

How a Flower Child Found God

Joshua Hanson thought he could find the meaning of life in heroin, Buddhism and Hare Krishna. When he finally found the truth, he knew he had to take it to his hippie friends.

For 30-year-old former peace activist Joshua Hanson, saving grace is finally as simple as the familiar children's song "Jesus Loves Me." Hanson founded Jesus Loves You Ministries, an evangelizing organization that goes into places hardly anyone else reaches—not to remote Africa or Asia but into the woods right here in the United States.

Hanson and the Jesus Loves You team follow today's transients—the teens and young adults who make up 80 percent of the counterculture known as the Rainbow People.

Living much like the hippies and flower children of the 1960s, Rainbow kids sustain themselves with little or no money and possessions as they wander throughout the country. Disenfranchised from society and the church, they hitch rides and hold Rainbow gatherings in the woods, march in peace walks, follow rock 'n' roll bands, champion environmental causes, explore religions and seek to create a better world.

At the same time, they live a lifestyle of underlying hopelessness—often abusing their bodies with drugs, sex and too little food. Hanson wants to offer them the true hope found in Jesus Christ, not by bringing them out of the woods and into church but by taking Christ's love straight to them.

Hanson, his 20-year-old wife, Shallyn, their infant son, Ari (which means "Lion of God"), and others travel the United States in RVs and painted buses and live wherever the Rainbow

kids live. They operate a feeding program from their homes-on-wheels. They connect with young people through drum circles and campfire chats and, as Hanson puts it, “just by lovin’ on them.”

Hanson understands these teens and young adults better than most. For years, he was one of them. Although his mom believed in Jesus, Hanson resisted the Lord from the time he was a small child.

“I remember my mom telling me that from the time I was little, every Sunday I would kick and scream and fight because I didn’t want to go to church,” Hanson told Charisma. “I never really received Him.”

His running continued through his teens and into his 20s. His parents divorced when he was 7, and by the time Hanson reached high school in Kansas City, Kansas, he was into the drug scene. After high school, he enrolled at the University of Kansas for a couple of years but was still into drugs and partying.

In the middle of his college life, Hanson’s sister decided to go on a “Dead” tour, joining groups of fans who lived on the road by following the 1960s seminal psychedelic band The Grateful Dead. Hanson heard she was going, dropped out of school, quit his job as a United Parcel Service driver and hit the road with her.

“They were into partying, and I was really into partying, so I felt really at home there,” Hanson says.

After using drugs for so long, it was a short step for Hanson

to dealing them. He was arrested once for possessing marijuana. Even on probation, he continued to party.

"I tried everything from ecstasy to acid to crack to heroin," Hanson says. "I'd get drunk first, then try about anything anyone put in front of me."

There was a time when Hanson even thought he had AIDS. "I had done everything that put you in a high-risk category," Hanson admits. "I had shot up heroin, had lots of unprotected sex with lots of women; I even had a homosexual experience. For a long time, I was too scared to have myself tested and just kept messing around with people."

Always searching, Hanson explored many religions during his wanderings—from Hare Krishna to Buddhism to Islam to Judaism. Nothing satisfied his deep desire to find true meaning in life.

"My aunt was a shaman [medicine woman] and would do these journeys to Peru, and I'd join her for ceremonies," Hanson says. "We did iowaska, a drug that is similar to what peyote is to Native Americans. A whole group of us did that and then dyed ourselves blue. Once, we even took a bath in cow poop. It was crazy, man."

Perhaps the lowest point came a short time later when another shaman predicted that Hanson would die if he continued to drink. "He really put a curse on me, and every time I drank after that I would see demons and have demonic experiences," Hanson says.

Even with the demonic encounters Hanson found it hard to give

up the alcohol and drugs and would go through periods of abstinence followed by more binges. Miraculously, he lived through it all, loosely keeping in touch with his parents back in Kansas City, who were worried sick about him. His father, who worked at a drug-rehabilitation center, finally “pulled some strings,” Hanson says, and had him involuntarily admitted.

“I tried to run out of there, but they tackled me and brought me back in,” Hanson says. “Miraculously, I haven’t drunk or done hard drugs since then.”

Around 1994, Hanson was released from rehab—clean but still searching. He discovered a group of Rainbow kids led by a Buddhist monk. The Rainbows were participating in a peace walk across the country that began on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and went from New York to California. He joined them.

