

Extreme Faith

They call themselves 777 Skateboards. Their goal is unorthodox: to take the gospel to the thousands of teenagers who spend most of their lives on skateboard ramps.

On this sun-drenched Southern California day, thousands of barely clad beachgoers stroll along the boardwalk, taking in the scene at fabled Venice Beach, southwest of Los Angeles. Kids munch snow cones, rollerblading teens glide past endless rows of palm trees, and a 19-year-old girl from Bakersfield, California, shows off her just-pierced eyebrow.

At one end of the promenade college coeds compete in a vigorous game of volleyball. At the other end several dozen tattooed behemoths line up to lift weights at world-famous "Muscle Beach." Disneyland cannot compete with this unrehearsed sideshow.

A tourist from Iowa gawks at a couple of lesbian bikers, a street magician swallows a sword, and a horn-playing Vietnam War veteran impersonates Louis Armstrong. Vendors hawk everything from T-shirts to tarot-card readings. One posts a sign that reads: "Spiritual Rebel Community: Come Out of the Closet—You Are God."

They're all part of a Saturday walk along the beach.

A song from the metal-music group Metallica reverberates along the shoreline, and a crowd lets out a loud cheer. A 14-year-old boy has just careened down a 35-foot-high ramp and masterfully twisted through a set of tricks on his skateboard.

The teen performed three "kickflips" (flipping the board with a sharp downward kick), "achieved large air" (getting as high above the ground as possible) and "ollied" (jumping into the air with the board still on your feet) over a smaller ramp. For anyone not hip to skateboarding lingo—usually those over

age 18—these are terms for maneuvers performed atop a short piece of wood outfitted with wheels and commonly called a “skateboard.”

The mounds of dirt and daredevil ramps have been set up at Venice Beach today for the inaugural run of Core Tour, an extreme-sports event. Professionals—and any amateur who dares—can sign up to compete.

“Not today,” says 18-year-old Eric Gorgoglione. “I am not that crazy.”

Gorgoglione, though not a pro, is probably good enough to take on the Core Tour’s “Insane” ramp, and he certainly has mastered the kickflip, but he has come to Venice Beach today as part of a Christian outreach called Zoo World Ministries, also known as 777 Skateboards. Zoo Ministries has set up a booth less than 50 yards from the skateboarding spectacle.

“I am here to represent Jesus,” Gorgoglione says. “I wear the 777 T-shirt and ride a 777 skateboard. People are used to seeing skulls and demons on skateboards, so they ask what 777 means, and I can tell them it means the opposite of 666.”

Members of the Zoo—started three years ago by former amateur BMX (“bike motocross”) national champion Steve Shippy—do not stand on the sidelines waving Bibles at skateboarders or try to introduce them to Jesus merely by inviting them to church youth groups. Shippy, Gorgoglione and the rest of the Zoo team have become part of the skateboarding subculture. They not only talk about Jesus with everyone who will listen, but they also manufacture 777 brand skateboards and a Zoo Clothing line as well as sponsor skateboard riders at mainstream events.

Not all of their sponsored skateboarders are believers, but Shippy’s ministry team and core group of riders are. Sponsoring non-Christians is part of their ministry strategy, however.

“We show them that they do not have to have skulls and devils on their boards to have fun,” Shippy says. “And we are there to support them when a lot of other people would give up on them.”

Going to Extremes

Extreme sports—generally outdoor sports that involve a high degree of physical risk and include the more daring forms of in-line skating, skateboarding, snowboarding, sport cycling, motocross, surfing, skiing, street luge and others—have catapulted in popularity in recent years. USA Today reported in August that skateboarding was the second most popular participation sport in the country, behind in-line skating. Zoo Ministries is one of a growing number of Christian efforts to reach youth by using extreme sports.

Internationally, Youth With A Mission has an Australia-based skateboarding outreach and has arranged tours in North and South America. In Londonderry, in the United Kingdom, youth groups have put up ramps or hosted demonstrations.

Across the United States, churches from California—where skateboarding thrives—to Missouri to Virginia have built skate parks and opened them to the public. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes has for two summers now sponsored a sold-out skating camp at California Lutheran University. Assemblies of God pastor Ryan Delemeter of Ventura, California, hosts a biweekly Bible study attended by 200 at a community skate park.

