

Frontlines

"I wanted kids to grow up knowing that careless mistreatment was not God's plan for them."



Within These Hallowed Walls

by BRENDAN BLOWERS

Several years ago I was a “young eager spirit” who spent many hours helping out with the children’s after-school program as a student volunteer at The Salvation Army in Nampa, Idaho. When I revisited the multipurpose center last year, I noticed that the entrance to the chapel in a building nearby had a new sign with these words from the Song Book of the Salvation Army on it:

*We offer thee this temple,
With power, Lord, enter in
And teach us when we worship
Or wage the war with sin.
Oh may the sinner find thee
Within these hallowed walls,
Here many young eager spirits
Obey when Jesus calls!*

— Hymn 575

Entering the center, I remembered how kids would slam through the glass door after bouncing off the bus, then rush down the stairs to cram their backpacks into cubbies before going to computer classes or homework club. Upstairs, the gym echoed with screams and pounding thuds as children released pent-up energy, taking their aggression out on sports equipment... and sometimes each other.

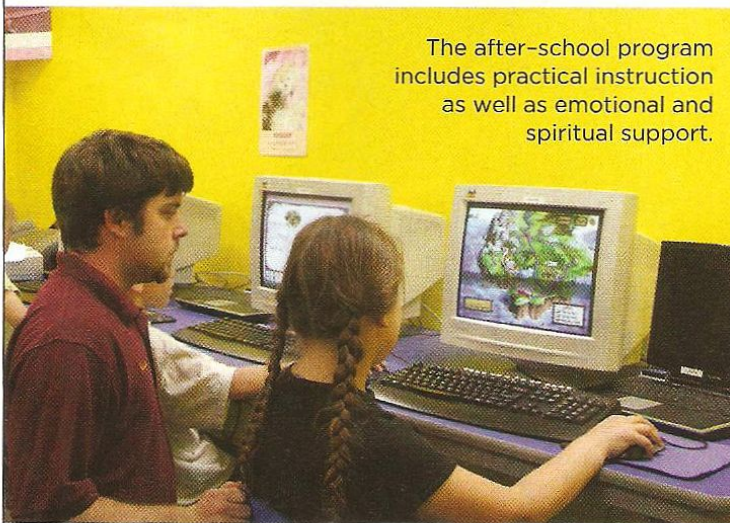
When as a volunteer I taught classes “within these hallowed walls,” I saw changes not only in the children and families the Army serves, but in staff members and volunteers as well. As for this sinner, I experienced the power of the Lord more viscerally than ever before.

I was enrolled at Northwest Nazarene University at the time. My course load included numerous religious classes and I was attending a local Christian church. Something about these overtly religious activities brewed a deep restlessness within me. Something

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was missing, and I couldn't figure out what.

I learned a lot from those young people at The Salvation Army. Spending time in conversation with them evoked an empathy in me for their needs that quickly overshadowed my own. Sometimes we would talk about where their bruises came from or where they would be spending the weekend. I became very uncomfortable with the world we'd given them to grow up in, and the lives they had to go back to. I suddenly became very convicted: was this the best world we had to offer them?



The after-school program includes practical instruction as well as emotional and spiritual support.

In college I was preoccupied with grades, class schedules and questions such as how a good God could allow evil to exist in the world. I worried about my own future, my own needs, my own circle of friends and my own beliefs. I was self-centered and consumed with issues on a theoretical level... until my preoccupations were jarred after just a few visits to the Salvation Army kids club.

I do not know how long I would have stayed caught in self-centeredness and trivial anxieties were it not for one girl and one boy in particular, who I will refer to here as M and B, their first initials. One day M casually tugged down the collar on her shirt to show me scars on her shoulder where her dad had burned her with cigarettes. The other kids called her Chucky, possibly because of a slight resemblance to the horror films about the demonic doll of the same name, but mostly because she made them uncomfortable by her unruly appearance, angry outbursts and intrusive

desire to be a part of everyone's fun. No one wanted to play with her.

B was much more cheerful and got along pretty well with other kids. Only occasionally did he lose his temper and lash out at others. One day he seemed particularly happy when he showed me a chess set he'd won at school that he wanted to use to play with his "gramma" while he spent the weekend with her. He briefly pointed to his blackened eye, which he said his dad had given him the week before.

Such interaction led me to redefine my academic pursuits, religious practices and reading so I could realistically address the acute needs I observed in surrounding communities. I wanted my life, my religion, my prayer and my work to be shaped by what I'd learned from these kids. I wanted to make sure what I studied and learned was practical and of importance in their world. And I wanted it to address how to influence the forces, institutes and systems shaping the world they would grow up into.

M did not make a judgment about what caused the scars on her shoulder; she simply accepted it as part of growing up. I began to hope, want and pray that kids would grow up knowing that such careless mistreatment was not God's plan for them, nor was it something a heavenly Father had in mind for His children.

The intended beneficiaries of the Salvation Army after-school program include working parents who need their children supervised so they can clock a few more hours at work before picking them up. The facility and its hallowed walls are put to good use each afternoon, and here these young eager spirits can learn that God loves them and get the chance to hear Jesus' call. After all, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:13-15).

I can attest that it is not just children and their parents who reap the benefits of time spent inside these hallowed walls. Staff, students, visitors and volunteers like me are also prime targets for God's grace and renewal. ■

Brendan Blowers returned to Nampa, Idaho, after four years in Costa Rica serving with Mission Aviation Fellowship. He credits the Salvation Army's youth center for helping prepare him to teach at-risk youth in that country.