

Children of Troubled Streets

(Introduction)

When I began to consider the possibility of writing a book about the troubled inner cities streets of America, I had no idea of the amount of time that it would actually take to sit before my computer to type the first words. To begin with, I had to weigh my motives repeatedly.

Then, to who was I to target it to and why.

Did this have anything to do with my own experience as an inter-city gang leader and street hoodlum or was there something genuine in my heart to try to voice my concern for the numerous kids that are trapped in these troubled streets plagued with violent gang activities and drugs? Whatever the reason, I needed to single it out, especially the motive.

My wife and I are founders of an outreach foundation that reaches out to all kinds of troubled lives in different ways through the love and power of Jesus Christ. So one can probably say that the motive could be to bring hope, right? That's right, because that's exactly why I'm alive today. Because of the hope I found through Jesus Christ, Yeshua the Messiah, when I was in the darkest moments of my life. So, what would be the motive? That's right, to promote hope and freedom In Him.

A lot of times when I walk the streets, I see life as it is today, nothing seems any different from back in my day, only that there is more violence and corruption. The generational problem of unemployment, family dysfunction, drugs and alcohol addiction and lack of education is still the producing factors of these troubled streets, and it keeps getting worse.

My wife and I came face to face with this reality when we went to Philly on one of our outreaches. We decided to choose the area near Temple University, the section of Broad and Ridge Avenue. When we began to interact with the people, we noticed an elderly man across the street from our position staring at us. Something told me there was something he wanted to tell us.

When I approached him, he began to warn us about the latest gang activity that was taking place in the streets in those days, "You two better be careful around here." He said "Why is that?" I asked. "Because the gangs are targeting older people that are out at night and killing them as a part of an initiation for someone that's entering their gang. " By this I gathered that he knew we weren't from the area. I asked him how he coped with that situation, "I come out in the morning for everything I need to do" he replied.

Wow! I thought to myself, this is definitely a heart chilling thing to hear, especially now, having my wife with me, who's never even been to areas like this before. You could be stabbed

or shot dead at any moment, and all because you're old. And what amazes me is that it all takes place at night and not during daylight time. This brings us to understand what forces are really at work here. The forces of evil that dwell in darkness. So I thanked him for the warning and we prayed with him for his protection. As we parted ways, I thought to myself how much I really understood this kind of mentality. A mentality of having to belong to something to be able to survive the troubled streets. I clearly understood how the preciousness of life could be stained with bloodshed, (mostly innocent). Yes, I clearly understood the ways of these dark and lawless evil streets because of my own experience as a young gang member and street hoodlum. I knew the magnitude of the danger that was now before us. And while back then, I had no sense of fear in the streets, I now felt that I needed to pray for us in this outreach. For God's protecting Angels to cover us while we shared the good news of God's powerful saving grace through the love of Jesus Christ His Son. That same powerful love had brought me down to my knees, convicted me of the horrible things I had done and had delivered me from drug addiction !

As we continued to walk, I pointed out to my wife the buildings covered with graffiti all the way up to the top, and some of these buildings were fifteen stories high. We noticed that in the middle of busy sidewalks were bus stops full of people waiting for the bus. There were also young men leaning up against buildings and chatting with one another, obviously unemployed or out of school. Rows of cars and busses and the loud noise of a subway train along Broad Avenue could define how busy the city gets in the day time, but it becomes a different world at night. A restless world of darkness that challenges the heart and souls of those that are giving every part of themselves to survive in it. That's what our elderly friend was trying convey to us.

The founder of the "Teen Challenge" concept defined the troubled streets as an asphalt jungle that imprisons a society and leaves little hope to escape. Where ambition becomes a dangerous thing to pursue, because it's confused with drug dealing, prostitution and gang power. Like I said before, ambition through lawlessness and bloodshed.

In this book, Children Of Troubled Streets, I will take you on a tour through some of this country's most darkest hoods and show you some of the elements of this environment and even introduce to you some of the people that were able to make it out alive miraculously restored through the changing power Of Jesus Christ.

To Him be the Glory for ever and ever.

CHAPTER ONE

Where Angels fear to tread

New York City, Philadelphia, Pa. Chicago, IL, Los Angeles and Washington, DC. These are some of the most known cities in the United States that have several things in common. Like large metropolitan life populations that includes commerce, real estate and housing, mass transportation and a vast population of mixed cultures. All are seeking one thing, progress. There's the uptown people and the downtown people that are divided by societies. Some are fortunate to rise in prosperity faster than others. But they all form the essences and elements of the metropolis they're living in. When I visit New York City, I notice that both the rich and the poor share a lot of the same things, like the same subway train, they sit in the same park and eat the same food from the vendor in the park. At night, they share a different world of colorful neon flashing lights. Undoubtedly a favorite time to recreate for most of the people that are living there. They call it the "night life". This is the time that everyone in the city seems to connect. Even the local politicians blends in on this side of town.

But like in all large cities, there's a part they call the [Hood], a dark side where the troubled streets are. Back in my day we called it the "Ghetto." Not much different from today. This is the part of town no one wants to talk about, not even the local politicians. Even the police hesitate to enter when responding to a 911 call. This is the part that represents lack of progress to the local government administration. It's a society of drug addiction, homelessness, prostitution and gang violence among other things. It has it's own laws, and the consequences of it, if it's broken. Here, fear is the ruling factor. I've heard it said that even the Angels fear to tread these troubled street.

There's only one society here. A society of being street wise and a mindset of survival, even if it means spilling blood. So, if you know these things, you're wise enough to live, and if you don't, then you'll die. That's how it is in every one of these cities inner-city streets. In the hood everyone looks the same, everyone speaks the same language, -(street talk), everyone knows what everyone else is thinking, and everyone's guard is always up. No one trusts anyone.

Philly was the one that impressed me the most. My wife and I went there to take over two programs for juvenile justice kids that were released from jail, and were placed in our custody to teach them a skill so they can transition back to society. These were ex-gang members with long criminal records of violence including attempted murder raps. Most of them had large

numbers tattooed to their faces, or their necks. When we asked them what did that mean, one of them told us that it was the number of years they expected to live . The number of years on some of these kids were 25 max. That meant they hoped to live to at least 25 years old. They were speaking death over themselves. The street gang violence was in such magnitude that these kids actually believed that their life span was that short. One of the programs was in a lock down facility in downtown. In this place I was to teach vocational skills and building trades. Some of the kids really wanted to learn and be able to get out and start a new life, but the belief that they were going to die young, held them back from getting started. Some were even told by their parents, that they would die young in the streets. So that was enough to put the number of years on their faces because that's what the parents believed. Like I said before, it's a generational malady, passed on from parent to child. Every day I would hear one heart breaking story after another. One boy told how his mom and younger brother were gunned down on the front porch of their home as they were coming out the front door, all in retaliation for something he had done. Innocently they paid with their blood for his sin. These were the very words out of his mouth. He confessed to me how he tampered with the idea of taking his own life because he couldn't live with the terrible guilt. Another boy told us of his plans to kill someone he held a grudge with. I spoke to his counselor about the underlying issues he still had, and because it was information revealed to me, I needed to shed light on it. My wife reached out to this young man in every kind way possible, but he had his mind made up to do what he was going to do. Now because I was responsible for him and several other kids, we had to live in the same building and monitor their behaviors. I guess it wasn't enough to just tell his counselor of his plans. His counselor said to us "He's already been saying this to everyone else, I'd pay it no mind if I were you". Well, I guess I was the last person this kid cried out to about his plans because one night he never made it back home. I called his counselor and I said to him, "This young man never came in last night." "Ok" he said, "I'll put out an APB on him for jumping parole". It all reminded me of what they called the system back in my day. The System was just that, "a system". No one cared, and no one was ever interested in helping us juvenile delinquents. Only when that state would put up more money for programs to help us, that's when you saw all kind of hands being extended to us. It was all about the money, not much different from today. Well, the next day I get a call at the downtown shelter where I was teaching building trades. It was his counselor with bad news. "Jess is on the run", he said, "he was involved in a shooting that left a young kid dead! We want you to notify the police if you see him!" I could have just said to him, " I told you so" but what would that do? He fulfilled what he implied he was going to do, and now he was on the run. All we could do now was pray for him, that he would turn himself in, or, that the police would find him, before the laws of the street caught up with him and he'd wind up dead somewhere.

