

TEEN CHALLENGE NEW ENGLAND—

Transforming addicts into leaders

BY KIRK NOONAN
PHOTOS BY AARON FUNK



Worship and volunteerism are staples at Full Gospel AG.

Rodney Hart has tornadic tendencies. He darts from person to person talking, shaking hands, slapping backs and telling the stories of the people he greets as if they were his own. In his trail of grip and grins he leaves goodwill and smiling faces.

Hart, president of Teen Challenge New England, is an affable wedge of a man. He's barrel-chested, wears a flattop and has a deep voice enhanced by a thick New England accent that neglects *r*'s unless they are tagged onto the end of words like idea.

In a tough Boston neighborhood Hart rumbles into a well-kept house that serves as the induction center for Teen Challenge Boston. In the front room several men do data entry or talk on phones to customers.

"The greatest story of Teen Challenge New England is that 95 percent of our staff are graduates of the program," Hart

says as he proudly surveys the men before him. "This here is Eugene Santiago, he used to be a heroin addict; now he's an Assemblies of God minister."

Hart makes his way around the room introducing and touching each person in it.

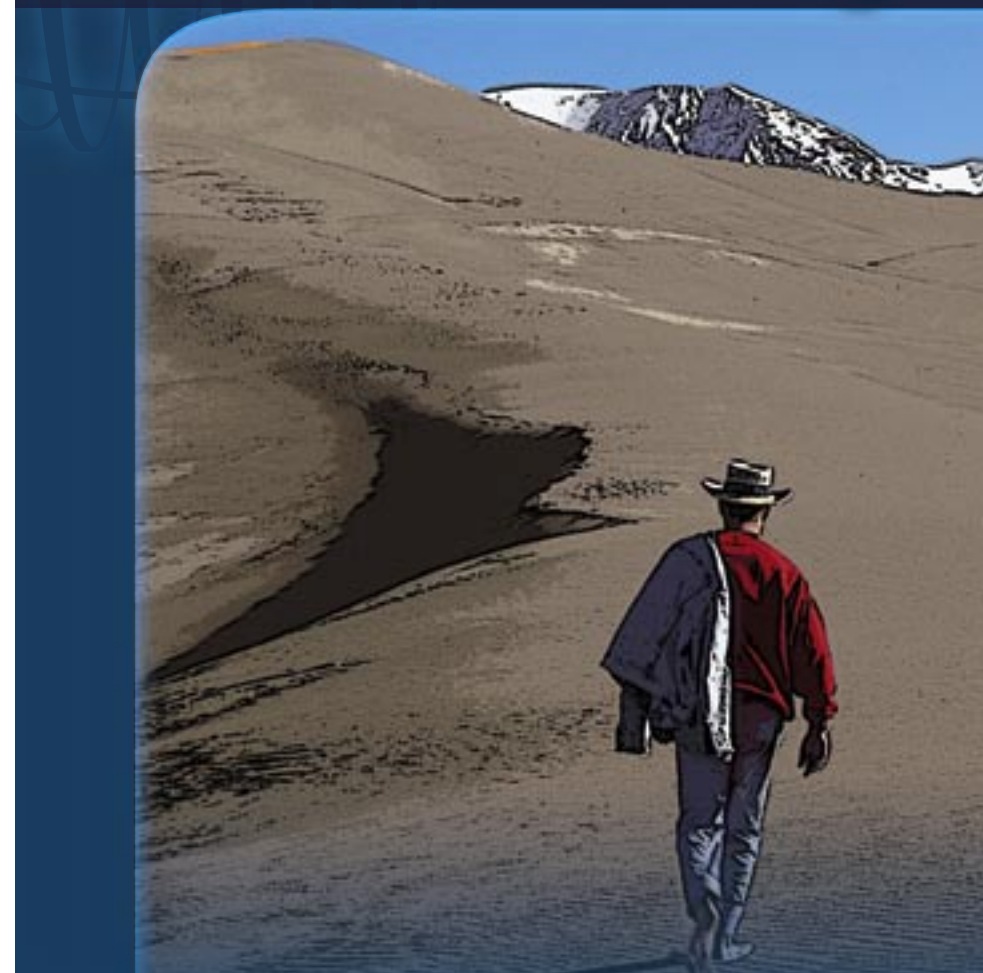
"When I see a drug addict I see a future pastor or evangelist or missionary or staff member," Hart says sincerely. "That's what we're all about."

Hart came to TCNE in 1999 after founding a Teen Challenge ministry in Paraguay. In the late 1970s he went through the program as a teenager after getting hooked on dope. Teen Challenge, he says, changed his life.

Since he took the reins in New England the program has swelled from 50 students to nearly 450 and from a handful of staff members to 125 who work at several sites in Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, Maine, New Jersey and



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continued on page 25

A Texas-sized heart for inner-city pastors and ministries



David McNeely was born and raised in Texas. After ministering in the West Texas District for 10 years, McNeely and his wife, Marsha, felt called to become U.S. missionaries to Boston's inner city. Since 1986 David has served in many capacities, such as church planter, mentor and director of Boston's Urban Bible Training Center. In this interview he lends insight to inner-city ministry.

For nearly 40 years you have been in some kind of ministry. In the past few years you have begun mentoring young pastors. Talk about that opportunity.

I meet with young pastors, listen to them and give counsel. It's important for them to know another person has faced what they're facing. Inner-city ministry is very tough. All of these guys could be ministering in the suburbs, but they have been called here so they gladly serve.

