

Mentor tells young offenders: ‘I’ve been there’

June 9, 2006

Posted: 6/09/06

Mentor tells young offenders: ‘I’ve been there’

By Laura Frase

Communications Intern

DUNCANVILLE—When Carless Talton talks with young offenders in juvenile detention centers, they recognize she speaks with the authority of firsthand knowledge.

Talton relates her personal experiences as a former drug addict and prostitute and tells about her rebirth as a Christian. Now she serves as regional director for Ring of Champions, a program sponsored by Bill Glass Champions for Life Ministries.

Talton was introduced to Christ in 1989 after she was arrested for drug possession and then admitted to a hospital to treat gangrene in her leg. At the hospital, a nurse told her how much Jesus loved her and about his desire for her to have a better life.

At that point, Talton said, her attitude was, “I don’t get into God’s business, and he don’t get into mine.”

After another arrest, a judge gave Talton a final chance to clean up,

sentencing her to 10 years probation and admitting her into a rehabilitation center.

During the process, Talton promised God she would serve him if he helped her.

But she soon forgot about it, until she passed through an area in East Dallas where she used to turn tricks as a prostitute and saw a sign for a Bible college. Talton wanted to attend college and serve God, but she was afraid they wouldn't accept an ex-con.

To her surprise, she said, "they were all excited that God sent me here."

Talton didn't forget her promise to God and gave her testimony at a church one morning. That testimony made an impact on Jim Lang, then vice president of prison ministries for Bill Glass Ministries. He immediately asked her to be a platform speaker at Champions for Life events, and she has been with the organization ever since.

Talton reaches out to young people with "I've been there" stories, making it easier to build their trust. Ring of Champions needs volunteers like Talton—or anyone willing to help save a child's future by becoming a mentor, she said.

Mentors commit to 12 weeks with a child, spending one hour a week with them. In the first three to four weeks, the young people are testing the mentor to see if he or she will stick around, Talton said, and it takes about two months to form a relationship.

Twelve weeks is the minimum requirement, but mentors may continue with the juvenile as long as they like.

Most mentors decide they want to do it for the rest of their life after their first experience, said Louis Korom, communications coordinator of Bill

Glass Ministries.

Talton wishes a group like this had touched her life when she was struggling.

When she was on the streets of East Dallas, she encountered Christians who preached the gospel to people in need. But afterward, they would leave the people to whom they witnessed on the street, confused and not knowing what to do, she said.

“When we leave, we give our contact information and leave teammates in the area that can help,” she added.

Unfortunately, hundreds of children are left without a mentor, she continued.

“We are always getting new kids, and the crime rate for kids is escalating,” Talton said.

Diane Perkins, chair of the board of Dallas/Fort Worth Ring of Champions, was fearful before her first youth prison facility experience.

“I was nervous about going, and after I went, I said I would never go back again,” she said. She described the young people as hard and their faces blank.

“But I watched Carless grow through her experiences, and I felt God’s call. This fall, I will be a mentor for kids,” she said.

Finding volunteers to mentor troubled children is difficult, Talton said.

“Nobody wants to step up, because there is no glory in what we do,” she said. “We’re just trying to keep kids from spending 20 years on the streets like I did.”

Korom believes people choose not to volunteer because “they think they don’t relate to that particular background, if they’ve grown up as a Christian all their life. Just showing up is all youth want.”

Champions for Life Founder Bill Glass agreed volunteers seldom are assigned children who are a perfect fit for them.

“The most unlikely people are totally effective with them,” Glass said.

The foundation continues to look for help in any way possible.

“As a ministry, we are looking for partnering churches, so when we open a new unit or have new kids, we are going to need more mentors, and we need somewhere to turn where they are prepared,” said George Huey, director of evangelism at Bill Glass Champions for Life. “We need lots of prayers.”

Perkins insists hundreds of children in the United States need mentors, but churches focus on sending missionaries to other countries.

“We need to look right here. We don’t have to go to a foreign country, and you don’t need a visa to be a mentor,” she said. “We just need people to share the love of Jesus to those who have never known that love. Just mentor a child.”

Glass believes Ring of Champions has been a success since its start in 2000, but the program needs more volunteers.

“We give them the Lord, substitute fathers, counseling and mentoring,” he said.

Ring of Champions is growing nationwide, and volunteers are needed in all areas.

“The most important thing we can give them is hope,” Talton said.

The lack of volunteers affects future generations everywhere, Perkins added.

“The Lord has shown me we have to invest in these kids. They are our future,” she said.

For more information on volunteering as a mentor, contact Carless Talton at (972) 298-1101, ext. 305.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.