I remembered reading a story in a news paper, in New York, about a public official or investigator who was visiting families that were on public assistance at the time. On this

assignment he was working in Brooklyn NYC, and he described in his report how children had to mature early and learn to live on their own, because their parents were drug addicts, or because a single mom needed to work and couldn't afford a baby sitter. He talks about how little kids were left alone while the mom or dad went off at night to parties or to look for drugs. There wasn't agencies to police this back then like DCF today (Dept. Of Children & Family) so they grew up unguided and without any sense of family or belonging anywhere. They ran the streets at night, and ate out of garbage cans behind restaurants or apartment buildings. A public agency official of New York City tells how he went to South Brooklyn to visit a young mom who lived in a multi-tenement building on the very top floor, and when he knocked, a little child, about five years old answered the door. When he walked in, he noticed the place was filthy and the young lady was nowhere to be seen. He talks about how he noticed two little toddlers sitting at the table with just a box of cereal and a quart of milk she left there for them to eat. The oldest one of the three being just five and having to babysit the other two. An all too familiar scene for me.

As I read this paper, I remembered witnessing this in my own neighborhood especially when I was growing up. The children in our neighborhood were like a separate society to themselves, with no one looking after them, or disciplining their actions. Some of these kids would actually be recruited by drug dealers to run drugs from one place to another or sell on the street corners, because no one would suspect a little kid's innocence. Also some of these little kids were recruited by local street gangs to become "midget gang" members, where they would learn the angles of street life. This would become their everyday way of life. A life of survival, or hoping to stay alive until the next day.

This was, and is the producing factor of the troubled streets throughout this nation and the world over. Sadly, it begins with a seed of evil that's planted in the tenderness of a small young mind, and it grows into weeds of confusion that leads to life styles of crime and lawlessness. If we compare these statistics to the past wars of Vietnam and The Middle East, we'll find surprisingly, that the loss of young lives surpasses these two wars by 50% or higher on research study levels done in the 70's by the Columbia State University in New York City.

This is mind blowing! To give such little value to life, to regard life as a wasteful gift, if one can even consider it to be a gift at all. Only God knows how much a human life is worth. It was Him and Him alone who paid the price with His blood through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ. He alone took the rap for the sins of mankind. So He alone has the answer to the question: How much is life worth? : He'll show you the wounds in his body, and you'll hear Him say to you "You mean the World to Me."

I remember saying this to someone in the streets of Orlando Florida in one of our outreaches, and noticing how surprised he was that that's what the cross he was wearing

around his neck meant. He said, “ It was just something to wear for good luck”. He had no idea that this was the Son of God given to the world as a ransom in his place. He didn't know that God loved him that much. That's how it is with this world, the price is unknown.

I grew up in the time of the Civil Rights movement era and I remember witnessing racial conflicts everywhere. The color of the skin determined the society one was to belong to. There was an awareness of self-worth. If one was dark, they would live in one side of town, and be subject to low paying jobs, even if you had education. If your skin was white, you'd be able to live in the upper side of town that was called the suburbs, and would have an opportunity to a good paying job even if you didn't have much education. There were borders in neighborhoods back then. Blacks and Hispanics could not wander into the suburbs without having the police after them, or being profiled. And likewise, whites could not wander into the hoods without being picked on and or assaulted. Racial hatred was abundant everywhere. Even to this day, it's scars are seen among the many societies, especially among the Baby Boomers born in the years between the 40's to 60's. To this day we still see how people tend to discard one another like trash because of how they think of each other, not stopping to consider or think how God created us in His image and likeness whether we're white, black or Hispanic. He put a price on us for Him that no one could ever pay.

Jesus identifies with us in many ways. First of all, He lived in a town called Nazareth, which was considered a common place of little interest back then. We see this when we read in the Bible the comments of Nathaniel when he said, “can anything good come out of Nazareth? “ (ASV). To me, this meant that he grew up in what we call today: the “hood”. Second of all, He approached the people where they were at, and acknowledged their needs without any religious reservations or prejudice of any kind. We see how He was tried as an outlaw, how he took the rap for someone on the cross and how he delivered and forgave the sins of a prostitute called Mary Magdalene. Yes, many times when we look at the cross, we don't have the slightest idea of who that man was and what He did by dying the way He did. He understood the issues of the troubled streets back then, just as He understands them today. He understood and acknowledged the pains of the common man's world, and He does so today. We see it in the many lives that are transformed through the powerful blood He shed on that cross. In every walk of life, we see the evidence of His transforming power. I myself, strongly attest to this. A merciless outlaw and drug addict , who didn't think there was any hope or any way out, and now, here I am, writing about His awesome hope in these pages.

It was in the troubled streets of my days that I came face to face with this awesome reality of His grace. When I was running desperately for my life, because now it became time for my blood out in the street as a gang member. I ran into his open arms, He was there the whole time waiting for me.

But right now, this is not about me, but about the people you are about to meet. It gives me pleasure and I'm honored to be able to highlight their testimonies in the following chapters. Each person has agreed to use his or her name to give Glory to His Name, Jesus Christ.

However, after much prayer and wise, Godly counsel, all names have been changed to protect everyone's privacy.

Come walk with me through the pages of this book and meet the "children of troubled streets" and see how God's mercy is still the same yesterday, today and forever.[Hebrews 13:8]

(Chapter Two)

From the darkest pit of despair into the light

Theme parks, sport centers, vacation spots and many happy fun things for visiting families to engage in is what's found here in Orlando, Florida, not to mention the numerous world conventions that take place in beautiful world class hotels. There's even the largest convention center in the world located on International Drive. A building that's a mile long connecting several city blocks and displaying the most modern architecture of today's technological construction art. Almost everything here is designed to impress and blow your mind away. When people arrive here, there's only one thing on their minds. Lots of fun and excitement.

But there's another side of town. A very dark one. This is the side of town no one cares to see. One part of this side of town has earned the nickname of "Crime Hills" here. The troubled streets are evident with drug gangs drive by shootings, hold up robberies and even home invasions. Almost every day you see things in the news of Orlando's troubled streets.

This was Jenny's world. These were the troubled streets she found herself in. A former college student that was about to enter first year of College in Atlanta Ga. She found herself deceitfully falling through the cracks of life and into a merciless world of darkness without hope. But it didn't end that way for her, because she found hope. In this chapter, you will read about Jenny's story, and what it took for her to miraculously find her way out of the troubled streets. Even though she chooses to use her own name, we've decided to change her name and the names of the characters in her story to protect their privacy.

Jenny, a resident of Florida, was brought up in a home of very Godly instruction, to a family who believed firmly in what Proverbs 22:6 says: "train up a child in the way he should go and

when he is old, he will not depart from it” (American Standard Version) But, as she tells us in her own words, “Just because you were raised in the right manner, you still have your own mind to make the choices you want to make. Whether good or bad, it depends on the individual. She tells us of the bad choices she's made while trying to grow up before her time.

“I was living my life in tracks I had no business being in” she says, and like many of us, she learned the hard way to accept herself for who she is and not for someone trying to fit into other people's circle or life styles.

“My addiction to drugs started during my teenage years. Once my parents separated, life as I knew it changed.” “My boyfriend, who was the Pastor's son, introduced me to pot (marijuana) and later, to cocaine. It started out as recreational getting high, but little did I know that this life style would lead to many troublesome times for me. Needless to say, the things I did as a teenager was now a thing of the past. I was now indulging in adult activities.”

As Jenny continued to relate her story, I could almost tell how she was bracing herself to recall her painful past. Just reading through the lines of her manuscript, I could almost visual her having a challenge with recalling her dark memories. “Take your time Jenny” I told her as we spoke on the phone. We'll do this only when you're ready”.

“The relationship with my boyfriend ended after a year or so, but not before I became addicted to getting high on drugs. At the end of my high school year, I was awarded a four year scholarship to this College in Atlanta Ga, and I decided not to take it. Soon after I turned eighteen I moved to Maryland and got as far away from Orlando as I could.

“If I could”, she continued explaining, “I would turn back the hands of time. I would never have decided to skip college and move to Silver Springs, Maryland. Having an education, especially for a person of color was crucial if you wanted to succeed in life. However, once I got to Maryland, I did acquire some vocational skills in the business field. Working as a secretary was what I had imagined myself doing all during my high school years. I always managed to obtain good jobs with reputable companies. Always being efficient, getting along with coworkers and proving I was reliable and dependable, became a real asset to me. Yet there was still that void in my life. I was living a productive life until I began to crave being in life's fast tracks like some of the people I knew, and trying to fit into their circle, circles I had no business being in. I found myself doing things I had never done before. Those Choices resulted in my being trapped in a vicious circle that kept me bound in a sinful life for years. The things that I valued most were no longer important to me. My priorities, moral values and standards were all compromised by my actions. I found myself so lost out in the world, that I could no longer see how I had allowed my desire of being accepted had taken control over what I knew in my heart to be truly right. Troubles and problems became an active part of my life, which included my addiction to cocaine. I could no longer hold a steady job, and I found myself not really caring.

