

When God Came to the Barrio

Freddie García once was a heroin addict living for nothing more than his next fix. Today he and his wife, Ninfa, oversee a ministry that rescues people from the grip of drug addiction.

By 11:10 a.m., Victory Temple's second Sunday service is packed. Male and female ushers—dressed in black pants, red polo shirts and red berets—help latecomers find their seats. Most of them are escorted to overflow areas and even onto the church platform. It's a full house, but nobody is turned away.

Located in San Antonio's Hispanic west side, Victory Temple draws about 800 people for its three Sunday services. At least half are former drug addicts, and the majority are Mexican-Americans.

Co-pastor Johnny Zamarripa and a team of musicians lead the congregation in exuberant worship that can be heard down the street. People sway and clap to the music. In between songs, a couple of former addicts share dramatic testimonies about how God saved and delivered them from drug addiction.

Though pastor Freddie García has already preached at the 9 a.m. Spanish service, he's ready to go again. The 62-year-old minister uses Acts 17 as his text. He speaks in a normal tone of voice, needing no theatrics to command attention.

García's gospel message is simple and to the point: "I don't have a Ph.D., an . or a B.S.," he declares with a slight accent. "I've got a born-again experience."

Victory Temple's sheep listen intently to their shepherd, whom the Lord delivered from drugs 30 years ago. Many of them say that if it hadn't been for García's love and self-sacrifice, they might not be sitting in the church's wooden pews or metal chairs today. In fact, they may not even be alive.

A Crippling Addiction

In the early 1960s, García was much like the people he works with today: All he cared about was his next fix. A heroin addict, he had gone through several federal- and state-funded programs, but the best psychologists in the country couldn't help him kick his drug habit.

After moving to Los Angeles in 1965, he caught up with an old friend, who gave him a card that read, "If you're hooked and need help, call Teen Challenge." Determined that this would be the last program he would try, García checked into Teen Challenge.

By the third week, God had softened his heart, and he went forward for salvation at the close of a chapel service. At the altar, he realized he didn't even know how to pray. He simply raised his hands and cried: "Give me a break, Lord! I'm tired of using all the drugs. Please forgive me of my sins and give me a break!"

After 16 years of drug addiction, García's desire to do drugs was supernaturally taken away. He called Ninfa, his live-in girlfriend and mother of their two children, and explained what had happened. He told her that if she wanted to live for Jesus, too, he would marry her.

At a moving service held at Christ Memorial Church of God in Christ, pastored by Benjamin Crouch Sr., the father of gospel legend Andraé Crouch, Ninfa went forward for salvation. Immediately after the service, Crouch Sr. performed the Garcías' wedding ceremony. His now-famous son played the "Wedding March."

Within a few months, Freddie García enrolled at the Latin American Bible Institute in La Puente, California, where he graduated in June 1970. Three days after graduation, he and Ninfa moved back to San Antonio, their former stomping ground.

García visited the local Teen Challenge and indicated that he wanted to become involved with their program. After getting a flat no, he called Teen Challenge founder David Wilkerson and said, "David, I've gotten a calling from God, and I believe I am supposed to start my own program." Wilkerson encouraged him to heed the call.

By faith, the Garcías opened their tiny home to the hard-core addicts they witnessed to in San Antonio. Before long, the house was full—men were sleeping wherever they could find a spot.

In desperate need of more space, García found a two-bedroom home to rent, with the option to buy. The home, which at one time had been a heroin distribution center, was on two acres. The Garcías fixed it up and called it Victory Home, and within a month, 35 men were part of the Christian-rehab program.

Despite extremely tight quarters, the Garcías never turned anyone away. That philosophy still applies today. "If we have no more beds, we'll tell them, but we will never reject

anybody,” Freddie says. “If Teen Challenge had said no to me, I would not be here today.”

The Garcías built Victory Home on four main ingredients: discipline, supervision, authority and love. As the home expanded, Freddie says he felt led to start a church, not only for those going through the program, but also for those who had graduated. God helped them find a building that, ironically, was once a bar, and they named it Victory Temple. It was a place where a hard-core drug addict could go and be accepted unconditionally.

After experiencing a transformation in their lives, several former addicts who had successfully completed the Garcías’ program went to Bible school. As soon as they finished, they launched Victory Homes in other Texas cities, with García’s stamp of approval.

But as new men came into the program and later wanted to go into ministry, García realized that financing their education was a problem. He also believed that God wanted him to follow Jesus’ example: to disciple men for ministry by showing them how to pray, fast, teach, counsel, witness and preach.

