

## Teen Challenge:

# CALM AFTER THE STORM



Teen Challenge Executive Director Tim Culbreth was perfectly content working in the office of a small business headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colo., when a friend asked him about returning to his home state of Arkansas.

“I told him I was happy where I was and would never go back,” says Culbreth. “But then he added, ‘What about Teen Challenge? Would you go back for Teen Challenge?’”

Culbreth says he knew the origins of Teen Challenge from having read “The Cross and the Switchblade,” the true account of Pastor David Wilkerson’s outreach to New York teens trapped by drugs and gangs. “As the son of a missionary to the Philippines, I was intrigued by Wilkerson’s ministry – so much so that I wrote college papers about it at the University of Maryland. I even made connections with a nearby Teen Challenge in Washington, D.C.”

Others who were inspired by the remarkable results of Wilkerson’s program adopted the vision for their own communities. One of those people was Troy Collier, who started Teen Challenge in Little Rock in 1969. Twelve years later, the board of directors purchased 40 acres near Hot Springs as a permanent home for the Arkansas group.

At the same time, the board was looking for a new executive director. “I came down as a courtesy to my friend, although my heart was really set on moving to a metropolitan area. But once I set foot on the land, I knew this was where I belonged. It was one of life’s epiphanies. I saw the vision. I felt the call. Thirty years later, I’ve seen much of our vision come to pass,” says Culbreth, blinking back tears.

Teen Challenge of Arkansas is now one of the largest induction facilities in the country. It operates a 56-bed residential faith-based recovery program for young men who voluntarily commit to a 14-month program, which is offered at no charge.

“Our facilities have grown to include a dormitory, a dining room, classrooms, recreation areas, administrative offices and the Vintage Mall – which until recently, provided thrift store income to supplement our primary source of finances: donations from individuals, churches and businesses,” Culbreth explains.

“All our residents participate in a rigorous schedule of faith-based instruction designed to equip them with the tools to live a principled life in today’s world. In addition to attending their regular classes, our residents provide volunteer services to area nonprofit organizations as a way to put

feet on their faith by demonstrating honesty, integrity and a sound work ethic.”

At the risk of omitting someone, Culbreth hesitated to list organizations helped by the residents of Teen Challenge. “Off the top of my head, I can think of Downtown Merchants Association, Senior Olympics, Spa Pacers, Farmers’ Market, Relay for Life, Cedar Glades Park Extreme Race, Spa Area Independent Living (SAIL), Chamber of Commerce, St. Patrick’s Day Parade, Flavor in the Park, Community Garden, Hot Springs Home Show, Pocket Theater, Malco Theater, Glenhaven Youth Ranch, Potter’s Clay and Art Blast.”

These days, Teen Challenge staff and residents are pouring most of their energy and resources into recovery of a different sort.

“On April 25th, our facilities were severely damaged by tornadoes that moved through the area,” says Culbreth. “As a precaution, we had reviewed our tornado drills earlier that evening, and in fact, had just sounded an ‘all clear’ when the damaging twister came through. Our brand new Vintage Mall/Administrative building was totally destroyed. What’s more, two of our staff were still in the building when it was hit. Although they were understandably shaken, neither was injured.”

In addition to damage at the Teen Challenge campus, one staff member’s home was destroyed, as was his personal car. Several other staff members’ personal cars were destroyed. Two more staff members had trees fall on their homes, requiring replacement of heating and air conditioning systems.

Culbreth says the outpouring of community support has been heartwarming. “Area restaurants, hospitals and churches responded immediately – not with just food, but with meals ready to eat for all 60 people on site. The wife of one of our graduates scheduled deliveries so that we got three catered meals a day for two full weeks, instead of too much food for the first few days.

“Another pretty powerful example of community support happened after word got out we didn’t have a way to do laundry because our power was out. A line of cars showed up to pick up the students’ dirty clothes; another line formed to return it – folded and ready to wear. Not only was it a humbling experience, but it also provided a concrete example of love in action for our residents. First, we were overwhelmed by damage; after that, by generosity.”

Debris from the tornado has been cleared, and damaged buildings have been cleaned up. “We have roof damage that is not yet repaired because we are still working with insurers,” says Culbreth. “In the meantime, we have set our sights toward rebuilding, and will make those plans public in a few weeks. Our goal is to be able to return to some sense of normalcy in 12-15 months. Folks who may want to help speed the process can find a list of current needs on our website, <http://www.TeenChallengeAR.org>.” ■