



**A LOOK BACK:**  
Residents at the Mid-Atlantic Teen Challenge listen to a speaker in 1999.

# A SEED IN GOOD SOIL

On a golden anniversary, Teen Challenge grows as political plants choke amid thorns **by MARVIN OLASKY**

**A** SUMMER IRONY: AS Teen Challenge celebrated its 50th anniversary with a June 25-28 conference in Manhattan, pundits were proclaiming the demise of President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative. The juxtaposition is sadly amusing because the faith-based initiative really began with Gov. Bush's taking the side of Teen Challenge of South Texas in 1995.

At that time Texas state officials tried to pull Teen Challenge's license because its counselors used a "give yourself to Jesus" approach to fighting alcoholism and addiction rather than a secular one. Bush—alerted by a *WORLD* cover story on the dispute—sided with Teen Challenge's record of effectiveness, and went on to develop programs and push legislation that removed barriers to religious programs.

Bush's compassionate conservative helped him barely to win the White House, and the first 10 days of his presidency began strongly with a celebratory announcement of a faith-based initiative. The initiative soon lost its sizzle, though, and the story is worthy of a parable: Why does one seed yield a hundredfold crop and another a plant that grows but is then choked by thorns?

Chapter 8 of Luke suggests the answer: "As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience."

The faith-based initiative has produced some useful results, but the

thorns of politics, power, and money have often choked it. And yet, Teen Challenge hearers who held fast honestly and good-heartedly have built an organization that now has 201 programs (5,900 beds) within the United States and 838 affiliates (nearly 18,000 beds) abroad, with more twentysomethings and thirtysomethings as clients than teenagers.

Not that it's been easy:

► When 26-year-old country pastor David Wilkerson felt moved to come to New York City in 1958 and begin preaching to gang members, Mau Mau warlord Nicky Cruz spit in his face and threatened to kill him. Later, Cruz came to Christ; tens of millions of people have read the book or seen the film of their experience, *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

► The organization Wilkerson founded, Teen Challenge, derived its name from a 1960 New York TV show featuring gang members and former drug addicts who spoke of how faith in Christ allowed them to beat all their habits, including cigarette smoking. One



**BEFORE AND AFTER:** Carlos Monteiro, one of many Teen Challenge success stories.

of the TV station's major advertisers, a tobacco company, complained to station managers, who cancelled the show.

► Teen Challenge staff members at first goofed by thinking that people who left addiction could quickly drop all their bad habits as well. Some hard experience led the organization to build a structured program of discipleship that would last a year and to emphasize habits of responsibility—being on time, getting homework done, respecting the authority of teachers. Teen Challenge stressed to graduates the importance of involvement in a local church, and today many centers do not celebrate graduations until at least one year later.

► Many professional therapists argued that addiction was a medical matter and scoffed at Teen Challenge's spiritual emphasis. A federal government study in 1976, though, discovered that 67 percent of Teen Challenge graduates were drug-free, 74 percent were employed and self-supporting, and 72 percent had gone on to further education.

A book that Teen Challenge has just published, *Teen Challenge: 50 Years of Miracles*, by David Batty and Ethan Campbell, tells dozens of conversion stories. Some of the most striking involve death. For example, Dennis Whitman snorted a bag of angel dust with his brother and slipped into a two-day hallucination in which he saw himself fighting with his brother and stomping pineapples. He awoke to find he had fatally beaten and kicked his brother. Whitman served three years in prison for involuntary manslaughter and then entered a Teen Challenge program. He is now married with five children and directs the Teen Challenge center in Turlock, Calif.

Repeatedly, lives regained involved lives lost. Jacqui Strothoff's boyfriend died of an overdose in bed beside her. Later she offered her teenage brother a heroin hit, but he immediately began convulsing and was dead when paramedics arrived. The two deaths finally forced Strothoff to her knees, and she was not alone: In 2002 Ivette Mastrobuono's cousin died of an overdose, and she entered Teen Challenge. In 2003 Todd Sheehan changed only after he held his girlfriend, dead via a heroin and cocaine overdose. In 2005 Chris Nichols' grandmother died in a fire because she had locked all her inside doors to keep him from stealing her credit cards again.

But sometimes parents acted in time to push away ultimate tragedy. On one Dallas morning LeAnne Moffett's dad did not take her to school but drove in the opposite direction for the next seven hours, taking her to a center in Kansas. She stayed there for a year, decided to leave behind chaos, and last year graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in mathematics.

Co-author Campbell says that during his research "I've discovered that God likes to tell stories—or rather, that He likes to tell the same story, over and over again. . . . A young man or woman makes bad choices—the wrong friends, the wrong response to a personal crisis, the false hope that a substance will bring salvation along with its high. Swiftly the sinner is brought to a point of desperation, where often the only choice is a reckless cry to God, or death. Then comes what a lyric poet would call 'the turn.' At once, entirely apart from human wisdom or strength or moral goodness, God plucks the helpless person from this self-made pit."

The strength of that repeated saga has even led some government officials to request Teen Challenge's help. In 1971 the U.S. government invited Teen Challenge staffers to travel to Vietnam to work with soldiers who had become drug addicts. One of the team members, Raul Gonzalez, later wrote that he "went from company to company speaking with soldiers, encouraging them to seek the Lord. . . . The spiritual hunger of the men was beyond anything I could ever have expected. Their frankness about their drug problem, and the openness to the Lord, were also remarkable."

Many local officials over the years have also seen value in the organization. In 1974 Cincinnati judges allowed Teen Challenge to counsel juvenile drug offenders and speak with them about Jesus. Teen Challenge centers have sometimes faced strong opposition from community members and local zoning boards concerning their purchases of property in new ministry locations—*there go real estate values!*—but those disputes have usually been resolved.

So, despite recent controversies involving the Bush faith-based initiative, federal involvement with Christ-centered programs is nothing new, and can be justified on simple pragmatic grounds—reducing alcoholism and addiction, along with the crime that often accompanies drug use, helps everyone. Teen Challenge staffers point to a 1994 University of Tennessee study that shows 67 percent of the graduates of Teen Challenge Chattanooga to be living drug-free. A 1999 Northwestern University study of graduates of three of the largest Teen Challenge centers in the United States showed an 86 percent success rate three years after graduation.

Nevertheless, Washington's faith-based initiative has not helped Teen Challenge affiliates, because restrictions remain against groups that cannot separate their religious teaching from their central function. For example, a job-training program designed to instill good work habits can have a lunchtime Bible study as long as instructors at 1 p.m. set aside biblical perspectives—but what organization that thoroughly embraces a biblical worldview can compartmentalize Jesus in that way?

Teen Challenge has refused to compartmentalize. It keeps growing as other spectacular plants wither. ☺