“Jesus commanded us to make disciples who will go out and reproduce disciples, who in turn will reproduce disciples and so on,” he says.

Román Herrera, who has served as home director of San Antonio’s Victory Home for eight years, says some people think García has a “unique ministry” by working one-on-one with former addicts. But Herrera believes García is just following Scripture. “He has set a pattern for us,” he says.

People outside the ministry also respect the Garcías' faithfulness to God's work. "Freddie and Ninfa are two of the greatest miracles I've witnessed over the years," Wilkerson told Charisma. "Through much suffering, Freddie has maintained a rich anointing of the Holy Spirit on his life."

Setting Captives Free

Today the Garcías' ministry as a whole is referred to as Victory Fellowship, and it encompasses numerous outreaches both in the United States and overseas. More than 13,500 lives have been restored through the ministry—and countless others have been touched through a "multiplier effect." Victory Fellowship now has branches in more than 30 locations, including every major city in Texas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Denver; Fresno, California; and in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina and Colombia.

Victory Home has been a catalyst to the organization's growth. García is proud of the ministry's success rate: He reports that at least 60 percent of the people who go through the program kick the habit. Those who stay longer than three months do even better.

"Anything over 10 percent, and you're doing better than the government," García says. "The federal government's programs are failing. If they worked, I'd probably do it the same way."

Though the ministry could desperately use federal grants, García says the only way he will accept government funds is if he can use his Bible-based approach. Victory Fellowship believes addicts aren't fully cured until they have the God-given power to beat all life-controlling habits. Thus, the

program focuses on a complete transformation of the mind.

“The tenacity of Freddie’s heart to rescue the perishing in the name of Jesus and then, with the Spirit’s help, to build into them a new way of thinking and ‘doing life’ has both blessed the church and astounded the critics,” says David Walker, pastor of Alamo City Christian Fellowship in San Antonio.

García believes the key to Victory Fellowship’s success in reaching the down-and-out is, quite simply, the Word of God. “When you are in school, they teach you how to make a living. The Bible teaches you how to live,” he says.

The new way of life drug addicts learn when they enter one of the ministry’s residential-rehab programs is very different from what they might have known before. At Victory Home, it’s “Jesus in the morning, Jesus at noon and Jesus at night.” The primary thrusts of the program addicts walk through as they seek freedom from drug abuse are twofold.

First, when an addict comes in for treatment, the home director explains the rules and regulations. If the person agrees to follow those rules, he is given a bed, and detoxification begins. (Some cities also have programs for women.)

A couple of caregivers who have already “kicked” the habit are assigned to the addict. They pray for him, give him rubdowns to make him more comfortable and even clean up after him if he gets sick. The detox time varies—usually anywhere from one to seven days, depending on the type of addiction.

“When the addicts come in the home,” says Ninfa, “they are weary and just want a place to rest. They understand it’s a Christian environment and that they will participate in the Bible studies—but they really don’t yet know what that means.”

The next step involves a full schedule of Bible studies, chapel services, discipleship and book reports. There’s no watching television and very little free time. Three times a day, the residents spend an hour in prayer. In short, it’s a spiritual “boot camp” in which they learn to put their complete trust in God.

The ministry’s rehab homes can’t easily be missed. Each home displays an “Outcry in the Barrio” sign, which is the title of Freddie and Ninfa’s book published in 1987. The book relates their testimonies and is given to anyone requesting a copy. Published in Spanish, English and Russian, Outcry in the Barrio has served as an effective witnessing tool.

The Victory Home located in San Antonio’s west side is the program’s largest, and it is in desperate need of an overhaul. Currently, there are enough beds for 48 men and 11 women. Neither area is climate controlled, which makes it miserable in the summer and winter. García hopes to build two dorms that each will hold 50 people.

He also wants to build a youth home for the younger crowd, those age 13 to 25. The Garcías’ 25-year-old son, Jubal, figured out that if they provided homeschooling for the youth, the program for teens could enjoy state approval. The participants would attend Bible studies in the mornings and do their classwork in the afternoons.

Alma Herrera oversees the Victory Home kitchen. She and several volunteers serve some 90,000 meals a year, and it's nothing for them to make 300 to 400 tortillas at a time. "We have a Bible in one hand and hot food in the other," says her husband, Román.

