

A Lesson in HOMELESSNESS



Albert City church youth group members Jaycee Dahlstrom, a student at Storm Lake High School; Ashley Nehring, from Sioux Central; and Taryn Kay, Laurens-Marathon; share donated groceries with homeless women and many Vietnam veterans at the Empty Tomb church, part of the eye-opening Urban Plunge program in the poorest part of inner-city Omaha. / Photo by Michael Ross, for the Pilot-Tribune

Albert City church youth group takes 'Urban Plunge' with inner-city homeless, prisoners

"Life can change in a heartbeat. You learn that in a hurry being around the homeless. Make a bad choice, and it could be you."

- High school senior Ashley Nehring

By **DANA LARSEN** / Pilot-Tribune

Fifteen young people from the Albert City area found themselves a few hours from home, but a world away from the comfortably secure cocoon of small-town America they have known, as part of the Urban Plunge program.

They walked the streets of the mean side of Omaha with the homeless, went to prison to speak with longtime convicts, worked in food programs for the desperately needy.

The architect of Urban Plunge, Michael Ross, is a former successful business owner in Albert City and was once the Republican Party chairperson for Buena Vista County.

"I woke up one morning and realized that there was more to life than what I was doing. I ended up selling my business and moving to Omaha to get involved on a personal level," he said. Now, each week, he guides a different group through a world of homelessness and lost souls.

"I had read a book called 'Halftime,' which is about finding what your passion is, and committing the second half of your life to it," Ross said. It so changed his life, he bought 400 copies to share with others.

His program is partnering with nine different social efforts in Omaha to expose teens to the human needs within society.

"I has to be more than seeing it during a weekend in the city. Whether the experience makes them feel good or bad, I hope a few kids can discover what their passion is, what their gift is. I was 45 years old before I figured it out - if they can do it at 16 or 18, great," Ross said.

Ashley Nehring, a local high school senior and a member of the youth group from Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Albert City, reflects that the experience was, "a great big eye-opener."

"Right away we were out on the street in a really bad part of the city. There was a lot of violence and ambulances, and later that night we could hear gunshots," she said. "We talked to the homeless people and offered to pray for them. Some of them were very shy, and some really opened up to us," Ashley said.

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Dallas Heuton stocks food for the homeless in the Urban Plunge program in Omaha.

Urban Plunge: Experience on the mean streets

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In the process, she said, they cast off any misconceptions they brought from their sheltered lives. "Many of the homeless people we were there to talk to and help were actually trying to help us. They would tell us about how they were trying to quit their addictions get off the streets, and were telling the kids not to make the same mistake that they had made," said Ashley.

Despite the sad state of their lives, many make it a point to attend church, where they find some measure of hope.

"After seeing it for three straight days, you start to understand better. You can't downgrade people because they are on the streets," Ashley said.

"Listening to their stories, you realize that life can change in a heartbeat. You learn that in a hurry being around the homeless. Whether it was alcoholism, drugs, sexual behavior, a Make a bad choice, and it could be you."

The Albert City students adapted well, Ross said.

to wander, however, they would very quickly be in places they should not be," Ross said. "The didn't want to quit that night. They would have kept going if we had let them."

There is a code and a culture on the streets. "If one person were to say something disrespectful to one of the kids, there would be four other guys that would stand up and tell that person to leave them alone," Ross said. "These people realize we are out there to try to serve them and listen to them. They appreciate that, because these are people who don't very often get treated very well. We may be out there offering to pray for them, but in a way, they are taking care of us out there too."

On Saturday morning, the youth were taken to a prison. Normally, visitors stick to a youth detention area and meet with a chaplain who was formerly an inmate himself, but that could not be scheduled for the Albert City visit, so the teens went inside the state prison.

There, they met a man who was arrested at about the same age the visitors are now, and has served 38 years including 20 in "the hole" - solitary confinement for bad behavior inside the prison. He will be released next week.

"Obviously, they don't encounter the homeless on the streets of Albert City. But as soon as they arrived, two girls in particular wanted to get out on the street and jump right into it. Here they were serving coffee with about 300 homeless guys walking the street at 10 at night," he said. "I was excited. They went from never having met a homeless person to talking around with them, hearing their stories."

At the Hope Center, in the heavily minority area of north Omaha, the visiting youth found themselves as the minority. They took the disadvantaged children skating. Some of the teens were so excited about the experience that they stayed up through the entire night, Ashley said.

