

GRAFFITI & GRACE

Bringing hope to L.A. County's tough streets

By Christina Quick

DENNIS GRIFFITH weaves in and out of Los Angeles traffic with the relaxed composure of a longtime urban dweller.

Scrolling through the messages on his mobile e-mail device, the crisply dressed grandfather of four looks like a typical business commuter. It's hard to imagine he once was a heroin addict on the brink of self-destruction.

Today Griffith routinely rubs shoulders with congressional representatives and other leaders in the nation's capitol. As executive director of Southern California Teen Challenge, he divides his time between the West Coast and Washington, D.C., where he lobbies for faith-based funding and serves on an anti-drug commission appointed by President Bush.

When he isn't talking politics, Griffith ministers in crime-ravaged California neighborhoods like the one in which he grew up.

THE UNKNOWNNS

Los Angeles County is home to some of the toughest streets in the country. Though violent, impoverished neighborhoods lie within half an hour's drive from Hollywood, they couldn't be further removed from the glamorous hub of the rich and famous.

Inhabitants of the aging rental houses and dingy rows of apartment buildings aren't likely to have their names engraved in stars. Many struggle to survive, uncertain where they'll sleep when the sun sinks behind the glowing skyline. In a city of celebrities, they are the unknowns.

Griffith motions toward a group of teens loitering on a neighborhood street corner. "No one cares what they're doing after school," he says with a note of sadness.

He explains that in many cases all it takes to keep youngsters out of trouble is for one person to take an interest in their lives. Unfortunately, most are simply overlooked and forgotten until they run afoul of the law.

Children play unsupervised in abandoned cars or alleyways where used hypodermic needles and cardboard campsites of the homeless litter the ground. Safe play areas are hard to find. Even public parks are overrun with thugs and drug users.

Garish gang graffiti mars much of the architecture. Miles of razor wire woven around businesses and road signs in an attempt to curb the vandalism does little to improve the scenery, giving some areas the appearance of a prison yard. For many, it's a fitting metaphor. Children growing up in the inner city have little hope of escape. Most join gangs in search of acceptance and security, becoming ensnared in a deadly cycle of drug addiction, violence and crime.

"On these streets, you can see many of the lifestyles that lead people to Teen Challenge," Griffith says as he drives through a dilapidated business district.

A few feet from the curb, a middle-aged man is passed out on a bench, a plastic cup and half-consumed bottle of liquor propped beside him.

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A prostitute struggles to cross the street in heels that are nearly too high for her to manage. A saggy sequin blouse and an unlit cigarette — apparently carried for show — give the impression of a little girl playing an inappropriate game of dress-up. Heavy makeup doesn't conceal that she is, in fact, a child of perhaps 12 or 13.

"No one ever says it's their career goal to become a disappointment, an alcoholic or a hard-core drug addict," Griffith says. "They all have their stories to tell."

SAFE HAVEN

At the L.A. County Teen Challenge Center, located in a former crack house, the stories are testimonies of God's grace.

Program supervisor Rick Marone, a broad-shouldered man with a weathered face and handlebar mustache, shot heroin for 40 years before accepting Christ and breaking free from his addiction. It took his wife's death from a heroin overdose to finally get his attention.

"My whole life I sold drugs, made drugs and had a habitual criminal record," he says in a raspy voice. "God set me free from all that. Now I mentor young people so they don't make the same poor choices I made."

Outside the center, Marone points to a bullet hole in the fence, the result of a recent fight between local teens. The building itself bears further scars of gunfire. Teen Challenge, with its residential recovery program and after-school care facilities, is a safe haven amid the violence.

In the enclosed yard, former gang members transformed by Christ have created a new kind of graffiti. Bible verses, pictures of Jesus and other Christian symbols adorn the concrete walls. One young man has artfully painted the words of Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."

Those who have discovered the truth of this Scripture understand they are not unknown. God loves them and has a purpose for their lives.

CHILD OF THE STREET

Griffith knows the harsh realities of poverty and substance abuse. He and his three siblings spent their early childhood mal-

nourished and neglected by their mentally ill mother. At times, their only home was a car. They didn't attend school until they moved in with their alcoholic father and stepmother when Griffith was 10.

Griffith dreamed of becoming an attorney, but he also craved the acceptance of neighborhood kids. With little parental supervision, his desire to fit in eventually led to trouble. By the time he was 13, he was popping pills and smoking marijuana. LSD and cocaine use followed.

Griffith hid the severity of his substance abuse from his girlfriend, Kim, whom he married at age 21. Shortly after the wedding, he secretly started using heroin.