The program doesn't cost anything to be part of, so Victory Fellowship relies on donations—groceries from local stores, clothing and money from individuals or churches. Each branch of Victory Fellowship operates as a separate nonprofit organization and is responsible for its own fund raising. When a Victory Fellowship is launched in a new location, Freddie García commits to supporting the work for one year.

The leaders and staff at Victory Fellowship earn meager wages. In fact, no one at San Antonio's Victory Fellowship makes more than \$500 a month—not even García. It is truly a faith-based ministry, and the staff relies on God to supply their needs, one day at a time.

Like the Garcías, the Herreras don't have a normal life—but they love what they do. "We never thought we would be positive role models for others," says Román, a former heroin addict. As home directors, the Herreras live with their children in the Victory Home and make themselves available all hours of the day and night for the residents.

In addition to new biblical concepts, many residents learn household responsibilities for the first time. "You'd be surprised how many people come here not knowing how to use a vacuum cleaner," Alma says.

Anthony García is just one example of a lost soul who found

his way through the ministry of Victory Home. García, who served nine years in prison, has been at San Antonio's Victory Home for several months. He says he had a 30-year heroin addiction, and now that Christ has changed his life, he doesn't ever remember feeling so good. He is finally able to think about the future God has in store for him.

Against the Odds

According to Robert Woodson, founder and president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise in Washington, D.C., Victory Fellowship is one of the most effective drug and alcohol treatment programs in the United States.

In 1990, Woodson was combing the country for special people. Freddie García was recommended as a nominee for the Achievement Against the Odds Award—and he won. The Garcías were invited to Washington, D.C., and were honored by former President Bush in the Rose Garden.

As he was waiting to receive the award, García thought, If my mama and dad could see me now. Until he accepted Christ, García explains, he wouldn't salute the American flag. "As a young boy, I got spanked in school for speaking Spanish," he says. "I didn't think that was fair because it was the only language I knew."

He rebelled against the system and developed racist attitudes at a young age. But when he accepted Christ, García began welcoming all races into his home.

Today, García's health is failing. Three years ago he was diagnosed with kidney disease and given a life expectancy of

five years. Three days a week he endures difficult dialysis treatments.

“My kidney problem has slowed me down, but it hasn’t stopped me,” he says. The García home constantly buzzes with activity, and Freddie always makes time for those who need his input.

García spends the bulk of his day mentoring men. He is also planning for the ministry’s future by training Jubal, his youngest son, to take over the reins.

“We never wanted to push anything on our kids,” Ninfa says. “But when Freddie got sick, Jubal took over his dad’s class—and before he knew it, he was hooked!”

While García is the visionary for Victory Fellowship, he is quick to point out that the program isn’t his, or about him.

“To see our ‘sons’ come back during our pastors’ conferences and preach is a blessing,” he says. “I’m proud to see that they’ve gone on for the Lord—and I know that if something happens to me, the ministry is in good hands.” *

Kicking the Habit in Fort Worth

Women in Fort Worth, Texas, seeking deliverance from a drug or alcohol addiction now have a beautiful place to call home. In September 2000, the Fort Worth ministry of Victory Fellowship opened a \$350,000 women’s home provided by History Maker Homes and other donors. Serving as home director is Ana Salomón, whose husband, Gerald, oversees the men’s home just a couple of blocks away.

"I was on crack cocaine for 14 years," says Lynn Stafford, who has been in the program since Dec. 18. Stafford went to Victory Home after serving a 40-day jail sentence. She says God has delivered her from addictions to cigarettes, alcohol and crack. Stafford challenged herself to stay in the program for one year, but she says she will remain as long as God wants her there.

Also in the program is Mary Ann Castillo, who is unable to hear or speak. At first, Anna Salomón wondered how she would ever teach Castillo. Thankfully, another woman in the program knew how to sign and was a true godsend. Today, Castillo is a new creation, inside and out. She has even lost more than 100 pounds since coming into the program less than a year ago.

Castillo's previous lifestyle involved prostitution to support her habits—cocaine, marijuana and alcohol. None of her eight children are permitted to live with her, but she is hopeful she will get to see them soon.

Just a block away, the Fort Worth men's home is dilapidated but full of life. Assistant home director Anthony D. Anderson came into the program in 1984. A self-described "crackhead," he stayed in the program for 15 months.

"The program is difficult at first because it's so intensive," Anderson says. "But it has to be because a drug addict's mind is always moving. Until God transforms his mind, he isn't able to sit still."

