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Steve Adler

“WHERE’S MOM?”

Chrystal ran away from home and was gone for two weeks, when mom got a call. "I love you mom. Can I come home? Mom sent a bus ticket right away. When Chrystal got back and was in the waiting room of the bus terminal, she called out "Where's mom?" She was told that her mom wasn't there. But, they were wrong. Mom was there. The reason for the confusion was that Chrystal is white and mom is black.



Michelle Walker

What the terminal staff didn't know was mom was there; Mom is Michelle Walker, Executive Director of "Miracles Outreach CDC, Inc.", which is a program with a mission to assist at-risk youth by providing them with a safe and nurturing homelike environment, educational development, and life skills training that will help them become self-sufficient. Chrystal lived at one of Miracles Outreach's Fresh Start Residential homes, in Tampa for eight months, after being placed there by a children's agency for abandoned teenagers. The road to "Miracles Outreach" for these teenagers is an awful trip. Some are victims of human trafficking, drugs, abandonment, physical and sexual abuse along with the horrific list of persons and activities, driving youngsters into crime, being taken advantage of and hopelessness. Chrystal was just another young girl of too many headed to some sort of disaster until she met "Mom."

This story is repeated over and over with different names. Chrystal's journey took a different path than we would predict because of love and dedication to stop this tragedy from eating away at our communities. Chrystal is now a student at Hillsborough Community College, on a scholarship, and on her way to having a healthy life.

Michelle Walker and her husband started to reach out to kids who were being left out of a chance at hope about 12 years ago. The Walkers had a barbershop in the hood. Michelle was a beautician and dad cut hair. They couldn't help notice that the kids who were hanging around the strip shopping center were trying hard to get into trouble.

Rather than look the other way, the Walkers, who were just managing to get through the month themselves said they had to do something to help these kids. "Something" was not easy. There wasn't much of "something" around.

The Walkers are a deeply religious couple and they felt that a powerful message from God was going to help them to help these forgotten kids. Magically, school supplies, food, and mentoring started to show up at the barbershop. Kids were feeling the love and the Walkers learned how deep the problem was. These kids needed a safe, loving place to live; otherwise they would surely be counted in the sad list of deaths and tragedies that fill our newspapers.

Michelle's brother came across a house that could work as a home for some of these abandoned kids. The Walkers applied to the Department of Children and Families to qualify as a shelter for these teenagers. The prayer was answered and six years ago the first "Fresh Start Residential Home" was opened in Tampa. Today, there are three residences that 18 kids call home. These boys and girls arrive with serious issues. The challenge is enormous. To bring these kids back to a feeling of hope and promise is tough. There have been too many disappointments, too many lies and too many bad examples. The children were victimized and used for pathetic purposes. Professional counseling and a whole lot of love is the recipe that Michelle and her staff give every day to make the difference. Not all the stories are the miracles we would hope for, but it is rare when a teenager gets to "Miracle Outreach" that their life isn't changed for the better.

So, quietly, Michelle and her husband work every day doing what our society needs so badly. We need people like the Walkers who are willing to make a difference when and where it matters most. Saving other people is their mission. To keep this mission afloat is really difficult. All we hear about are budget cuts, program reductions and often, just misplaced priorities. Foster home care cost the state less than group residential care, so the system will send a teenager into a foster home to save money. This is a disaster in the making. These children need special care. The abuse has been huge and, unless they are in a special environment, the chances of success are slim. The money "Miracles Outreach" receives is used for food and clothing for the kids, and is not nearly enough. Private donations fill some of the gaps. What is critically needed right now is for the good citizens of Tampa, who have observed the important job Miracles Outreach is doing to save lives, to do something to help Miracles Outreach and help ease the budget problems. That's the point of this writing. Whatever assistance can be provided will be greatly appreciated: clothes, food, school supplies, "gas cards", and importantly volunteering to be a mentor and being a positive influence in the lives of these teenagers. This is God's work.

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