

The Real Hero of the Jersey Shore

Evangelist Scott Hinkle and his wife, Nancy, have sold everything to reach one of the most unchurched regions of the United States.

I'm not a fan of *Jersey Shore*, the MTV reality show that features Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi and a band of 20-somethings who share a house near Seaside Heights, N.J. The program glamorizes casual sex, celebrates alcohol abuse and degrades an entire ethnic community by using the racial epithets "Guido" and "Guidette" to describe Italian-American guys and girls.

But one thing is for sure: *Jersey Shore* accurately portrays the gritty urban region south of New York City. It is one of the most unchurched areas of the country, and it's also known as the heroin capital of the United States.

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And that is why Scott Hinkle, a charismatic evangelist who grew up near the Jersey shore, recently returned

there with his wife, Nancy. They have planted a church right in the middle of this American Babylon.

“There is absolutely no trace evidence that Christianity has ever been here,” says Hinkle, 59. Last year he and Nancy planted Jersey Life Church in the community of Red Bank, about 30 miles south of the Newark airport. The congregation, which has about 35 members, just celebrated its one-year anniversary.

“We’re having the time of our lives,” Scott told me on Sunday when we met for dinner on nearby Staten Island. “We’re on a mission to penetrate this culture and reach the people for Jesus.”

A lot of guys Hinkle’s age are looking for a way to coast toward retirement. But Hinkle isn’t wired to slow down. Even though he cut his teeth on street ministry—and he still leads an aggressive Christian outreach every year during Mardi Gras in New Orleans—this is probably the most ambitious project he’s ever undertaken.

“If we were doing this in another part of the country, we would already have a lot more people,” Hinkle says—noting that 25 different hotels and schools have rejected his request to rent a building. (For now the church meets in a charter school.) He believes year one has been an important season of breaking ground.

“I believe we are building a strong,

vibrant church that will reach out to the greater Jersey Shore area," he says with contagious optimism. "We are going to make a big difference as we serve the practical and spiritual needs of this community."

Hinkle grew up in a middle-class Jewish family in central New Jersey, mostly in Asbury Park—the town where Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi began their musical careers. This is where Hinkle went through a period that he calls his "adolescent insanity." In the late 1960s he spent most of his time cruising the Asbury Park beach, going to parties and trying to get enough money to buy drugs. He became a heroin addict, but all that changed in 1970 when he met Jesus Christ.

He immediately began traveling with two evangelists, giving his testimony and training others to share their faith. He and Nancy struck out on their own in ministry in 1981, and they have emerged as one of the few charismatic ministries to focus on evangelism. (Hinkle wrote a column about evangelism in *Charisma* in the 1990s.)

Today, Hinkle is putting everything he's ever learned about outreach into practice on the streets of central Jersey: His church members go door to door asking for prayer requests; they give out bottles of water to thirsty people on the boardwalk; they help with a soup kitchen; and each week a local baker gives the church hundreds of free bagels

to distribute to the needy.

In this part of the country, popular “church growth” principles often don’t apply because few people have Christian backgrounds. The Hinkles are starting from scratch.

Scott Hinkle is a hero in my book—not just because he’s brave enough to plant a church in what some people might call a spiritual wasteland, but also because he forfeited the chance to become a charismatic celebrity. He and Nancy could be on the lecture circuit at this point, but they sold their ranch home in Phoenix last year and now live in a 2-bedroom apartment in one of the priciest parts of the country.

And Hinkle has no regrets. Besides the fact that New Jersey “has the best thin-crust pizza in the world,” he says this is where God has called him to make a difference. I pray his obedience will inspire all of us to reevaluate our priorities.

J. Lee Grady is contributing editor of *Charisma*. You can follow him on Twitter at leegrady. To read a column about evangelism by Scott Hinkle, [click here](#). To find out more about his ministry go to .