They handed out groceries at a church that offered a bag of food to everyone who came, serving many struggling Vietnam veterans. They sorted clothing donated for the needy, and attended an African American church.

"Everyone is wired differently. What excites one person will not touch another. That's why we take these kids through nine different programs," Ross said. "I think it was especially an eye-opener to be out on the streets with the Angels on Wheels program. There's trash everywhere, broken glass, abandoned buildings, people all over the stoops, cops coming around, and they saw two rescue calls within minutes where they were.

Jessica Roma met a girl with scars on her face, who spoke to her about how she had once been set on fire, and candidly discussed her ongoing struggles with alcoholism. Some of the homeless people the students encountered have forms of untreated mental illness.

A lot, the students found, are neat people who are simply hurting. Several told the students that they have children of their own that they are no longer able to see, and how deeply they are worried for them.

"The kids realized that there is not so much difference between them and the homeless. We're all just human," Ross said.

They also met one of the local leaders, who happens to come from a small town like theirs in Iowa. He had been working as a highly-paid engineer in the suburbs, which he termed "Velvetaville" - a place where you are processed by society to believe that all life is about is getting one more car, and a bigger house. He gave it all up, moved into the inner city. Saw one of his young daughter's friends gunned down. And continues to work to try to make a difference.

Ross says he never knows what will come from his work on the streets with visiting teenagers.

"For some it's just a walk. But our hope is that a few may have a realization and ask, 'What's going on, God? Should I be doing something about this.' We hope they will question why people should have to be living like this in this country. And we hope that when they go back to their community in Iowa, they may be moved to help others out in their own ways."

In six to seven years of operating, the program has never had a volunteer harmed by anyone on the streets, Ross added. However, visitors are warned not to go on the streets with expensive accessories and jewelry.

"They are doing sort of prayer walking, in the part of the city that has the most crime, drugs, prostitution. There are gangs and violence out there, but there is staff around them. If they were

His comments mirrored what they had heard on the streets.

"He told them what life was like in prison, but made a point to tell them why they need to pay attention to the small things in their own lives, because, as he had found, the first small mistake can get bigger and bigger," Ross said.

"The real shocker for me was meeting one lady in prison who had been a great teacher. She had gone to the best schools like Harvard. Something had gone wrong, she was on depressants, and then she started doing forgery and before she knew it, she was standing in front of a judge," student Ashley added.

"You don't have to be poor to mess up. This woman was very intelligent, spoke four languages, was very well educated, came from a great, supportive family," Ross said.

Some of the inmates told the students to mow lawns, get jobs, and find any way to keep busy. A common denominator for those who fall into trouble is laziness, it seemed - a desire to make a quick buck.

The young people were quite nervous and concerned inside the prison, and that suits Ross fine.

"From the minute they get here to the end, our goal is to take people out of their comfort zones - you don't ever grow if you never step outside of that comfort zone," he said.

"They were real troopers, but I do think it was a pretty meaningful experience for them," he said. "As far as how deeply it touched them, only time will tell. That will be up to each one of them to decide."

The Urban Plunge, a name that was borrowed from an unrelated social program in Memphis, has been successful enough that Ross plans to expand it.

A branch program will soon begin in Lincoln, Nebraska, which will specialize in introducing youth to senior citizens. "Young people today don't learn about the older people in society. They don't know how to carry on a conversation with a senior," he said. "Heck, I think they will find that a senior citizen will accept them for who they are - maybe even more so than their parents. If you sit down with a senior and are willing to really talk with them, they don't care if you have metal puncturing your face or tattoos."

Next year, Urban Plunge branches are planned to begin working with the needy and homeless in Des Moines and Kansas City.

Locally, another youth group from Bethel Baptist Church in Newell is making the trip in June. A group of adult singles from Summit Church in Alta recently took part, and other groups of any denomination are welcome. Family groups and college groups are also possible, and experiences can be tailored from three to five days in length. Next year, Urban Plunge will begin reaching out to area organizations like Scouts and 4-H to send groups.

"We aren't forcing these kids to think or feel anything. All we want to do is make an opportunity available to see a lot," said Ross. "If God happens to tug on their hearts or whisper in their ear, cool. It would be great if something sticks."

• For more information on Urban Plunge, e-mail Michael Ross at mross@cfc.org, or call 888-526-7551.