Sadly enough, what became important to me now, was getting high and figuring out where the money was going to come from for my next high. “

“I began to lie, cheat and steal to accommodate my habit. I became an addict. After becoming homeless, hungry and sick, my family in Florida finally sent for me. They told me to come back home in hopes that things would get better for me there. However, it didn't get better, because the lifestyle I was living in Maryland came with me back to Florida. By this time I had wasted almost twenty years of my life in bad relationships, cocaine addiction, incarceration, having no kind of future outlook and continuing to look for love in all the wrong places. Life was living me: I was no longer living it. I had allowed something so minute to take control of my life. People reached out to help me and bring me to treatment centers but I refused the offer, because I didn't believe I had a problem. The insanity of drug addiction was killing me physically, mentally and emotionally. Spiritually I was already dead.”

“Except for a few choice people, my life for the most part was disowned. My immediate family didn't even want me around. I was a disgrace to them. A drug addict with no goals or direction for my life. I hardly resembled the person they used to know. Only my grandmother showed me compassion, and even that I took for granted.”

“I remember one Thanksgiving Day, my niece informed me that there was a big family gathering. When I arrived, I wasn't even invited in. They told me to wait outside for a to go plate. It was that day when I finally and painfully realized how it felt to be outside looking in. It hurt so bad to be left out. I was sad, lonely and disgusted, but not disgusted enough to abstain from getting high. I didn't have the energy or the strength to try another way for my life. My addiction continued, as did the awkward relationships and wanting to mix with the wrong crowd. The path of destruction that I was on should have ended my life on several occasions. I remember a particular incident when a car hit me and kept going. The driver left me on the side of the road for dead. God spared my life. Still, this wasn't enough to stop me from doing what I was doing. I realized that God was tired of me making a major mess of my life. He rescued me by allowing me to go to prison. I know today that going there saved my life. However, it came at a cost. While there, I lost my best friend, my grandmother, and what few material things I had, I lost as well. I finally woke up and realized that I had no one else to depend on, but God. I had gone out into the world looking for love and acceptance in all the wrong places when the love I so desired was already inside of me.”

“I had been brought up in church, but knowing the way and acting on it are two separate things. Now I've rededicated my life to Christ over ten years ago. I became determined to make it, in spite of the negative stigmas attached to me regarding my past drug addiction, and my being an ex-felon. Many doors were closed to me, and many people had negative things to say, but one door did open for me. I went to a woman's transitional ministry home in Orlando

Florida. And the loving people there helped me get my life back. I've been pressing through ever since."

Psalms 20:7 says: "Some trust in chariots and some trust in horses but we will remember The Name of the Lord." (NKJ) "Today, I'm thirty nine years older than I was when I left high school, but finally I graduated college in December, 2013 and the Lord has been using me to share my strength, hopes and experiences to help others. I am living an honest life. I am truthful, and I have integrity. I have an administrative position with a reputable company. I have my family back. I am drug free and life will never live me again. I live life on God's terms. Being thankful doesn't quite say it all. I am blessed and highly favored. I will forever have an attitude of gratitude, because if it hadn't been for the Lord, I don't know where I would be today. Probably pushing up daisies, because the devil was definitely trying to kill me."

"God is able, and is there to help us all. We must keep hope alive and keep our eyes to the hills from where our help comes from. Believe me, if He did it for me and others like me, He will do it for anybody. All you have to do is believe it and receive it. God bless you."

My wife and I attended Jenny's graduation, in which we witnessed a miracle of God's awesome power. She graduated at the top of her class with honors. This doesn't surprise me at all, because I've already seen what He (Jesus) is capable of with His life changing love. Amen.

Chapter Three

I lifted my eyes and cried out in my darkness

There are things that's very familiar to me when I visit a large city, especially the ones I mentioned earlier. The constant sound of emergency sirens at all hours of the day and into the night is one of them. A loud crying sound of lamentation that lets us know that there is something wrong happening somewhere. There's also the loud boom sounds of rap music exploding out the windows of vehicles driven by young kids. Back in my day it was a large boom box that one carried on the shoulder blowing loud music into the air, where the whole world could hear it. Not much difference from today. The ways may be different, but the mindset is all the same. In the gang infested areas of these large cities, it's an all too familiar scene that's senseless to the surrounding world. Even its elderly society have had to accept this and live with it. It becomes even more frightening for them at night, when the sounds they hear is gun shots from gang activity, that is very near their home.

This next story is about a young man named Carlos. A native of New York City, (Bronx Borough) and like myself, a former member of the Powerful Latin Kings, (Bronx Chapter) Carlos shares his story without reservations for two purposes only. To give praise and glory to The Most High God who delivered him from death, and to guide other young people like him away from the troubled streets. His real name was changed also to protect his privacy. Today he's a husband and a father to two young men who look up to him with admiration, and he's an awesome father! He shares what took place in his life while in prison.

Carlos:

I was born in Boston Massachusetts and was raised in the South Bronx by my grandparents along with eight of my uncles whom I called my brothers. I later came to find out I had another set of ten siblings on my father's side, which made me one of seventeen confirmed kids to my father. I had a rough start in my very early years as a boy. By age five I was already fighting almost every day in school and in the streets. It got so bad that I stopped going to school for days at a time, and at the age of twelve I was already in the streets carrying guns on me and hustling with adults in the hood. I would make sixty dollars from selling two hundred dollars worth of weed for someone. After that, I started dealing hard core drugs, like coke and heroin among other drugs. By age fifteen, I was making two hundred dollars a week. By that time I got the mother of my oldest son pregnant. At age sixteen I became a father to my first son. For the first four months of his life I wasn't able to see him because I had shot someone in the hood, and I fled from the law to Puerto Rico. When I was finally able to return, I got to be with my son, but I kept hustling in the streets making three times the money that I was making before.

Shortly after my son was born, at age 16, I got caught with a gun and ten thousand dollars of drug money from the kids that did stick ups or hold ups. We would hold up super markets, drug dealers, people, or anything that crossed our path with money. Big money started coming in, as much as seventy five thousand dollars. This went on until we did our last hit. Things started getting bad. Now the law was after us. There were four of us, three of us got away, one got caught. He ended up snitching me out and I got picked up. For this case I got three and half to ten years. Some of my charges were kidnapping in second degree, and armed robbery among other charges.

About two years into my sentence I got introduced to the Kings. Shortly after that, I caught another case which added another six and half to eighteen years on top of my original sentence. By this time I thought I was never coming out. Then I got hit with a year in the box or some may know it as the " hole". Then I came out and was transferred to another prison, where the Latin Kings were not doing good. So I decided to step up and take over the prison. There I got established and was doing really good. At one point I was helping a brother on how to read and write. Shortly after, this brother ended up joining the Muslim brotherhood which was a bad idea during prison. A hit was sent out and he ended up snitching me out and I caught another box charge. I was sentenced to three years in the box with no privileges like the commissary or visits of any kind except my lawyer. I was then transferred to super maxi max prison.

At this point I was convinced that I was never getting out. So I began to settle to my new environment. I swore, I thought this was going to be my new home. I was on a twenty-three hour lock down and I was only allowed to shower twice a week. The first night there, I was given the prison rules, my bed sheets and escorted to my cell.

As I entered the cell I noticed that on the counter sat a Bible. That night I began to read it, and I began to get messages from it. I didn't know if this was God, or if it was me hallucinating. So I began to pray and ask God to help me. But I'd wind up giving up because I thought He would not forgive me for the terrible things I had done.

It was my first year there. I continued to read the Bible, but I was still doubting myself. During my time in the box I was still hearing voices. I thought I was starting to go crazy. I started to question myself, do I need medication? What's going on? Am I bugging out? I continued to pray, and the more I prayed the more I heard the voice. And that voice kept telling me "don't be afraid", just lean on me. I continued to pray and the voice kept talking to me and telling me to open the Bible to a specific scripture in Psalms: 40:1 "I waited patiently for the Lord to help me and he turned to me and heard my cry". " 2. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and mire, and set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along".

