October 23 Marks 4 Years

In 2004, I came to understand that California is the place I ought to be, so I packed up my bags and…well, you know…swimming pools, movie stars…

Actually, there was a little more to it than that— I’ve never had a more clear call to something I’ve never seemed more prepared for, utilizing every gift, talent and ability given me all at once. As unlikely as it is that this Midwestern, suburban, white boy would be working with gang members and drug addicts, I’ve never felt more at home on the street and in jail with these guys, never better received by any group of people and have never gotten as good a response in anything I’ve ever done.

Development Of A Mission

Looking back on the first 5 months, I miss them as a time when I’ve never had more faith and God had never more clearly provided. Some think that because I’ve gone without, it means I’m doing something wrong, but that’s what they tried to tell Job in the Bible, too! Going without doesn’t necessarily mean being outside the will of God.

Many of those I deal with are at one or more points in their lives homeless because of the choices they’ve made. There is no way I could have learned that any other way than to get a taste of it myself. Now I know what it feels like to spend the day figuring out where I'll spend the night. The first ‘place of my own’ was a tent I lived in for a year in the backyard of one of the families I came to know on the street. It was through the cold winter of 2006.

That’s all right, though, because the more I learned, the more I understood and the more respect I got from those God’s led me to reach. I learned about drugs on the street watching it being done. I came to understand gang families from the inside seeing them interact with one another.

What I’ve Been Taught

1. Respect EVERYONE as a creation of God worthy of love, serving them as the Lord blesses even unworthy me.
2. My job is to provide for whomever I can, however I can to demonstrate the love of Christ, but I AM NOT the Holy Spirit and am responsible for changing NO ONE. I serve and respond as the Lord leads trusting that HE will do through me and in them what HE wants in HIS time and in HIS way.
3. I DO NOT TRADE INFORMATION with any authority except to save life. I am NOT law enforcement and any assumption that I might be will kill everything God’s brought me to do. I maintain relationships at all costs within the law encouraging those I’m leading to deal with reality and do what’s right. I cannot make decisions for people.
4. I expect sinners to sin and take note of, but overlook the symptoms of the problem to get to the heart of the matter to foster change from the inside out.
5. I have NO EXPECTATIONS and must ALWAYS INITIATE while being willing to be used without assuming I’ll get ANYTHING in return. That’s unconditional love, right? That’s what undeserved grace is, isn’t it? That’s what Jesus did and does for us all.

The Response Received

Since before I arrived 4 years ago, I thought that since I had grown up in the Church and had no background on the street, that dealing with nice people would be easy and dealing with bad people would be difficult. Boy, was I wrong! Getting nice people to understand and support what God has paved the way for has been the most difficult challenge I’ve ever faced.

I’ve had people tell me that they didn’t agree with what I’m doing or how I’m doing it, that I’m just being used and taken advantage of, that can’t get past the bureaucracy or perceived danger of how to effectively minister and give me the feeling that they’re just sitting back and waiting for either this to come to an end or magically make gangs and drugs cease to exist in some Billy Grahamaganza!

While there have been saints who have been there for me to provide a place to stay, a normal meal and adult conversation as well as the money necessary to build the relationships needed, by and large I get the feel that either people don’t like the people I’m trying to reach, how I’m trying to reach them or me.

Not long after I first arrived and began building trust and relationships on the street from nothing, I estimated it would probably be about 5 years before anything would happen for people to take notice of and see that all this might somehow help bring about change. This past year has almost felt like I’ve been going in reverse, but for a reason!
**The Model For Ministry**

You see, here’s where I make a lot of people unhappy, but I’ve got to learn to care less about that! I’m not here to make nice people happy; I’m here to do what God’s called me to do. They nailed Jesus for eating with sinners and hanging out with the least of these, so I figure I’m in good company. The Savior didn’t come to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance. Why bother with StraySheep100 when there are 99 good sheep to tend to? Because God does. Why risk everything to go after those who don’t seem to care? Because God did. The Lord is counting every lost sheep and goes after every stray.

Let’s be honest— nobody likes these guys or wants them around putting graffiti on everything, committing crime and intimidating everyone they can. Five years ago, I would’ve crossed the street on the other side to avoid them. But let’s be realistic, while gang violence fluctuates, are the number of gangs decreasing? There’s a never ending supply of kids that prevention doesn’t reach who will attempt to find family in a gang neighborhood whether simply for the excitement or out of necessity for survival.

**Why Gang Families Exist**

Human nature has always come together in familiar groups for a common cause. Whether it’s your extended family, community group, place of worship, business network or sports team, we all want to share life with people like ourselves. In those groups we find a shared purpose, provide for one another and protect one another. Granted, a gang and my church produce a couple different outcomes, but they exist for the very same reason.

Graffiti, crime and drugs are simply symptoms of something deeper which, if not addressed, will not stop, change or disappear. Gangs are families finding in their circumstances a way to meet the desires we’re all looking for. Graffiti is simply a means of advertising such as any business would use. That doesn’t excuse the crime, but it helps in dealing with the root cause. Drugs are an attempted shortcut to excite, effect or escape a life one otherwise doesn’t know how to deal with. We all have to figure out a reason to live. For some, in the right environment, with limited resources (real or perceived) and little to influence us elsewhere, a gang is just the right fit.

**Reaching the Unreachable**

I don’t meet people cold on the street, but always through someone else, so that some level of trust is passed along. About 2½ years ago, I came across an 18 year old that I had met when he was 10 and I was in college. Because we had an already established trust, I began meeting others through him, but was rejected by the elders of the gang. I was impressed at one point a couple years ago when those whom I knew were ‘checked’ because they were spending time with me. They were willing to fight to spend time with me! As relationships were slowly developing I still could not break through the barrier to be accepted in the neighborhood.

What it would come to was a funeral that would bring everyone together. In the August Update I explained how that happened this past May with the death of a 17 year old. Knowing the family, as I stepped in to help, the elders in the gang noticed. I was invited to eat at a restaurant with about 12 from the gang and a few of them important. Afterward, I received a handshake and thanks for all I was doing. It was as if a key finally fit and opened the door to everyone.
At this point, after 4 years, I am thankful for the few people who have acknowledged they are praying for me and the mission God’s led me to…as well as those who have chosen to send financial resources. Currently, there are 8 individual regular providers sending $293 monthly making up just 15% of the estimated need (3 of which are sending about $18 total from their work in prison). Over the course of this year, I have averaged a minimum $250 shortfall each month, growing a debt of nearly $3000 in cost-of-living expenses (I’m currently renting a room in a home for $600 a month). However, much of that, in the first half of the year, was spent on gas at an average of about $400 a month.

In December of 2008 and January of 2009 I expect to come up about $1000 short, not being able to work as many days while I will be spending time with my family over the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. While I had only planned on going to my parent’s for Christmas, due to my Dad’s aggressive prostate cancer, we’re trying to spend as much time as possible together over the next 10 months he’s been given. I anticipate 2009 being an extremely challenging year in all respects and primarily personally as I’ll be challenged not only to expand the mission (and expenses) as contacts increase, but also as I will be dealing with my Dad’s worsening condition and caring for Mom.

Under the “Personal” tab, click on “Send Money” and enter my other email address next to “To:” dave.straysheep100@yahoo.com and the rest of the information required. Or, mail to:

Dave Rentz / StraySheep100 ● POBox 221122 ● Santa Clarita CA 91322

Thank you so much for your consideration, prayers and support that make this effort possible.

Offering hope and a future through a changed heart and transformed mind – Jeremiah 29.11 & Romans 12.1-2

Dave Rentz