“I want them to be godly people, to live lives of integrity, to know how to be a good friend, to keep their promises and to be honest,” Delemeter told the Los Angeles Times. “It’s just like normal church, but the skateboards.”

Last year, as a way to reach kids who were riding their boards around the church’s property, First Assembly of God in Fenton, Missouri, built its own skate park with 20 ramps and a half

pipe, modeling it after a groundbreaking skating facility, Central Church's Skate Church in Portland, Oregon.

"Everything is relational with these kids," explains senior pastor Jason Barta of First Assembly. "We did a poll asking what the kids wanted most. They wanted a skate park, so we raised \$30,000 and built one."

Called Truth Skate Park, it is open to the public, and the church charges a \$3 admission fee. While there is no overt preaching, there is ministry.

"It has given our church a very positive relationship with the community," Barta says. "It shows that we have a heart for the youth."

Twice a month, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Fairfax, Virginia, puts ramps up and turns its gymnasium into a skate park. More than 700 kids have used the facility. Youth pastor Josh Hackworth gives the skaters a short, hip sermon and offers Bibles, but most of the night is spent on the ramps.

"A lot of these kids consider this a place where they can go to be fed spiritually," Hackworth told the Washington Post.

Like the sport itself, ministry to skateboarders has mushroomed. Including 777 Skateboards, there are at least three Christian teams that tour the United States regularly. And there are at least two very visible born-again believers among the 300 professional skaters.

One is Jamie Thomas, 28, of Encinitas, California, who is widely recognized as one of the best street skaters in the world and has released three popular skating videos. He is known for his "Jesus on the Cross" maneuver in which he flies through the air with his hands stretched out to symbolize a crucifix—a move sometimes called "Christ Air" that was made famous in the 1980s by skater Christian Hosoi.

He also features crosses on skateboards sold under his name by Zero Skateboards and T-Shirts. Plans are under way for the products to be sold by Innes and distributed by Black Box, a company Thomas recently founded. Thomas attends a Calvary Chapel church in Southern California and has done demonstrations at churches.

What kind of impact does Thomas have for the gospel?

“Jamie Thomas is awesome,” says 19-year-old skater Brandy Chappell of Ventura, California. “Yes, I have his shirts, and I wear them. I know he is a Christian and what his message is. There is room for everyone in skating.”

Another who is influencing the skate culture for the gospel is Dave Wylie. Ranked third nationally last year as an amateur, he has just joined the pro tour and is sponsored by 777. He is also a member of the 777 demonstration team and has appeared in three skateboarding videos.

“Because I am one of them [a skateboarder], I don’t really have to reach out to people I don’t understand,” says Wylie, 22, a member of Calvary Chapel Capistrano Valley. “Steve uses me as a pawn to get others. He uses me to show people that you can do awesome things on a skateboard and be a Christian.”

Fellow 777 skater Gorgoglione started skateboarding when he was 10, after an initial love affair with surfing. The progression was both natural and historical, as skateboarding was invented in the 1960s by surfers who practiced their sport on land with small, wheel-mounted versions of their wave-riding boards.

Gorgoglione went to church as a youth. Sometimes he actually went inside—but usually he was there after hours riding his skateboard on the sidewalks and performing ollies on the handrails.

Gorgoglione showed up at Shippy's house one day and taught Shippy's son, Logan, how to do a kickflip. Shippy taught Gorgoglione about the love of Jesus and the need for salvation.

"The day I met Steve, I accepted Jesus Christ in my heart," Gorgoglione says. "Now I can see how kids are being tormented by riding evil boards. There are a lot of demons, fire, blood and violence in skateboarding. Satan is after the minds of the kids. We put angels on our [777] boards, and we pray over each one."

And why do kids love extreme sports?

"It feels like you are flying," says Shippy's 12-year-old daughter, Michelle, who favors snowboarding and boogieboarding. "All kids are daredevils."

