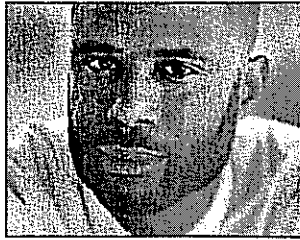


COMMENTARY



Darryl
OWENS

SENTINEL COLUMNIST

Love is a lesson served warm in a cold world

Zackary Griffis is an average 7-year-old boy, all snips and snails and puppy-dog high spirit. But he knows something important: "Don't talk back to your mother and father."

This is no small thing. It's a lesson he recently learned after hopping a bus powered by angel wings.

On Saturdays, waves of kids spill out from buses at First Baptist Church of Maitland and stream under a methuselah oak whose boughs seem to graze heaven. They natter and nibble donated McDonald's sausage biscuits, and when a whistle blasts, they tidy up and line up for the morning's lessons.

Just shy of noon, buses load up and roar out. Fortunate kids return to run-down trailer parks, others to ramshackle weekly rentals haunted by hookers and hustlers or to cars — home to kids bereft of four walls.

These are the kids of Orlando Children's Church — an itinerant ministry that scoops up kids a heartbeat away from homelessness and feeds them with life-changing mentoring.

The ironic shame is that a group that serves that booming demographic soon may be on the streets.

"There was no rhyme or rhythm to it initially; we just wanted to help kids in the city," says founding pastor Peter O'Driscoll. Four summers ago, with his wife, Isabel, he took youth groups into trailer parks along Orange Blossom Trail and invited more kids to join them.

Soon the flock multiplied, and they needed a meeting place and transportation for a ministry that some Saturdays swells to 400. O'Driscoll finagled several auctioned buses. Lynx painter Doug Bloodworth adorned them with angel wings, one with rainbow colors. Now five buses shuttle kids from Union Park, Orlo Vista and red-light points along Orange Blossom Trail.

First Baptist Church of Winter Park once housed them, but they outgrew the space. In Maitland, they have found temporary sanctuary. With the caste O'Driscoll serves, they get by on outside donations, not passing the plate. To avoid wearing out their welcome, they'll likely leave in December.

For now, it's at least a place to make do. After breakfast, volunteers teach Bible-based lessons. Cynics may sniff at the Jesus vibe but can't sneeze at research that shows mentoring's benefits. Caring enough to invest in homeless kids helps mediate antisocial behaviors, boost scholastic performance — and give them hope.

"They live in trailer parks, so [kids] call them trailer trash — downright mean," O'Driscoll says. But on Saturdays, the kids aren't trailer trash, he says, they're "trailer treasure."

Corny, yes. But for kids starving for self-worth or living in places infested with dope dealers, as does Alexis Taylor, affirmations are manna.

"I made this for you, Mr. O," said Alexis, a pixie with paintbrush lashes, giving him a drawing and a hug.

"This is a tough world — it's no friend of grace," O'Driscoll says. "But we teach these kids through love how to respond to anger [and have] respect for authority that we know if they do, they'll be successful down the road."

Last week, after the whistle, kids prepared to head down the road. "Bye, Mr. O!" shouted Zackary from his bus. O'Driscoll, who has used a wheelchair since a car accident in 1978, waved and trundled off. As buses rolled out, Zackary pumped his fist.

"Rock on, rainbow bus! Rock on!"
Half-cheer, half-prayer.

If you would like to help, call Peter O'Driscoll at 407-760-4402. Darryl E. Owens can be reached at dowens@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5095.