“It finished in San Francisco, and I wanted to keep walking it out, Forrest Gump-style,” Hanson says, “so I started my own group called Uniting Spirits to go on peace pilgrimages. We were all about checking out all the religions and bringing spiritual, environmental, religious and social groups together.”

He completed a peace walk from the National Rainbow Gathering in Missouri to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1996.

“It was the first time the convention had been held there since the 1968 riots, and we hooked up with protesters doing this Festival of Life event,” Hanson explains. “We tried to organize simultaneous prayer, drum circles and tribal councils

around all 50 state capitals.”

Hanson even attracted attention by helping carry a coffin across the country to deliver to the “drug czar” in Washington, D.C., to represent those who had died in the war on drugs and to push for legalizing pot. Hanson now realizes that all the time he was walking across the country, living the life of a nomad and believing he was working toward something, he was actually walking away from true fulfillment.

“I wanted to make a difference here on this planet, and I spent years and years trying to make stuff happen in my flesh,” Hanson says.

Then, as Uniting Spirits were traveling to a National Rainbow Gathering in Oregon, the group stopped in Kansas City, and Hanson’s life was changed.

“We ran into some Christians who were out feeding the homeless,” Hanson says. “We stopped to get something to eat and talk to them, and this lady named Hazel told us about how she had gotten saved in the Jesus Movement.

“Well, we all had head lice, and Hazel took us all back to her home and debugged us, washed all our clothes and helped us get clean. She really loved on us.”

That was the beginning of Hanson’s experience with true love and peace. His group continued on to the National Rainbow Gathering, but afterward, Hanson was drawn back to Kansas City. Ironically, the school bus transporting Hanson’s group crashed into the side of the training center of Metro Christian Fellowship in Kansas City, Missouri—Hazel’s

church—and Hanson stuck around a while.

“The Lord actually laid me out on the ground kinda like in Paul’s Damascus Road experience, and the scales came off my eyes,” Hanson says of his conversion. “I had a revelation of the Lord that He was what I was looking for the whole time. I didn’t find it in activism; I didn’t find it in religion.

“I was really deceived, but I didn’t know I was deceived. The revelation was that I had been misleading other people. After that, I realized that it was Jesus and only Jesus.” From that moment on, Hanson felt as if God was calling him back to the woods, back to the marches and the Rainbow gatherings to share what Jesus had done for him.

Hanson was discipled and trained for a short time in Kansas City, then became part of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship in St. Louis in between his times on the road ministering.

In 2001, he founded the nonprofit Jesus Loves You Ministries to fulfill his vision of sharing the love of Jesus with nomadic kids looking for peace. Since then, Jesus Loves You Ministries has become a mobile community, growing from one little Toyota van to 25 to 30 people committed to driving around the country in six or seven buses and RVs. “We have a free kitchen, and we play music at the gatherings and just worship Jesus,” Hanson says. “We go out to the streets, hang out in coffee shops, and we play our drums.”

The group consists of singles, families with young children and mentors who aim to give wandering youth a glimpse of healthy love. “We spend months of the year in the woods, just to love on these kids and be their friends.”

Hanson met his wife, Shallyn, at a Morningstar conference in Jacksonville, Florida, and then at an event in Asheville, North Carolina. Shortly after graduating from high school, Shallyn felt called to go out on the road with Jesus Loves You.

“I didn’t say anything to her [about a relationship] for about eight months, and then I asked her parents’ permission to court her,” Hanson says.

Shallyn was 19 and had kept herself pure for the husband God had for her, Hanson says. With her parents’ blessing, the couple married in March 2002. Ari was born one year later.

“That God would give her to me is such an incredible gift,” Hanson says. “Going all the way through high school as a virgin is an awesome testimony and definitely the better way to go.”

Today, the Hansons and the Jesus Loves You team go wherever the Lord leads them. They go to Bike Week in Florida, Reggae on the River in California, the Bonnaroo Music Festival in Tennessee. They also visit large rock ‘n’ roll concerts and Rainbow events.

They have received a welcome (and a place to park their buses) from Southern Baptists to what Hanson lovingly labels “charismaniacs.” The average age of his team members is around 23, but there are families and a mentor couple in their 50s (see related article on page 66).

“It is so awesome watching people’s lives—right in front of our eyes—being transformed,” Hanson says. “When they come into

a relationship with Jesus, it is like night and day. We see those who have given their lives to the Lord get radically transformed.”

Now, Hanson hopes to find some land for the ministry to call home base, where kids who have just found Jesus through Jesus Loves You can rest, train and grow in the Lord before heading again to the front lines. “Sometimes we need a season to grow and fall in love with Jesus,” Hanson says.

