He retired from the kitchen staff but still lives at the facility. "I sit with the men and women and give them a shoulder to cry on," he says.

Conchita Hays, 70, lived a luxurious lifestyle, partying and mingling with celebrities, until she received a five-year prison sentence for grand larceny. She graduated recently from Teen Challenge's Walter Hoving Home in Garrison, New York, and now volunteers as a mentor.

"You can have it all and lose it all, but I have it all again," she says. "I don't have a big bank account, but I have the love of Jesus. He walks with me from the moment I get up to when I close my eyes."

Although most Teen Challenge centers charge nominal monthly fees, no one is turned away who cannot pay. This contrasts with secular programs, which charge up to \$5,000 a week. Donations from churches and individuals provide the bulk of funding. But miracles happen too.

Last year the Walter Hoving women's home in New York received a \$700,000 donation in the morning mail for the exact amount of a much-needed loan. Vice President Beth Greco says she was awe-struck when she opened the envelope. Shouts, screams and

praises flooded the office.

Healing Broken Hearts

Batty says that in the last 20 years Teen Challenge has seen an increase in sexual and physical abuse among those entering the program, and a greater number of addicts have been abusing drugs for 20 years or more. Samuel Sierra, the new executive director of Teen Challenge in Brooklyn, can attest to that fact. He says failures hounded him growing up, and he started drinking wine at age 12 and moved on to drugs at age 14. "The more you fail the more you depend on drugs to hide the pain," he says.

After decades of conniving, lying and even stealing milk money from his children, Sierra lost his job and his marriage. "I had no friends and no work," he says.

Stoned on methadone and heroin, he staggered into the Teen Challenge in Brooklyn on July 5, 1988. He kicked his habit miraculously without having withdrawal symptoms. "In an instant I experienced the love of God and forgiveness," Sierra says. "I was made new."

God restored his relationship with his wife, and they remarried in 1990. He subsequently graduated from college, earned certification as a pastoral counselor and established an inner-city ministry in Washington, D.C. Today he's back at the Brooklyn facility, welcoming new men and women with compassion and telling them how he overcame addiction. "It is an overwhelming joy to be back in the place where I was born again," he says.

Phyllis Jones spent 27 years addicted to drugs. Carrying the shame of being molested as a child and gang raped, she stole, sold drugs and worked as a prostitute to support her habit. "I did what I had to do to survive," she says.

Jones' life has been transformed since she graduated from Teen Challenge in 1994: "I am a woman of excellence because God

gave His only Son for me that I may have a new life in Him.”

Now she is a senior counselor in the pediatrics department at the Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn and works part time as a women’s counselor at the Teen Challenge center in Brooklyn. “I look at the women as individuals out of order,” she says, “souls that need to be healed and loved by the power of the Lord.”

The Brooklyn facility has 18 female and 15 male residents. The women’s program lasts 12 to 14 months, and the men stay there four to six months before transferring to the training center in Rehrersburg for another eight months. Known as the “farm” and founded in 1962, the 300-acre training center in Rehrersburg has 220 residents ranging in age from 18 to 65. The men study the Bible and participate in group counseling as well as educational and vocational training.

Jesse Garvey, 21, graduated from the farm in December. The Philadelphia man had dropped out of high school and sold drugs to support his addiction to PCP (phencyclidine), better known as Angel Dust. “It made me crazy. I felt like Hercules,” he says. “I was the man.”

For a time he seemed to have it all—a nice car, cool clothes, girlfriends. But something was missing. “It felt like always trying to fill emptiness inside me,” he says.

Then his life crashed. His car was stolen, he was arrested for assault, and he contracted a nasty staph infection. He was deemed to be an unfit father, and police seized his 2-year-old son. “I saw the look of disappointment in his eyes,” Garvey says. “Right there I knew how much of a scumbag I was.”

Eventually he joined Teen Challenge of Western Pennsylvania, where he gave his life to Christ. “I was set free from guilt and the shame of sin,” he says. “Instead of being angry and bitter, the Lord gave me a spirit of gratefulness. Jesus is my Lord and King.”

In the 50 years since he founded Teen Challenge, Wilkerson says some things have changed, but the answer to addiction remains the same.

"Drugs change, but the problems remain the same," he says. "The need still brings people to their wits' end. It has always been a sin problem."

From Brooklyn to Bombay, Teen Challenge is seeing broken lives restored by the power of the Holy Spirit. "My greatest satisfaction is to hear from a guy three years later and meet his family," says Kennon Baker, a senior staff member at the Rehoboth training center. "It makes me cry to see him flourishing under a disciplined, godly life."

Greco agrees. "You see miracles happen every day," she says. "You know that you serve a God that speaks through His Word and helps in time of need."

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