As I kept reading the scripture, I felt these words were for me, but how? How can a two time felon, with three years in the box, and a board panel waiting to see me when I get out, who will

probably stick me with two more years or more the minute I stand before them, find any kind of help?

I had so many questions. How can I be forgiven? Will I ever get to see the streets again? How can I start over? I started to think it was impossible and hopeless.

So now, in my third year in the box, I'm still praying. In the meantime a corrections officer comes into my cell to tell me something, "You have a visitor" he said. I thought to myself, "who would come to visit me here, half of my family doesn't even know I'm here, and the ones that knew, weren't going to take a seven hour trip to see me". So I asked the CO "who is it?" "I don't know" he replied. "Just hurry up and get yourself ready cause I don't have all day" .

So I got ready and the CO shackled me and escorted me to the visiting room. On the way there two other CO's met us to escort me. I kept wondering who was here to see me. As we approached the room, I noticed a white gentleman with paperwork in his hand. He introduced himself as a lawyer. "I never asked for a lawyer, and I don't have any money" I said. "I'm not here for money" he said. "I just came across your file and something told me to review it. As I reviewed your case I saw that I could help you. I looked at him and thought he was crazy. I said to him, "Man, you can't help me" But he told me that he was going to put a motion together that morning, for the judge to hear my case. So I said to him "Man, that's going to take months if not years. So why would I even give it any thought?"

I could tell by the look in his face that he started to lose patience at my negativity. "Hey man, why don't you have a little faith? It may just work out" he said to me as he started to get up from his chair. And waiving the folder with my files, he told me, "I'll keep you posted. Once we have a date open before the judge, I'll come back to prep you with plenty of time" So he said good bye and told me he would see me soon. Then the CO's chained me and escorted me back to my cell, where lots of things began to flood my mind. I could not believe what was happening. Where was this gleam of hope coming from? Was an actual miracle about to take place? And if so, why would God be interested in someone like me? Someone that had so many charges, some even pending. I couldn't single it out, but one thing I knew, there was hope looking at me at the end of the tunnel, and it says in the Bible that hope does not disappoint.

The more I thought about it, the more it started to excite me. I began to share this with the other inmates who then began to discourage me by telling me that this thing wasn't going anywhere, that this is something they see all the time. But I kept praying and going back to the Psalm I had read before. I started to believe that something could happen. The more I read the Psalms the more I could see that God did have a plan for me. Three weeks later, that same lawyer came by to inform me that we had a court date the following month. It was sounding better by the moment.

The time arrived and it's now my court date. The prosecutor started to review my case and began by mentioning that I was a high ranking member of the Latin Kings, and that I was a menace to society. She continued to bash me throughout the first session of the case. After she was done, it was my lawyer's turn. He began by saying, "she's probably right, but we are not here to discuss his past. We're here because his rights were violated. He was put in the box for three years and his release date was overlooked, and it was taken away from him. He appealed to the handbook of rules of the facility and pointed out that none of those charges were in that book.

So the judge called for a thirty minute adjourn to review the case, and to my surprise, he came back and sided with me. He revoked everything in the case and demanded that facility release me immediately on parole. The warden and the deputy of the facility stressed to the judge that this was a maxi-max facility and that they would have to transfer me to another facility, because nobody ever goes home from there. The judge refused to listen to them and ordered to have me released within two weeks, any more time after that, he would have to fine them one thousand dollars a day! Wow!!! Can you believe I was going to be released!! God is good!!!

Today, Carlos is a loving husband and father . He is a minister and works closely with those who have been in gangs and prison.

In the valley of the shadow of death, Thou art with me.

In the inner city streets, recreation in the summer months for kids out of school could be something as simple as an open fire hydrant spewing out water into the air to cool off from the sweltering heat of the day, or playing football or stick ball in the middle of a busy street dodging the vehicles that are passing by. Others spend the days in basketball courts playing ball and shooting hoops.

Restlessness mixed with the hot summer days of kids out of school and with not much to do becomes an invitation for trouble, especially if there isn't anyone to be accounted to. Back in my day as a kid, this was trouble. Being from a family with nine kids and very little attention given to each one us, because both parents worked, it gave me the freedom to do whatever I wanted to. As soon as my mom and step dad left the house, I was out the door and on my way to Sandy Hill Park, where I'd spent the day hanging out with several kids like me, trying to figure out ways to recreate ourselves. That's when our brightest ideas kicked in, like choosing the cleanest and highest wall to draw our most colorful graffiti. Or see how fast we can outrun the corner grocery clerk by snatching up fruit from the produce stand outside the store. As innocent as this game seemed to us, it was setting the stage for what was to take place later on in life as juvenile delinquents and felons.

In today's world there's summer programs that kids get to participate in right from the moment they start their summer vacation. These programs are designed precisely to keep kids like us out of trouble during the summer long months, giving them a chance to experience a clean and trouble free environment. Getting to visit museums and national parks, and even going swimming to a beach and not a fire hydrant in the street, being able to play sports in a park and not in the middle of the street endangering their lives.

But the challenge remains for a lot of inner city kids that fall through the loops of not having any guidance. So the simplicity of resorting to what's available for them in the troubled streets still remains. The stage is still being set before them, learning to run from the law, learning to use and abuse drugs and learning the violent ways of the troubled streets. Thus learning to be children of troubled streets.

In this chapter I'd like to introduce you to Pastor Carl. A man who today labors in his ministry in one of the most challenging areas of Central Florida, (The Four Corners of Lake County). This area has several large multiple apartment complexes that houses thousands of lower income families, most of them Spanish and African American, with many of them lacking means to excel in business. Because of the low income and missed opportunities, it's also defined as one of the

most high in gang activity and violent crimes, with drug and sex trafficking also in its number of incidents.

Pastor Carl's work is not easy. But his passion and a keen knowledge of the troubled streets, not to mention a team of like-minded people along with him, helps make his load lighter. He too was a product of the turbulent troubled streets. Having experienced tough times as a youth and identifying with like-minded people of the troubled streets he grew up in, gave him not only the understanding, but the passion and compassion needed to lead and shepherd this complex community. I am very fortunate to have worked with him very closely and therefore, I've asked him to share.

My name is Pastor Carl, and today, I'm the Pastor of a Church. I am also a father and a husband with a family that's precious to me. Its part of what helps me see the people I work with through the Eyes of Almighty God our heavenly Father. The Bible tells us in 1st Corinthians chapter 13 (KJV) that we must have love to do these things. It's the only way we can truly touch a people for Him. I myself grew up lacking this kind of love. At age five I began to witness many things that tends to be harmful to any child living in today's world. I began to see violence and the behavior of violence in different ways. I began to witness sexual behavior, people doing these things around me and people drinking and doing drugs. This in turn caused me to start imitating what I saw, even at that age. I began to disrespect the opposite sex also, even at that very young age. I also began to experiment with alcohol early on. My mother did the best that she could do to get me under control, because I was only a child already growing up out of control. I became a shoeshine boy and started going into bars to get business shining the shoes of the men that were hanging out and drinking, and I got accustom to the smell of alcohol. That made me want to see what that tasted and felt like. These guys would give me drinks while I worked on their shoes. So, by the time I came out of there, I was intoxicated. Again, this is while I was still less than ten years old. Things began to escalate fast in my little life. I joined a street gang of kids my age to which I later became their leader. I began experimenting with drugs starting with marijuana and graduating to harder narcotics. I learned to break into places to steal. One day I broke into a bank not realizing it was bank. I started hitting up all these places and breaking in. Temptation was great, but something always held me back. I kept getting into more and more trouble with the police and being a problem in the community. I was in and out of juvenile detention institutions, and finally I was given the opportunity to go into a boy's home in Nebraska. Here this was supposed to be a safe place. But not only did my troubles follow me there, but I began to be abused by the people who ran the place, and so I in turn started fighting and abusing the other kids in that same place. I kept running away time and time again, and being caught and brought back to the shelter. Then one day I did leave, this time for good. Things continue to get even worse for me in the street at home. I began to freebase with cocaine. This is what crack cocaine is. Now I was hooked on a stronger narcotic. Every bit of money I could get my hands on went to support this new addiction. At this point of my life I was

fifteen years old, and I went back to Ohio to live with my mom. I tried to make an effort for the sake of my mom to get myself straightened out and go back to school. It almost seems that God always had His eyes on me for some purpose, because I excelled in everything good I'd set myself to achieve. I got into sports and started playing basketball for our high school and became a star player. Colleges started trying to recruit me to play for them. They documented my skills as great. I was supposed to restrict myself to a special nutrition which cost money, but we were poor and my mother was on welfare, so I did what I knew how to do best, and that was hitting the street and started selling drugs to make money.