What are some realities such pastors face?

The high cost of living often requires both spouses to work while doing full-time ministry. There is day-to-day stress living in a highly congested area. Pastors must also battle discouragement over small congregations. They have to remember every person in that congregation is important to the Lord.

You must have had some dark days too while ministering in the inner city. What pulled you through all these years?

My relationship with the Lord and the fact that Marsha is a prayer warrior and has remained completely supportive of our work here. And also the people from the West Texas District have supported us beyond the call of duty in terms of finances and especially prayer.

You have served in several positions since coming to Boston — have you ever felt like going back to Texas?

We love Texas, but we have been called to Boston. This is where we want to be. There is still much work to be done here.

How important is prayer support to inner-city pastors?

There is nothing more important than prayer. That is what we rely on to make a difference in America's inner cities.

— Kirk Noonan

Teen Challenge worker in the carpentry shop



Rodney Hart and Jimmy Lilley



New Hampshire. A majority of staff have taken Global University courses and have become credentialed Assemblies of God ministers.

"We've created a holistic ministry," Hart says. "The staff has grown because discipleship and continuing education have been at the forefront."

Though the ministry has grown, Hart is most thankful for the array of changed lives such as Santiago's.

"I have been delivered from drugs and alcohol," Santiago says. "Teen Challenge was the vehicle God used to save my life."

One of the main goals of TCNE is to give its students the tools to live productive lives after graduation.

Students work on residential and commercial painting crews, snow removal teams, as cooks, caterers, carpenters, sales people in the center's thrift shops, or as detailers at Teen Challenge's professional car washes.

"We do what we can to supplement the ministry," says Jimmy Lilley, overseer of the Teen Challenge center in Brockton, a Boston bedroom community. "In doing so, our people exemplify the body of Christ."

Tabitha Mello went through the program a few years ago and is now on staff. She says Teen Challenge taught her to care for herself and to embrace biblical

principles. But something unseen yet no less tangible captivated her.

"The first thing I noticed was the love of God and His presence in this place," she says. "That convinced me to leave the ways of the world."

Ministry is not confined inside the walls of Teen Challenge. Each week staff members also go into the marketplace, jails and prisons to minister. The prison ministry is a unique program where inmates are evangelized and disciplined behind bars.

"It's very effective," says Carl Stephens, a TCNE prison minister. "Seeds are planted, and it's an opportunity for the inmates to get to know God."

In the past three years 20 inmates have enrolled in TCNE once they have been released from prison. Already two of them have graduated and are now on staff.

A few blocks from the main center in Brockton sit two tidy buildings that house Teen Challenge thrift shops, dormitories, a carpentry shop and warehouse.

"It's cool how we restore furniture and God does the same with us," Ray Normandin, a student, says as he places a clamp on a chair leg.

Two miles away cars move into a high-tech carwash operated by Teen Challenge staff and students.

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Joe Radzikowski and Joe Crowley



When the cars emerge workers swarm over them and wipe them dry. In a nearby bay other workers vacuum, buff and detail cars.

“We work together and get stuff done,” says Craig Jenkins, general manager of the car wash. “This is our church and discipleship program.”

Jenkins is not posturing. Each morning the workers gather in the on-site chapel. Throughout the day prayer requests are shared, Scriptures are discussed, and encouragement is generously doled out.

“Spirituality isn’t just contained to our classrooms or campus chapel services,” Hart says. “It happens throughout each day in the car wash bays, in the kitchen, and while helping customers at the thrift shop.”

Trevor Moseley knows this to be true. He leaves for language school in a few months and plans to go to Spain to help missionaries plant churches. A few years ago Moseley was facing more than 15 years in prison.

“I was saved and transformed by the love of God while in Teen Challenge,” he says. “When I came here I was taught to be a person of love, peace and joy. I went from death and destruction to hope and life.” **tpe**

KIRK NOONAN is managing editor of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*. E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Pizza their hearts: former pizzeria owners plant church

Joe and Gail Radzikowski know pizza. Joe owned and operated a pizzeria for years before his drug addiction caused him to lose his business and almost his life. But after going through Teen Challenge the Radzikowskis wanted to do more with their lives than sell pies and build a personal fortune. Instead, they started a church in the hardscrabble Boston suburb of Revere.

To do so they relied heavily on pizza to draw children and teens to their Bible study, which eventually became the foundation for Full Gospel Assembly of God.

“It worked,” Gail Radzikowski says, referring to the mixture of Bible studies and pizza. “Every week the kids came back for more.”

Joe concurs.

“We didn’t plan to start a church, but to get the kids to our Bible study we offered pizza,” he says. “We figured if we could reach the kids with the gospel we could then reach their parents.”

It has worked. Since starting the Bible studies and eventually the church, the Radzikowskis have also given numerous children and teens healthy servings of the Word and a couple of hours each week in a safe and peaceful environment.

“The kids from these neighborhoods have no hope,” says Joe Crowley, owner of a local pizzeria and member of the church who works closely with the Radzikowskis. “It’s heartbreaking.”

In the six years since the first Bible study, the church has grown to more than 100 worshippers on Sundays, acquired a building of its own and now sends outreach teams from the church and Teen Challenge into nearby projects to tell people about Jesus Christ and His love.

“Unfortunately the need for our ministry will never stop,” says Joe Radzikowski. “But when we see a child accept Christ as Savior and his or her life changes — there is nothing better than that.”



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