

# Teen Challenge more than just reading the Bible

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...you left. First Assembly of God is their church, and we support them the process," Palmer said. "She and some of the staff attend every morning and Sunday night services. The congregation interacts with the students. We have members of our church who were Teen Challenge students who are living healthy and productive."

As long as Teen Challenge clients keep going to church, they're being victorious, Larson said. The program is not all Bible reading. Students learn — of skills such as proper work habits, parenting and marriage relationships. Those who aren't finished high school are encouraged to get a GED. Those who don't read well are tutored. Master craftsmen teach carpentry and auto repair and the program hopes to introduce a computer literacy class soon. In the final phase of the program, clients move to a halfway house facility, where they are assisting in finding suitable employment, housing and a mentoring church organization.

reached that stage. McGILL's life was once completely consumed by drug use. Today, he said he doesn't think about drugs or what he needs to do to get them.

"I used to be the laziest bum," McGill said. "Now I get up and work out. I do the worship thing and I feel like man, I'm ready to go. That's unbelievable."

"How'd that happen to a sloth like me? I don't know. It has to be God. It's the only way to put it."

—A. favorite of President Bush.

Teen Challenge is one of the most frequently mentioned faith-based programs to be a prime candidate for funding in the 1998 support initiative. Organizations dedicated to maintaining the separation of church and state have spoken out against it.

"Taxpayers should never be forced to pay for religious conversions," said Harry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United.

In Texas, the Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse tried to shut down a Teen Challenge program because it did not have accredited counselors. Then Gov. Bush responded by initiating legislation exempting faith-based substance abuse programs from state regulations.

The better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance gave Teen



**Praying to help:** Former student and current staff member Bob Brown has his hands on a student as they pray during a chapel service at Teen Challenge. The daily services can include personal testimonies of staff members and students.



**Facing the past:** Ben Bowman, 18, is filled with emotion during a weekly service shortly after joining the program. Staffers assist in facing the past is important in surrendering to God.

Challenge International low marks because the organization did not furnish current information about its finances, programs and governance.

But it also has a number of studies reporting its success. In reviewing them, Dr. Aaron T. Beckman, a researcher at Northwestern University, found Teen Challenge graduates are far more successful than those treated by publicly funded programs even though they were generally more dysfunctional, more deeply addicted to a greater range of substances and came from difficult-to-reat groups with fewer support systems.

Yet, Teen Challenge graduates are more likely to lead normal lives, hold down full-time jobs and rarely return to treatment than their peers in publicly funded programs, Beckman found.

Palmer isn't surprised.

"It's the Jesus factor," Palmer said.



**Time to laugh:** Cameron Strunk, 23, right, jokes with Bryan VanDyne, 18, while sharing in the daily services. Students find time for fun and friendships during their nine-month CoLife stay.

## Three say program worked for them



**Spreading the word:** Kevin Rowsey, 26, talks with another student. A former drug abuser, he now enjoys evangelizing.



**On the job:** Mike McGill, 42, lowers the flags outside of Teen Challenge as part of duties that rotate among students.



**Building a future:** Scott Brown, 31, passes as he and Steve Carrera, 18, work on a construction project at Teen Challenge.

## Four friends died from drugs

Kevin Rowsey was raised in a Christian home. He went to church on Sundays, attended youth group and worked at Heaven's Gate, a Christian youth center his father owned in Cedar Rapids.

When he was not at church or at the center, he was getting high with friends. He smoked pot for the first time when he was 12.

"During that time, I had two 'bros,'" said Rowsey, who now is 26.

The pot turned to cocaine, morphine and heroin. He was arrested for the first time at the age of 21, for smoking from him to someone to buy drugs.

His troubles persisted as he continued to use and sell drugs. In 1996 he saw four friends die from that overdose. He missed his son Levi's first birthday because he was in jail. He broke into a safe and stole thousands of dollars from his grandparents' while they were out of town. He was arrested for trying to sell someone else's urine for analysis at a halfway house.

He attended some 15 treatment programs. None helped. Rowsey was still using, and facing a prison sentence. Then his mother suggested Teen Challenge.

The faith-based program was

## Workaholic finds new joy

Scott Brown worked 100 hours a week, sometimes more. The self-employed general contractor had struggled through what he called "two failed suicide attempts, the death of his mother, getting a divorce, and living in a trailer." He was willing to live in a trailer, but he was not willing to live in a trailer with his wife and two children.

"I was my escape. It was something I could control myself with in order to numb out everything else."

Then overworking became an obsession — not something he wanted to do but had to do. "I would find myself working longer hours," said Brown, 31. "I would find myself working longer hours," said Brown, 31. "I would find myself working longer hours," said Brown, 31.

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## Back injury led to addiction

Mike McGill, 42, believes God is the only explanation for his transformation. "I was a totally different person than I've ever been in my life and better for it."

McGill was one of 11 children raised by a mother who was addicted to painkillers and a father who was addicted to gambling. He started abusing drugs himself while in high school when he smoked pot with his friends, and continued through a marriage and the fathering of five children. But it was not until McGill suffered a back injury at work that addiction really took over his life.

He began using painkillers at home and at work for the chronic company he owned in Omaha, Neb. He quickly found that taking multiple pills gave him a sense of euphoria.

McGill was arrested for the first time in 1990 but after a brief stint in jail and a 15-day treatment program he went right back to using. During that program, another patient had taught him how to use a doctor and call in prescriptions.

"Once I learned how to do that, that was the beginning of a lot of my trouble," he said.

He was arrested twice more during the next three years, spending multiple nights in jail

—Jeff Thompson