In school I developed a reputation and I used that reputation to use and manipulate people mainly young girls, and also to push my drug business. By age seventeen I fathered a child, a little baby boy. At the time that was sort of a pride in the street among us street people, to be able to father a little boy that you can take around with you and say this is my little shorty. This is my son. It becomes a prideful thing. But when you never had a connection with your own father, what kind of father can you really be to your little boy. So I really didn't have a connection with my son, because I was a child myself. It was hard for me to be a father when I really never had an example.

At age twenty one I made a name for myself. I was called a hustler, a street monger, a dope dealer etc. I wound up leaving my child and his mother and went after my selfish ambitions of street life and making money the wrong way. Behind the scene I was running from everything, I was running from the police, my family and my own demons. I lost my scholarship to play for college basketball. I lost the trust of everyone who knew me, even my family. By now I had gone back to the street and began or better to say, resumed hassling. Now I was selling pills like LSD, Mescaline and all kinds of mood altering drugs. People knew me everywhere, and my clientele was huge, money was good but my life was quickly coming apart. I remember getting a job at a steel mill and making about forty thousand dollars a year. At that time that was a lot of money, but because I was also making even more money selling drugs in the street, I would wind up with three and four weeks of checks that I'd forget to cash. Now money was not the issue in my life. It was hearing others that were concerned for me. I couldn't get it together at all. This finally cost me to lose contact with my son. My relationship with his mother ended. So I continued doing this same thing in the street. Living the life world of drugs and violence. Back in those days things weren't any different from what we see today in our streets. There guns and street drive by killings just like you see today. By saying this I have to tell you that I'm blessed to be alive today. That in that environment, God preserved my life for what He has me doing for Him today.

My life took another direction when I met another young lady who became the one to show me what sweetness can really do in a troubled life like mine. We dated for a long time and then we got married. I was that in love with her, that it made me want to marry her. But sadly to say,

I continued in my troubled ways of street life. She became pregnant with my daughter and began to suffer the consequences of my behavior to the point where she had to separate from me and move to Florida to take time to consider if we needed to get a divorce. This hit me hard. I promised to change if there could be a second chance. So with her acceptance I went to Florida to be with her, and I took a job in a car dealership as a car salesman. There I met a guy who was a Christian and a recovering addict. We became close friends.

While working with my friend, he began witnessing to me in between breaks, and invited me to attend the 12 step recovery program he attended in his church. I took him up on his offer and went with him one evening. That night I surrendered my life to Christ and started on my road to a complete and wholesome recovery. My challenges continued but, I began to discover how powerful and awesome the changing power of Jesus Christ is.

I began to experience a real love in me for my wife and my kids. Now I didn't have to face challenges alone. Jesus said "when we're tired and heavy laden," He will give us rest". That means He takes that challenging load from you. And that's what he did with me. Praise His Holy Name!!!

Chapter Five

His Mercy Endures for Ever and Ever

Like Pastor Carl, there's many young kids stuck in the crossroads of life with no clue as to which way to turn. They have no idea that there's a loving Savior called Jesus Christ that knows all too well the road they're on. That's why He said, "I Am the Way, The Truth, And the Life" He is the way out of the troubled life we live in. He identified with every situation in our world then and now. He was wanted like a common outlaw, He was tried and executed like a criminal. He took the rap for a gang member and a criminal called Barabbas, just like the code of honor you see in the streets today. Only His code of honor changed and is still changing lives today. Mary Magdalene, a prostitute in her day, found forgiveness and freedom, Mathew the tax collector, who was considered to be a government authorized thief, found a place among those closest to Him, the outcast and sick people found hope too. Likewise today, a severe drug addict finds hope and freedom from addiction, a man who's lost everything finds everything new in Him, Families are restored and broken lives are rebuilt again. These are people that society labels as out casts, He calls them precious. To a religious person called Nicodemus, who thought that he had the answer, He said you must be born again.

Isn't it mind blowing? How the Creator of the universe took the form of a man and clothed himself with such compassionate love and drew close to man? To show him that there is hope and forgiveness if only eyes were lifted up to Him? We see it even now, in the darkest corners of this world, in the troubled streets. People filled with love and compassion through Christ reaching out to touch the many broken lives that find themselves without hope. Someone said to me once that hope is the fuel that ignites faith, and the Bible tells us in Hebrews chapter 11:1 that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." As people heard about the miracles, especially those in despair, their hope drove them to believe in Him. Without seeing they already knew that He could set them free.

He is the same today as He was back then. He is still setting people free. He is still changing lives. Just like He did with Nicodemus, He reassures us that we can be born again, start over with a clean slate, see a new sunrise. I remember standing in a street corner one cold morning. As I pulled the collar of my gang jacket up to shield my face from the cold wind, I remember asking myself, "is there anything else in this life for me, other than this pathetic street gang life?" Even there, He reached out to me through a courageous caring Christian believer to tell me, "Yes there is something else, something wonderful and full of hope. A new birth."

Chapter Six

There is hope for the hopeless

There is a place in Dade City Florida that reaches out to young men that are severely addicted to drugs. This program is sponsored by The Assembly Of God Counsel of Home Land Missions. It was there that we met a young man named John, who is the executive director of the Florida Chapters of a known ministry that we will reserve the name to protect its privacy. John shared with us his unusual experience with the troubled streets in his days. He was a part of a movement called "The Juggolos". These young people gather by the thousands in one place to do some of the darkest things anyone could ever imagine. As he described their behavior in these gatherings, it made me remember the Woodstock generation of the 1960's, but ten times worse. In this chapter, John will share his gripping story of the troubled streets and the Juggles movement into becoming an inspiration for many other young people like him.

My Testimony

I was born in, 1985. Growing up in Indianapolis Public Schools, I was a minority and being a small white kid, I got picked on frequently. I became racist, and my home life added more fuel to my anger. At home, I dealt with a father that came out of the Marine Corps very angry and bitter. I always felt like I was walking on eggshells around him, as did my mom, which led to arguing a lot. I was taken to church by my parents, but I received the impression that they were only taking me to make my grandmother happy. I also didn't see them living out their Christianity in the home and watched them eventually get a divorce. When taken to church, I would sit on the back row (we were the "trouble-making kids"). One day, around the age of twelve, I felt like the preacher was looking directly at me when he was preaching and it seemed like all I heard was, "believe or you're going to hell!" At that moment, I got up walked out of church and quit going back. I told myself and others that I'd worry about that 'church stuff' when I was older. This helped me to begin moving faster down a path of rebellion. I began meeting new friends that introduced me to a new lifestyle. They enjoyed skateboarding, alternative music, gothic/punk styles, dressing in black, making and causing trouble on purpose, and I began to enjoy all these things I hadn't experienced before. Along with all of this came my first experience smoking weed and huffing inhalants. I then heard a cassette tape that had a purple and green clown on it and was called the Riddle box. The music group's name was Insane Clown Posse and their followers called themselves, "Juggalos". They would sing about graphic things that I never really heard people openly talk about. They would also put a funny twist on all of it, so this caught my attention. "Normal" people didn't say these things, and when you repeated the lyrics, people would be in shock & amazement about the things you just said out loud. Because of my rebellious attitude, I began following this culture and openly proclaiming it. As I dove into this culture, I realized I had an instant Juggalo family that I belonged to. No matter where I was, when I saw another Juggalo with the Hatchet man symbol, we sensed an instant bond.

This rebellious lifestyle began to increase into deeper thought patterns and issues. I began purposely rebelling and I wanted everyone to see it. Eventually the drug use increased and I began smoking weed on a daily basis. I would steal from stores for an adrenaline rush and began vandalizing houses, cars, and anything else that would come across my path. Around this time, we got our first computer at home with AOL internet and I began to teach myself about computers and the internet. Within a couple years, I had learned how to hack other people's accounts, emails, and web pages. I also started receiving and trading stolen account info and credit card numbers in AOL chat rooms. I ordered and received a brand new laptop valued at \$2500 from a large named computer company with a stolen credit card number I received in a chat room. After some circumstances revolving around breaking into someone's house, my

parents were notified about what I had done and they took me and the laptop into the Sheriff's Department. This was my first time in handcuffs, but it was just a scare tactic and they let me go.

