

A pathway to hope for homeless teens

Tom Gallagher | Nov. 23, 2010



Crushing poverty, acute family dysfunction and fear are reasons teenagers leave home for a life on the streets. Some 2 million U.S. teens a year experience a period of homelessness. This often leads to drug abuse and addiction, prostitution, and even death. The streets are no place to call home.

Where can homeless teens find safety, food, warmth and love? Where can kids in crisis find a pathway to hope, health and education?

Since 1972, New York City-based Covenant House has gone out into major cities across the U.S., Canada and Central America, and offers teens the opportunity to get off the streets. Covenant House welcomes all kids into their centers at any hour of the day, without reservations.

According to Kevin Ryan, the organization's president and CEO, Covenant House is steeped in the scriptural meaning of being a "covenant community" to homeless youth.

Ryan, a graduate of The Catholic University of America, Georgetown University's Law Center and New York University Law School, knows a little something about kids. He and his wife, Clare, have six children. He's also no stranger to Covenant House. During law school, he volunteered at the Covenant House in Washington.

Founded by Franciscan Fr. Bruce Ritter, today's Covenant House bylaws reserve a seat on its board of directors for a member of the Conventual Franciscan Friars. Moreover, the bylaws require that the directors "shall at all times have due regard for the Roman Catholic origins of Covenant House and the Roman Catholic traditions and philosophy that have guided the administration of Covenant House."

Today, its 22 locations offer a wide range of services for homeless youth seeking a new way forward, including medical care, educational and vocational programs, drug abuse treatment and prevention programs, legal aid services, recreation programs, mother/child programs, transitional living programs, life-skills training, and street outreach.

Covenant House's residential and community service center programs care for 29,922 homeless kids, while street outreach teams serve an additional 40,453 homeless and at-risk youth on the streets.

"All I was looking for was a bed. But I found a haven," said teenager Mark. "Covenant House is different than other shelters. It's like a home. There are lots of 'parents' here who love working here and help you fit in. This place is for us."

Another teen, Aren, agrees. "I was surprised at how supportive people are here. I had stayed at other shelters before. They'd give you a bed and something to eat, but nobody ever cared about me as a person. It's different here. People here really care about you."

Teens are seeking God and meaning in their lives, says Franciscan Fr. Placid Stroik, director of pastoral ministry for Covenant House in New York City. A member of the Franciscans' Assumption Province in Franklin, Wis., Stroik has worked with homeless young people for over 20 years.

"The pastoral message for teens is this: God loves you," said Stroik. "We try to enable young people to reconnect with their faith through Bible study, prayer, spiritual direction and individual counseling."

He often presents text from Romans Chapter 8, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" as a framework for young people to reflect upon. The youth, he said, often cite John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son," and Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd," as their favorite verses.

Any organization that works with vulnerable teens requires clear and comprehensive policies and procedures on how to interact with young people. In 1990, founder Ritter resigned under pressure following allegations of sexual misconduct with teenagers and financial improprieties. Ritter, who died in 1999 at the age of 72, denied the allegations and no charges were filed.

Today, the organization has in place a rigorous code of conduct, and subjects all employees and volunteers to a thorough background check and ongoing training.

Ninety-nine percent of Covenant House funding comes from private donors, not the government. Covenant House receives funds from over 450,000 U.S. donors, 125,000 Canadian donors and a handful of European foundations.

But Ryan said that Covenant House experienced a major contraction because of the economic downturn. He estimates the organization has lost some 100,000 donors.

This forced some major changes, including the closing of 50 beds in Florida and 10 beds in Louisiana. The whole operation in Guatemala had to close for a time, though it has since been reopened.

"We trust in God's providence and through our own 'hands' and through prayer, we are coming up with new ways to provide a safety net for kids," Ryan said.

He points out that instead of each Covenant House site buying its own employee health insurance, they have aggregated their purchasing power and reduced costs by \$600,000. Likewise, payroll services have been consolidated among the federation of locations and this step saves \$1 million per year.

"We are working together more effectively and more deeply," Ryan said.

No potential solution is overlooked. To keep services available, even bartering has found its way into the Covenant House system.

In Newark, N.J., a health services center was closed down due to a lack of funding. However, Covenant House board member Barbara Bush -- President George W. Bush's daughter, who runs Global Health Corporation --

partnered with Covenant House to keep the services available.

Through Global Health Corporation, Bush provided two full-time volunteers in Newark, Covenant House provided the office space, and the health center reopened. Additional volunteers are being added.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*'s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Resources

Are you a homeless kid needing shelter? Have you thought about suicide? Is your teenager in trouble?
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Covenant House
www.covenanthouse.org

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