As Griffith's life spiraled out of control, it became impossible to conceal the truth. He became dangerously thin, lost his job as a railroad brakeman, had his car repossessed, nearly died from a drug overdose, and was arrested twice on drug-related charges.

In the meantime, Kim accepted Christ and gave birth to their first child. She fervently prayed for her

husband and pleaded with him to seek help. With a baby to support and a second child on the way, Griffith enrolled in Los Angeles County Teen Challenge.

Feeling beyond hope, he found the message of Christ's love and forgiveness resonated with him.

"I had no earthly reason to hope," he says. "I was still in trouble with the law and my life was still a mess, but when I understood that God could forgive me I knew that somehow I was going to be OK."

Griffith soon sensed God calling him into ministry. After graduating from the program, he accepted a job at the Teen Challenge Center in Riverside. Since that time, he has been helping others discover the hope that set him free.

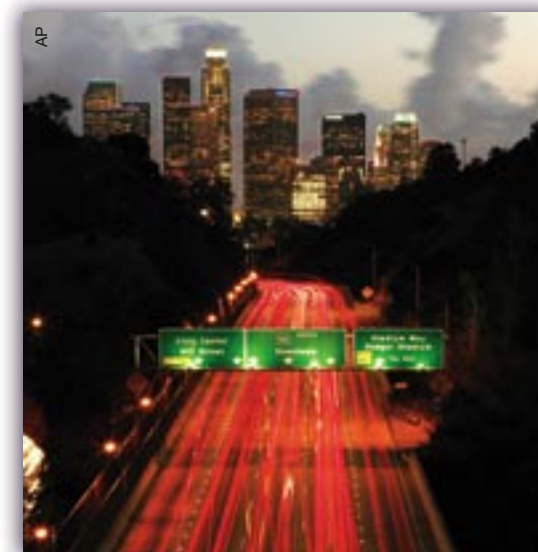
THREE MILES OF SUDDEN DEATH

It's dusk when Griffith parks behind the Orange County Teen Challenge Center in Santa Ana. With 26 known gangs in the surrounding neighborhood, killings are so frequent local police have dubbed the area Three Miles of Sudden Death.

Inside, teens gather for a Friday night event called God's Gang. Many of them belong to local gangs with names like Alley Boys and Suicidal Punks. Despite their street-tough pretence, they show up each week for hugs, a friendly game of football, help with homework, and Bible stud-

ies that challenge them to choose God's plan over a dead-end future.

Griffith says many of the youngsters know nothing outside the inner city. Though the Pacific Ocean is less than 10 miles away, most have never been to a beach. The nearest glimpse of God's beauty is the Teen Challenge



Dennis Griffith (left) is committed to helping others leave drugs and gangs.

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Dennis Griffith (right) meets with staff.



Aaron Funk

Mojarra Jr., who started coming to the center at age 12 and now serves as a staff member. "When there were problems at my house or the streets were too hot, I always came here. This is where I accepted Christ. This is where I learned to live."

WASHINGTON AND BEYOND

Learning to live is what Teen Challenge is all about. Over the years, hundreds of gang members, drug dealers, alcoholics and prostitutes have been transformed by Christ's truth. That fact encourages Griffith.

He is a vocal advocate on Capitol Hill of faith-based initiatives that remove bureaucratic

hurdles and allow programs like Teen Challenge to receive limited government funds. He has served on expert panels providing information to Congress and has testified before a congressional committee.

Griffith currently serves on the Advisory Commission on Drug-Free Communities in Washington.

Last year, Teen Challenge received about \$800,000 in public grants nationwide. Griffith acknowledges, however, that such funds are subject to the whims of politics and may not always be available.

"We continue to depend on the church and God's people for most of our resources," he says. "There are positive dynamics in

pulling together as the body of Christ."

As night falls on the second-largest U.S. city, it's apparent the church's involvement is urgently needed. Beneath a street lamp, a man holds a sign that says, "Homeless. Please help."

Though most of the hurting people don't carry signs, their needs are real. Millions throughout the city and across the nation are desperate for the hope and purpose only Christ can provide. Teen Challenge is responding to their pleas for help. **tpe**

CHRISTINA QUICK is staff writer for *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

B. Believe in Jesus (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

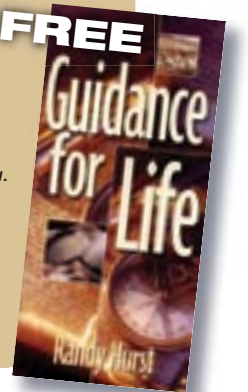
"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

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