Around this time, I was forced to move out to my dad's place in another county, almost 30 miles away from my mom and Indianapolis. Right away, I met some kids that were into the same music and rebellious activities I liked. The drug use began to increase more and more. Around the age of 15, I was now buying, selling, and ingesting acid (LSD) on a daily basis. When I turned 16, I got my license and began working in the next bigger town, at the same time selling weed and pills because I could travel farther and easier. After constantly experimenting with different drugs, I was introduced to a little expensive (\$35) blueish green pill called OxyContin. This was the drug that controlled my life. I began using and selling Cocaine to support my addiction...I would do anything that made me money, including burglary, theft, and dealing various drugs.

I graduated High School in 2003 but lost my Academic Honors Diploma because I only had a 2.8 GPA and 3.0 was required. I was very addicted to opiates (OxyContin) by the time I graduated, but eventually began working as an electrician. My drug habit got so bad, that I would nod out (fall asleep) while driving, at work on a ladder, and even while eating. One night after partying hard, I passed out while driving home and woke up on the wrong side of the interstate heading towards an oncoming car. Other times, I would wake up, go outside, and find my car wrecked, not knowing how I made it home. The first part of John 10:10 reads, "The thief (devil) only comes to steal, kill, and destroy." That is exactly what the devil was trying to do; kill me. At 20 years old, I was arrested for the first time for a DUI. After being put in the system, I violated probation and was arrested many more times. But in 2007, this three-month jail stint was not the normal one for me. I saw this young 18 year old black man hold these prayer circles at the end of each night with those in the jail block that wanted to join. Although I thought I was racist, something appealed to me when this guy would pray. I now know that it was the authority of God this young man was speaking with, and that God was speaking through this young man to reach me. One night in April at the end of the prayer circle, we began to repeat, "I love you Jesus," out loud and I felt the love of God flood my heart and break my hardened heart. Even though for so many years I walked around acting hard with a face like flint, God broke me and tears flowed from my eyes. I knew what was happening; my sins had been forgiven by Jesus Christ, and I was now saved.

Immediately I had a desire to tell people about Jesus. I went to my friends and told them I knew how they could get off the pills (opiates), but when I said, "Jesus" they would turn away in disappointment. Because I wasn't led to the Lord through a chaplain or pastor, I had no training or discipleship, and would try to minister in the same places I came from where people were drinking and using drugs. Before long, I was back drinking and using with them, and then

reading my Bible to them while we were using. In 2009, I left Indiana for good to move to my grandma's new place in Florida to get away from the OxyContin pills. I thought that if I moved in with my grandma "the Christian" then I wouldn't use drugs. Unfortunately, I found out that over 80% of OxyContin in America is manufactured right in Florida, with Florida being deemed the "Pill Capital" of the United States. Because the pills were so cheap and the doctors were giving them out like candy, my addiction became worse than ever. I eventually began shooting up the pills with needles and turned to shooting up Heroin when the government finally began cracking down on the pill mills, (Dr.'s who over prescribed medication).

I used to attend church frequently with my grandma and cry out to God to set me free from addiction like He did in 2007. One day at my grandma's church, this older man who was a Leader and Minister, was with a group of younger men, who were on stage talking about how they used to be drug addicts, but God set them free through this man's Bible based recovery ministry. It sounded great, but I still wasn't ready for help. I remember coming up with this plan one day that I carried out. I stole my grandma's debit card, took the rest of her money out of the bank, bought pills and got high, then went back home to her house to tell her what I did and that I needed help. I remember sitting there at her kitchen table saying, "Why is God leaving me here on earth to suffer with addiction? Now that I am saved, why won't He just take me home to heaven?!" At this time, she reminded me of the program we saw at church weeks before, so we called and I was accepted into the program.

This is a very intense 2-year residential discipleship program for men with life-controlling problems, basically a Bible Boot Camp. I left the program four times without completing because I wasn't ready to fully surrender my life to God. I still felt I deserved this or deserved that, when in all actuality, the only thing I deserved was hell. But Jesus still died for me, and Pastor Wendell Wilson still believed God had a plan for my life, so he allowed me back into the program for the fifth time, which is not something they usually do. After two years, I realized God was calling me to serve at this program long term. God put it in my heart, as well as the founder, that I was the man for him to raise up to be his successor and carry on the legacy of this program that he began in 1983. He sowed into me day after day for five years, mentoring me and training me into a disciple-making man of God that walks upright with integrity.

After graduating the program, I stayed on as a staff member and began attending multiple Bible Colleges. In 2014, I became a Credentialed Minister of the Assemblies of God. I went from being "Crazy John" the heroin junkie, to Rev. John, the unashamed Jesus freak! I am now serving as the Executive Director of this Awesome program while overseeing all of our locations throughout Florida, including Palmetto, Dade City and our newest location opening in the Greater Miami area. I have the privilege of training and sowing into men every day, while helping them learn to live godly lives free from addiction. One of my life scriptures is Gen 50:20, which I prefer to personalize the scripture to my life. This is a paraphrase, "As for you (the devil),

you meant evil towards me to harm me with everything that's happened in my life and my past, but God meant it for good and is now using everything you did to me (my past and my testimony) to save many other people's lives." I do not believe that I would be as effective in helping train men to live drug-free lives had I not been through what I've been through in my past. If you surrender your life to God, He will use your past to help so many others.

A few years after I began serving the Lord, He gave me a vision to reach out to the subculture I came out from, called "Juggalos". The Lord gave me the name, "From Juggalo to Jesus Freak," and I originally thought He wanted to write a book about my life with that being the title. Shortly afterwards, I realized that it was a ministry He was calling me to, for reaching out to the "Juggalo Family". Within four months, I found myself 1100 miles away ministering the Gospel at the annual Gathering of the Juggalos (a festival where 7,000 to 10,000 people of this culture gather for four days to listen to horrorcore bands, do drugs, and have all night parties while camping out.) Drugs are consumed and sold openly, some people walk around with little or no clothes, and the profanity and explicit content is more than you could imagine or probably endure. For the past four years, I have traveled each year up north to this event to hand out free food and cold drinks while ministering and praying for hundreds of people. The first year we baptized three Juggalos in the Ohio River, on the festival grounds. We see salvations every year, along with healings, chain of addictions broken and freedom from lifestyles of sin. I feel like God gave me this vision to be the hands and feet of Jesus to the Juggalo Culture, showing them the unconditional love of Christ that radically changes and transforms lives.

I am also blessed to travel every January to the nation of India to preach the gospel and to oversee our program in India, which consists of an orphanage with 45 beautiful children, a Christian school for the orphans, a Bible College & Seminary, and 160 churches. God is truly fulfilling the great commission of, "Going and making disciples of all nations."

Earlier in this chapter I quoted the first half of John 10:10 where it reads, "The thief (devil) only comes to steal, to kill and to destroy," but in the second half of the verse Jesus proclaims, "But I have come so that you may have life and life more abundantly." I am now walking in this abundant life that Jesus gave me, by sacrificing himself on the cross to die for my sins. You too, can find freedom from any addictions or bad habits in your life through the power of Jesus Christ, and then be able to step into the abundant life that He has provided for you!

Chapter Seven

Time and time again we see it throughout history: The great King Solomon said "nothing is new under the sun, what was is what continues to be". Jesus said "The children of darkness are more cunning than the children of light." Meaning, evil seems to thrive more in this world, and

its preference is darkness. It abounds more at night than in the daytime, especially in the large inner city streets.

It takes on different names like,

Hustling, Copping, Streetwalkers, Gangbangers etc. And it promises all kind of thrills and excitement, all hiding behind the curtain of darkness. Almost every lawless deed hides behind that same curtain of darkness. That's where we see "drug trafficking, sex trafficking, street violence, and all kinds of activity we don't normally see during the daytime or when it can be easily seen.

But we also have to understand that evil and darkness takes on other forms that can be deceiving to the human understanding. We have to remember that Satan was once an angel of light. The Bible says that he was the most beautiful of angels in heaven, taking on one of the most important rolls given to an angel. That was until evil/pride was found in him, and he was cast down from heaven, dragging a third of the angels in heaven into darkness. This is where he is bound to.[Isaiah 14:12] This is his territory, and he's always trying to disguise himself as light, meaning what we may be looking at or the pain we are dealing with, God Has a purpose for good and the devil always has an evil intention to destroy us and others around us. In saying this, the next chapter is about a totally different person. One who grew up in a small town in Florida, who never experienced the dark troubled streets of the inner cities, or was ever in trouble with the law when she was growing up. But she was a victim of drug addiction, and she experienced many of life's hard struggles we have previously read about. Here she is to tell her story.