In the meantime, Hanson and his group keep attending and organizing events, witnessing to the teens, Vietnam veterans, grandparents and young children who make up the Rainbow family.

“They are all really searching and seeking; most of them are really spiritual people, really wanting to know the truth,” Hanson says. “And they are surviving on the waste of America, eating out of Dumpsters. They have backpacks and hitchhike and can get around on next to nothing.”

Hanson says the hardest part of ministry is watching those who find the truth return to the same addictions. “It is only by the grace of God that I was able to give up the drugs, sex and alcohol,” Hanson says. “Sometimes we do see people go back again and again. When they do, we just try to pour into them.”

As for Hanson, he is quick to say that Jesus Loves You is absolutely not about Joshua Hanson, but about Jesus Christ and about the team that has come together to honor Christ and take His name to some outlandish places.

“What we are seeing is the Lord breaking down the generation

gap, raising up a nameless, faceless generation that is going to turn this world upside down,” Hanson says. “The brothers and sisters here all have different gifts. We’re like the ‘Dream Team’ doing guerrilla warfare. And I’ll tell you, taking a bath in the blood of Jesus is a whole lot better than a cow-poop bath.”

Father to the Fatherless

Alan Nord, a Vietnam vet, sold all his possessions to become a pastor to today’s transient youth.

As a fairly new believer with a passion for Jesus but without years of grounding in the Scripture, Joshua Hanson asked the Lord for a spiritual father to join Jesus Loves You. Alan Nord of New Smyrna Beach, Florida, had no idea it would be him.

“God had given us the theme of joining the hearts of the father to their sons and daughters and the hearts of the children to their father,” Hanson says. “So we wanted an older father in the faith to come along and help us out.”

Nord, a retired pastor, was looking for a new calling from God when he went into the Ocala National Forest with a friend for a time of prayer. The friends literally ran into the Rainbow gathering and Hanson’s Jesus Loves You bus.

“I was a Vietnam vet who came back a heroin addict and then gave my life to Jesus in the 1970s as part of the Jesus Movement,” Nord says. “I had vowed because of Vietnam never to

go back into the woods. But after my last tenure at a church ended, a friend and I felt we should go into the woods to fast and pray. When I got there, there was that bus.”

Nord thought he and his Christian brother were going to be alone with the Lord in the woods. Instead, the forest was teeming with Rainbow kids.

“That evening, we joined Joshua’s campfire,” Nord says. “I spent the next two months there.”

Nord went to Bible school in Detroit in the mid-1970s, planted churches in New York and the Washington, D.C., area and pastored a variety of churches in several states. After his two months in the woods, he believed it was time to ask his wife, Tina, if she agreed that it was time for them to hit the road with Hanson.

The Nords gave away their possessions and moved onto the bus in 2000. The couple now live in a small motor home and travel full time with the ministry.

“I believe we have many teachers but not many fathers,” Nord says. “There is such a shortage in the land of natural fathers today, and there is a direct correlation in the spiritual. If you have never known your father or known the love of a father, how can you relate to God as your father?”

Nord and his wife were able to be father and mother not only to the wandering Rainbows but also to the young people in Hanson’s ministry. They did so while living out their marriage and walk with Christ in the cramped quarters of a school bus.

“For the first couple of years we lived right there on the bus,” Nord says. “You can’t hide anything when you are living on a school bus with 10 people.”

Nord knows the ministry is making a difference because of the changed lives he sees.

“One time in Ocala, a girl came into our camp and was dancing around to the music,” Nord says. “She had hitched her way down from Canada and had been involved in Wicca and had bisexual relationships. Lorelei came back the second day to dance again and helped us cook. She shared with us that she hated Christians because they were so narrow-minded. By the third day, she broke down in the middle of our worship time and said Jesus revealed Himself to her.”

Today, Lorelei is married to another member of Jesus Loves You and the couple have a daughter, Shekinah. The family travels with the ministry when they can.

“I know it makes a difference,” Nord says. “I’ve seen kids in the woods with spiked collars on that look mean as a snake, and I can actually hug them. I’ve had them literally start bawling on my shoulder because a father figure would love them unconditionally, with the way they look and everything else.”

Natalie Nichols Gillespie is a freelance writer who lives with her husband and blended family of six children in Weeki Wachee, Florida.

For more information on Jesus Loves You Ministries, e-mail the group at jesusloves@mail or call (800) 557-4585.