Shippy attests to his daughter's fearlessness. "She did a front flip on a razor [shooter] over a 25-foot gap," he says. In July, his 8-year-old son, Logan—a skateboarder—was ranked second in the state by the California Association of Skateboarding.

Daniel Butcher, 9, of Orlando, Florida, thinks skateboarding teaches people how to reach and go beyond their limits.

"It is exciting and challenging," he says. "You can test yourself to see how well you can do, to reach your limits."

Chappell agrees. "It is a challenge," she says. "It is the rush, the element of speed. It is a positive way to vent your energy."

"When I was a teen, my whole life was racing bikes," says Shippy, now 37, but who had turned pro as a BMX racer by the time he was 14. "So I know what these kids are like and how the competition drives them. I know the rush they are looking for."

Teamed Up for Ministry

Like many individual sports, skateboarding operates with sponsors. Commercial enterprises, such as Mountain Dew, Panasonic, clothing companies and board manufacturers, sponsor professional skaters. Professionals such as Thomas, Tony Hawk and Eric Coston are identified by the brands they advertise.

Following this model, Shippy, who is based in San Clemente, California, set up 777 Skateboards in August 1998. The ministry has several dimensions, which include a core team of skaters who give demonstrations at church events and mainstream venues. Members of the core or Pro Ride Team are Wylie, Gorgoglione, Logan Shippy, Jeremy Cervantes and Andy Larochelle.

Also included is a very loose sponsorship of 50 other professionals and amateurs who wear Zoo Clothing and ride 777 boards. Shippy provides or sells equipment, attire and stickers to hundreds of skateboarding hobbyists around the world, mostly boys and girls under age 18. He gives out \$100,000 of product a year and gets about 100 requests by e-mail per week.

"I'd like to give it all away, but I can't," he says.

He does support some youth who are not quite talented enough to be competitors under the usual skateboarding criteria.

"Out of 100 kids I talk to that want to ride 777, maybe one or two warrant a sponsorship," Shippy says. "The problem is, Jesus Christ sees all 100 as superstars and wants every one of them on His team. That is the challenge."

Although he has to be selective about whom he sponsors, Shippy responds to each e-mail request and answers questions about Jesus. In three years he has prayed individually with a couple of hundred skaters who wanted to receive Christ.

"There is nothing on earth I would rather do," Shippy says. "It is an incredible feeling to know you are doing exactly what you were created and designed to do."

For Shippy, the clear goal is making contact with the subculture.

"You have to become one of them," he says. "I am, and that is why I can reach them. If my excitement about skateboarding was not real, they can smell a fake a million miles away. You have to be in their hell. Then you can reach them."

With their crosses and "777" logo, skateboards built by Shippy's company offer an alternative to the dark images found on most boards. Shippy designs and manufactures his own 777 boards, using the finest products and technology. In fact, they are coming out with a Dave Wylie board, now that he has turned professional.

Zoo clothing raises eyebrows, both those of Christians and non-Christians.

"We have a little bit of an attitude," Shippy says. "We have to if the skaters are going to believe us. But we pray over every design."

One of the eye-catching T-shirt images depicts a young man urinating on the devil. Another features a tattooed skateboarder flexing his muscles in a Popeye pose and holding a newspaper with the headline "Good News." The tattoo is a heart with an arrow through it and Jesus' name written in the center.

The Zoo slogan? "A bunch of freaks with nothing better to do than to remind you of what really matters."

Despite having limited funds—he pays for almost everything out of his own pocket—Shippy runs Zoo Ministries and 777 Skateboards full time and has a staff of three.

"This is my ministry," he says. He also owns a construction company but spends most of his time with skateboarders.

"Everything is for Jesus. I just want to get a board or a shirt in their hands," Shippy says. "The message is there. It will get them thinking."

That's what happened with Steve Thronsen, former lead singer of the rock group Cottonmouth Kings. A demonstration by 777 Skateboards had been set up outside a concert hall where Thronsen was performing. After the event, Thronsen asked if he could ride the ramps, and soon after that encounter he accepted Christ as his Savior and quit the rock band.

"It is not about T-shirts and boards," Shippy says. "It is about talking to the guy who is looking for that rush, the guy who will try anything for a thrill. It is about telling him about the peace of Jesus."