Anderson has been trained by Freddie García at the ministry's leadership academy. He's now waiting to be launched into

ministry. “Freddie is a man after God’s own heart,” Anderson says. “When I got to San Antonio, he took me under his wing and accepted me for who I was and began to impart in me the Word of God.”

Victory Home resident Jeremy Blevins has experienced love and acceptance from the Fort Worth “home boys,” which is what the residents are called. For seven years, he was addicted to drugs—primarily methamphetamines, a chemically produced drug that creates a sense of paranoia. His mom found out about the Fort Worth Victory Home and dropped him off at the front door.

“Getting out of the car was the best decision I made,” Blevins told Charisma. He wants to help others by telling them about Jesus and what He can do in their lives. “If He can change me, He can change anybody,” Blevins adds.

Victory Home takes in people from all walks of life. Drug problems are as real for the rich and famous—such as actor Robert Downey they are for poor kids living in the drug-infested areas of Fort Worth—such as Anthony D. Anderson.

“When crack came out, it was an urban problem,” Anderson says. “Now it’s America’s problem.”

According to Anderson, every drug addict he knows wants to change—they just don’t know how. As the men and women of Victory Home go into the streets of Fort Worth to share their testimonies, they are giving others a reason to believe that change is possible.

Stamping Out Drugs in Dallas

Though on a smaller scale than Freddie García's program in San Antonio, the ministry at Victory Fellowship in Dallas relies on exactly the same methods to help people find freedom from drug addiction.

"If you go to a McDonald's in Washington, D.C., you can expect to order from the same menu you would find in New York City," says María Gomez, who serves as home director with her husband, Roy. "The same is true of Victory Fellowship. Every city you go to, you'll see the same pattern."

On Tuesday evenings, about 50 people meet at Victory Temple for Bible study. Half are "home boys" (the name Victory Fellowship uses for its residents), and the other half live in the neighborhood.

With fervor, the group begins with praise and worship. The words they sing represent their new faith in Christ: "I've made my decision; I'm going all the way / I've drawn the line, I'm going all the way / No turning back, I'm going all the way with the Lord."

After a thorough Bible study, the members gather at the Victory Home, located just a couple blocks away in a low-income area of east Dallas. A woman points out that their next-door neighbor runs a crack house. Three children who live there take part regularly in Victory Temple's outreaches and even walk over to Victory Home to get food.

Each room in the tiny Victory Home is packed with people. Somehow, about 15 men are able to eat, sleep and receive an abundance of spiritual training here. Providing guidance is Roy Gomez, who was saved in 1983 at Victory Fellowship in

Houston. His wife, María, also found Christ when she ran away from Roy and checked into García's Victory Home in San Antonio.

"We were once in the same condition as these guys," Roy recalls. "We didn't have [any] place to go. I am thankful for Freddie and his father's heart."

In the past, Roy's drug of choice was speed, and it led to an 11-year addiction. At one point, both he and María had good-paying jobs—but lost everything due to their drug habits. Roy was physically violent, and his children would run and hide under the bed when he came home. Before she sneaked off with the kids to San Antonio, María tried three times to commit suicide.

After he went through the program in Houston, Roy met up with María in San Antonio. He was trained by Freddie García for two years, and God restored his relationship with María.

"When we were in training, it was difficult," María says. "Roy was paid \$15 every two weeks. But somehow, through God's grace, we always had enough."

After two years of training, Roy was placed as director of the Victory Home in south San Antonio. Within six months, 65 addicts had checked into the home.

At García's request, the Gomez family moved to Dallas in 1988. Today, Roy and María are proud to have earned the titles of "Pop" and "Mom." Even their three daughters have become accustomed to a full house.

Sometimes, men aren't ready to commit to the program and leave early. "It's a disappointment because there is a chance of them getting killed or dying of a drug overdose. Even my children cry if the guys leave," Roy says. "It becomes like a family."

Roy and María hold the Garcías in high esteem. "I respect and honor Freddie," Roy told Charisma. "He has prepared over 65 people for leadership, and we were all once at the end of our ropes—deadbeats and drug addicts. He loves Jesus and loves to have a good time in the Lord."

María praises Ninfa for her willingness to listen and provide wise counsel. Instead of offering her own advice, she turns to Scripture for answers to life's problems.

At Victory Fellowship in Dallas, finances are tight. Fortunately, however, a new home is being built that will enable the ministry to expand and will give the Gomez family some breathing room. "I walk by faith," says Roy, "and God always makes a way." *

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