A small town girl's story

By Christie

Jesus, please, get this monkey off my back!!! I cried out to a picture of Jesus Christ I had hanging on my wall for years as I crawled on the floor to get to the phone to dial 911.

I had been doing drugs for years and now it had begun to take a toll on my body to where even smoking pot was becoming dangerously harmful to me.

I kept trying to quit, flushing pot down the toilet, or asking a close friend to hide it from me. But I kept falling right back into using again and again. And now this very day I had smoked so much tripping weed, I felt that my lungs were going to collapse.

I was a normal working mom by day with a small baby boy. at night

I was getting high, not even thinking of the negative outcome this would take on me and my son.

Now it all came to a clash as I tried as hard as I could to gasp for air! Something was happening! I could hardly breathe! I couldn't get enough air!!

GOD, HELP ME PLEASE!! I fell down on my knees and cried out for Jesus to "take this monkey off my back", and He did! Immediately I felt like something was released from me and from that moment on, I never wanted or did drugs again!

So now laying there, startled at what had just happened, I began to reflect on everything in my past life.

Snap Shots

One would think I grew up sheltered and safe like any other small town girl. But it's sad to say it isn't so. For one thing, I never experienced the healthy emotional love of my parents. My mom was always strict in her ways and my dad, though a lot kinder, was neglectful in ever expressing much love or involvement with any of us. I never really experienced the love of the father. I'm not sure how it all happened. All I remembered was it started when I was very young, maybe three or four years old. At that age I began to understand that things were hard, even for a little child like me

Things started happening fast. I remember we had a babysitter who we called "Aunt Nora", even though we weren't related. She and her husband were from Ireland. She had been a professional nanny in Ireland for many years and was reluctant to come out of retirement to babysit me.

One day Aunt Nora said to me "did you know that today is your mom's birthday? Did you say happy birthday to her?" "What?" I was dumbfounded. "Is today really my mother's birthday?" she said "yes" "Can I go over and say happy birthday?", "Of course" and she took me by my little hand and walked me up the block to our house and I could see my mom's car was still there. Then I saw her come out and get in her car, I could have sworn she had seen us.

So I ran as fast as I could to catch up to my mom before she went off to work, and I saw her backing out of our driveway, I started yelling at the top of my lungs, "Mom. I want to say happy

birthday!” But she didn’t stop. It was as if she didn’t even want to be bothered, or maybe she didn’t want to be held up. But she just drove off without even looking back I don’t know, maybe she just didn’t want to be late. But there I stood, watching my mom drive away. I felt my heart being crushed.

I could see that “Aunt Nora” couldn’t find a word to console me with. She always seemed to say the same thing all the time. “Your mom just works very hard.” That was her simple way to get me to understand.

My mom was a registered nurse and she worked with all kinds of people in different parts of town. One program she worked for was federally funded. This was an elementary school program for low income families that was established in the poor side of town. Most were black families, and this program was in an elementary school where she served as the school nurse. On my summer vacation she would take me with her to the school. I would just hang out and try not to get in the way. I was taken by how different these people were, and how different their culture was from ours.

One day when I was about five years old we visited one of these families home and I noticed something very unique. It was their culture. I remember the smell in the house, it smelled like flour and oil. I remember thinking “wow, is this what a black families home smells like?”

I thought to myself “I bet none of my friends have ever been in a black home like me before” I noticed that even though they didn’t have much, their home was kept very neat and orderly. And it felt like a proper home.

Encounter

When I was twelve I became involved with our church youth group and someone gave me book called “Run Baby Run” by an author called Nicky Cruz, a former New York City gang leader.

When I read this book, I was really captivated by its story. I kept thinking to myself “why has this book impacted me so much and got such a hold on me? Nothing in my life had anything in common with the story in the book.” But I just couldn’t let it go from my mind. Little did I know that the mystery would be revealed later in my life, when the Lord called my husband and me into ministry, ministering in the inner-city streets everywhere in this country.

Another evidence to this mystery came when my family took my sister to New York City, to fly out of JFK to France as an exchange student. We all went on that trip, and we stayed in a Howard Johnson Hotel in Midtown Manhattan. This was definitely a different world there. The large city streets seem to buzz with traffic and lots of people everywhere. There was a multitude

of people in every corner waiting for the traffic light to change, it was the same at night, that's why it's also called "The City That Never Sleeps".

New York City had two different effects. One during the day time and another during the night. During the day, there's a constant grid lock of vehicles and loud emergency sirens and at night, the city dresses itself up with the splendor of colorful neon lights that promoted excitement of all kinds. Movie theaters, operas and party spots everywhere, not to mention the numerous news and magazines stands that remain open throughout the night everywhere.

Later that day, after we checked in, my dad asked me if I wanted to take a walk with him. "I guess so" I said. But it made me wonder why I, and not my sister who was the one going away from home, or my brother, who was the eldest. But like I said, this was a mystery in itself for what was going to take place in the future.

So we walked block after block of the Bowery section of the city, which was precisely near the hotel where we were staying. I noticed the emergency vehicles and fire trucks were constantly racing past us. It wouldn't stop, in my innocent mind I kept wondering where the huge fire was, because these vehicles kept going up and down nonstop.

I also noticed as we walked that there were drunk and homeless men sitting alongside of the sidewalks, lots of them. Some would extend their hands out to us asking for money. "Can't we help these guys dad?" I asked "No honey, there's too many of them, and it can get dangerous if they mob us. So finally my dad asked "have you had enough?" I thought, what an odd thing to ask. I shrugged my shoulders and said "I guess so" And we headed back to the hotel.

Journey into Darkness

In those early years of my life, I had no understanding of what addiction to drugs and alcohol was. I had no understanding of sexual promiscuity or anything of that nature. All I know is my life began to spiral down faster than I could realize. When I reached my teenage years I began hanging out with a couple of girls from our high school band class. I thought these girls were pretty cool to hang around with. They ended up turning me on to pot (Marijuana), and getting me high for the first time. Pot then became my go to thing in times of personal disappointment or struggle. Later in college, I started using pot more frequently and graduated to harder drugs like cocaine, acid LSD and even opioids. This also started me on a journey to an even darker place of sex and drugs that I thought I would never be able to recover from, for twenty years.

I started to see myself as a failure. I began to lose hope. There was no joy left in my life. I started wasting away my last year in High school. I was having sex with my boyfriend because I was desperately lonely and I thought that this was the way to fill my void. I felt that no one

understood me. I started to turn inward instead of upward towards God. And with every sin I felt farther and farther away from Him.

I felt that God nor anyone else would ever want me now. I looked for ways to hide my shame. Even before college in the last year of high school, I became pregnant. My boyfriend and I wanted to have the baby, and made plans to move in together or maybe me just moving out of my families' house. But Satan had another plan and used the people closest to me to convince me to go out of town and have an abortion. To be honest, I didn't even know what an abortion was at the time. But according to my family, this was the quickest way and easiest way and no one in town would have knowledge that I was pregnant, or that I had an abortion.

I was told that it was just a blood clot, so I did just that. It was arranged. I was taken out of town where no one knew us, and I aborted my baby.

On that bus trip back home I realized I was missing something deep down in my soul, and it wasn't a blood clot, it was my baby, he was gone forever. That deep sadness began to set in deeper in my heart. I wish that I can tell you that by going to college and getting an education, things got better and all would be normal again, but it didn't, not for me at least; it didn't take away the pain and shame and even worse, the immense guilt was weighing me down all the more. Nothing can take that away other than the awesome forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ.

Now to make matters worse, I escalated in my drug use and continued to have unprotected sex and having more abortions. I was always looking for someone to love me, but it always ended up in lies. I was always in and out of abusive relationships., and in later years in and out of marriages seeking the answer to my downward spiral.

This lifestyle lasted for many years. I would repent and ask God for forgiveness and then resort to doing it all over again. I failed to realize that true repentance comes from heart change deep inside. It means having to turn and walk in a totally different direction. One hundred and eighty degrees different.

I was so filled with self-deception and self-pity that I couldn't see that what was really missing was the love and the change that can only come through a Savior, and that would be Jesus Christ, the Son Of God, who died to take away the sins of the world, especially mine.

Now at age thirty six I finally hit the point of my worse despair. Not from drugs but from the emotional baggage that had been buried deep inside my soul.