There are other stories, too. At the extreme-sports Epic Tour in Montreal, Wylie first demonstrated his tricks on a ramp, then used his board as a pulpit.

"As much attitude as I get [from other skaters] about not wearing skulls or horns, people respect you for the tricks you pull," Wylie said. "People started crying [in Montreal after he told them about Jesus]. This was not a mellow crowd. There had been fights. I was blown away by what God did."

The skateboard subculture has a hard edge to it. After the extreme events, many competitors drink or party heavily.

"Drinking is second nature to those in the sport," Wylie says. "Sure, it is tempting sometimes, but I try not to be around the people who offer temptations. I know how important it is for there to be people like [Jamie Thomas] and others who go out and make a difference."

Shippy favors outreaches in secular venues, such as one held

at Ontario Mills Mall in Ontario, California.

"We set up our ramps, get their attention, then they start asking about what 777 means," Shippy says. "We don't have to say a sermon or a big testimony, we just answer their questions, and it goes from there."

The 777 core team also does demonstrations at churches and Christian events. Tommy Tenney, evangelist and author of *The God Chasers*, saw them earlier this year.

"Some chase God from pulpits, some from pews. Steve Shippy and 777 chase God on skateboards. These guys are extreme skaters and extreme worshipers. Their very lives and actions convey that they are serious about the chase," Tenney says.

For most people today skateboarding is an extreme sport—a source for the rush, the thrill, the excitement that charge to the surface when you attempt something daring and fun. For Shippy, Delemeter, Barta, Hackworth and others it's even more. It's a higher calling, with an impact that lasts long after the rush wears off.

"There is a lot of spiritual warfare in extreme sports," Shippy says. "And it is not just attempting crazy tricks. It is the lives these kids live. They come up and talk to me at events. They come from broken homes, violent backgrounds, hopelessness—not all, but too many of them."

He adds: "Someone has to be there for these kids."

Sports Add Punch to *Extreme Days* Film

The evangelistic movie is loaded with daredevil action

In late September, moviegoers in about 90 markets got an extreme look at a new kind of movie. *Extreme Days* was produced by Christians, but for a mainstream youth audience and was released in mainstream theaters.

"We are not calling it a Christian movie, but it is wholesome entertainment with Judeo-Christian values," says Victor Vanden Oever, chief executive officer of Providence Entertainment, which produced and is distributing the movie. The idea is to get church youth groups across the country to buy blocks of tickets and make the moviegoing experience an event like a concert or the Young Messiah Tour, Vanden Oever added.

Many viewers will be attracted by the action. Packed with every extreme sport imaginable, the film includes sequences of surfing, skateboarding, BMX, motocross and rollerblading.

Extreme Days was created by video producer Eric Hannah, known to Christian booksellers for his sports and evangelism videos. He has turned his passion for extreme sports into a feature film.

"This is appealing because of the huge explosion of extreme sports in the last five to 10 years," Vanden Oever said. "Extreme sports is a backdrop for the main story. We have to produce films that are relevant to this generation."

Beyond the fast-paced action, Extreme Days does have a story line. Four friends set out to have the trip of a lifetime. Along the way, they meet a woman, portrayed by Cassidy Rae (Model's Inc.). Cassidy turns out to be a woman with morals and a flare for comedy.

"Kids will be talking about what they see," Vanden Oever declares. "It is not preachy, but it talks about abstinence, faith, forgiveness and reconciliation."

Newsboys, dc Talk and Audio Adrenaline provide the sound track.

Providence Entertainment found earlier success when it distributed Omega Code, which surprised Hollywood producers with a long box-office run. Providence teamed with the Trinity Broadcasting Network, which produced Omega Code, to pre-sell

tickets through churches and to Christians across the nation. With Extreme Days, Providence has modeled its marketing approach after the success of Omega Code.

“We need the support of the church,” Vanden Oever said. “We want this to be an event.”

Steven Lawson has never done an ollie or a kickflip, but he does enjoy riding his 6-year-old niece's scooter. A veteran journalist based in California, he recently edited Stomping Out Depression (Regal), a book for youth by Neil T. Anderson and Dave Park.

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