But my life began to take another turn when I met a very godly woman, a true Christian lady that you could really feel God's anointing in her. I met her through her son, who I was seeing on occasions. He was an addict. Even though I wasn't doing drugs anymore, it was still a very bad

place for me to be. I still had a lot of junk in my life, a lot of hurt emotions that needed to be healed and delivered.

So this woman started taking me to church along with her son, and while he could care less about God, something started happening in my heart. I wanted to go to church more. I began to realize that God wasn't mad at me. He loved me just for who I was, and He looked past my shame. I wanted to have a personal relationship with God. So one Sunday, sitting in church with this lady, my mind drifted back to that night when I crawled across the floor and ended up before the picture of Christ. I was remembering how I was crying out for God to help me.

My tears began to roll down my cheeks and my heart was pounding. This was exactly what I was waiting for all my life but I didn't know it. Now I knew what I needed to do. So I left the church that day, left my boyfriend and his mother who had encouraged me to go find my own church, I promised her I would go find my own church and start my own walk with the Lord, and I did. Praise God!!

I finally realized that He [my Heavenly Father] was there all along, knocking at the door of my heart. Revelation: 3: 20 says "I am at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door I will come in and sup with him".

I couldn't believe that this was actually happening! I felt the weight lifting off! My heart was overwhelmed with joy! I began to feel like I was really home for good this time.

Several years later, after attending a church and a Christian 12 step program, the Lord began ordering my steps. He began to put a passion in my heart for the lonely people of this world, through a ministry that the Lord gave my husband and I.

I now remember what it was that I was seeing many years ago, when my dad and I went for that walk in New York City, as we went past the drunk and homeless men in The Bowery section of the city, as I looked in the eyes of those men, I was seeing the "Eyes of Jesus" looking back at me, and God was letting me know that even though I could not help them at the time, I would return one day to help them and love them like He loved me.

My husband and I have made numerous mission trips to New York City on street outreaches, and we've seen those same eyes in every individual that we've approached. Everyone, young, old, rich, poor, gang members, drug addicts, alcoholic, prostitutes etc. We see "Jesus in their eyes", we see Jesus move in their hearts, and it's He who collects their tears as they drop. [Psalm 56:8].

Chapter Eight

Pathway of Hope Out of the Troubled Streets

Today, as I'm sitting here before my computer, pondering the next lines of this chapter, it occurred to me that each one of these stories have four things in common. Expectation, Disappointment, Despair and finally Hope. But I like to shed light on the last element we're referring to as hope. Each one of these individuals began with an expectation of achieving something early on in their lives. But then something changed. To some, it started with peer pressure in school. With others, it was a sense of needing to belong to something like a street gang or group of this kind in the streets. Then others, it was a sense of insecurity. The Bible tells us In 1st Corinthians 13 that three powerful elements will remain forever, Love, Faith and Hope, and while the greatest of these is love, hope becomes the pathway that brings us to love and faith. I heard a Pastor say to me a long time ago that hope is the fuel that ignites love and faith. Each one of these individuals navigated the road of expectation, disappointment and despair to be able to find the Pathway to hope. But in this case, Hope takes on a form of a man called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who takes away the sins of the world. It was He who suffered a terrible death on the Cross so that we can have that hope. This is the only way we can find our way out of the hopeless troubled streets. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth and the life". It's only through Him that one can break free of any kind of bondage or addiction. It's only through Him that one can break free from street gangs, and sex trafficking, from despair and from all kinds of inner brokenness. It's only through Him that broken families can be restored. He is the hope for the hopeless. In the bible there's a story of a man with leprosy who approached Jesus, and said to Him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean", and Jesus stretched out His hand and said "I am willing, be cleaned". And immediately his leprosy was cleaned. (ASV) This was a man that society discarded. No one wanted anything to do with him, because he had a contagious disease. He had no hope of ever being normal again. But he came to Him and found hope. The religious people of the time told him there was no hope for him. But he found Hope in Him who was called The Savior.

I myself was in the same situation this man was in, being a problem to society, when I was growing up. I was a gang leader in New York City to one of the most vicious and violent street gangs in the city, and like this man, I too was told that there was no hope for me. Society didn't want anything to do with me. While they saw me as an undesirable, He saw me through eyes of love, and He showed me His Pathway of Hope. His Pathway of Life, and a love that moved the highest mountain of hatred that drove me into a lawless life of street violence and addiction. Constantly running through alley ways of darkness in my life as a Child of The Troubled Streets.

Yes! The miracle, a new birth took place in my life, by faith through Jesus Christ the Son of God, who died in my place. He alone took the rap and conviction of what I alone had coming to me.

He showed up in my brokenness, and opened my eyes to see Him. That's exactly what He did in His days as He walked here on earth. Everyone He healed and delivered were people who were able to see Him through their brokenness.

We read about the blind man who called out to Him, how He heard his cry even when the crowd of people wanted to shut him up, and He came to him, and healed his blindness. Or the adulterous woman who was about to be stoned to death, when she was caught in her adultery. She saw no hope. But in her brokenness, He was there to set her free. Or what about the demon possessed man that lived in a grave yard. The Bible says that they bound him in chains and he kept breaking them. It says that he was running naked and causing all kinds of trouble. But one day Jesus showed up, and dramatically set him free. He is still setting people free dramatically. The Bible tell us that He's the same yesterday, today and forever.

So as I continue to walk through the troubled streets of this nation, I see the evidence of the brokenness everywhere, of what's really deep down inside. It reflects on the conditions of the surroundings. Society has given it a name, 'they call it the slums.'

There's no beauty in the public landscape. What's meant to be nice and green along the sidewalks is tainted with empty broken liquor bottles and beer cans, along with every kind of trash that tells you there's no hope. Even the trees in the public park seem like it's all they can do to try to beautify what they are calling a slum territory, with graffiti and trash everywhere on its grounds.

When you look at the houses and buildings, with its walls filled with colorful graffiti, every window represents a family that's trapped in its prison of despair and hopelessness.

But like I said, He (Jesus) is our Pathway of Hope when we turn our eyes to Him. Then He helps us to see Him through our brokenness. And that's what He did in my life, and can do in yours. Amen.

Lifetime Journey

I like to take this opportunity to shed light on what you may not be seeing through your pain and despair, or your thoughts of hopelessness. Or maybe there's nothing hindering your life right now and all is well and maybe you're doing good and you're on top of the world, conquering the lime light etc. The fact remains that there really is a space in our hearts that Belongs to God. Its called a God made hole. We find ourselves trying to fill that emptiness with all kinds of other things. Like money, love, drugs, alcohol and maybe even a professional career like sports or a title of some sort. Which there is nothing wrong with that, but He's been wanting to have a part in your life forever. He yearns for this so much that He gave His Only Son,

Jesus Christ, to die in your place so that Through Him, “Jesus” He can have a closer walk with you.

So please, don’t give it second thought, invite Jesus into your heart, and see how good is His mercy, and how far it can take you. Give Him your troubles. He said, “ Come to me if your tired and weighted down, for I will give you rest.” Meaning He will take the load off your back.

Get ready to begin your lifetime journey in Him.

Acknowledgment

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge Pastor’s Saul and Leticia Colon, my parents in Christ, who mentored me during my early years of service in ministry. How they guided my every step and continue to do so today, after thirty years.

Saul and Leticia have ministered as senior marital counselors in the church they attend and they pour into countless couples and families throughout their ministry walk with the Lord.

The Authors Note

While the stories are true, the names and places have been changed to protect the privacy of the characters. This project is intended only for the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to highlight His transforming power. Each person who collaborated with this work did so in sharing the gospel passionately.

Also, the teen correctional program mentioned, though without name originally, has since closed down and no longer exists.

Quotes from Bible text were limited to less than three per chapter, and we carefully acknowledged any and all public domain policies of THE AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION. (ASV)

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About The Author

Carmelo Santana Cuascut, is an ordained minister, evangelist and author.

He conceived the idea for this book which has taken him over four years to bring to publishing. However, we know that the many obstacles are because of the great work God wants to do in each and every person who reads this book.

Carmelo also has written another very impactful book called “Desperate Cry In The Ghetto” which is about his own personal story and testimony of how Jesus took him out of gang life in the streets of Paterson, New Jersey, to serve Him and lead others into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Carmelo’s books have opened many doors for him and his wife to travel and minister to teens and adults in urban intercity neighborhoods and churches both in Florida and the Northeast parts of the United States. Carmelo is a father, step-father and grandfather. He enjoys walking in nature, communing with God, traveling and spending time at the beach.

