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Special Deliveries

Victoria Teague of Atlanta and a group of volunteers deliver gift baskets to strip-club dancers. Many of them respond by leaving the clubs and clinging to Christ.

by Candi Cushman

The first book of the Bible that Victoria Teague ever read was Job.

She discovered it while sitting—homeless and stranded—in the parking lot of the Waffle House in Marietta, Ga. A few days earlier, she'd been fired from her job as a strip-club dancer because her looks had so deteriorated from an 11-year cocaine addiction that she was no longer considered "profitable."

"I was barely 100 pounds, I had constant nosebleeds. When you start losing your looks, they ask you to leave," she told *Citizen*. "I thought it was all over for me at age 28."

Few people would have guessed that the wasted-looking woman in the parking lot was raised in a fairly well-to-do, Bible Belt family—she'd even had her own quarter horse as a child. But by age 15, Teague watched her family fall apart after the death of her 11-year-old sister from cancer. Teague's mother turned to alcohol to cope with the grief. And it didn't take long for Teague to follow her mother's example.

She attended every high school party she could find where beer flowed freely. At one of those parties, Teague said, she was brutally raped by a football player. "That's how I lost my virginity," she said. "I was devastated. ... Because it was so public. I just started drinking more and doing all the drugs I could get my hands on."

For the next decade, she spiraled out of control, finally ending up in strip clubs in a warped attempt to find acceptance. And now, as she sat at the Waffle House reliving those painful memories, she desperately thumbed through the Gideon Bible a Christian had given her. She'd heard salvation sermons before. But something about the words of Job gripped her.

"I thought, 'This is real. I believe in God. There are no accidents.' Because I saw that others in the Bible had suffered too ... and yet God's hand was in it. That started a paradigm shift in my thinking. When I accepted Christ, instead of 'Why me?' the question became 'What for?'

"And it's for the glory of Christ."

'You are in a war'

That was 15 years ago. Today, the 43-year-old Teague is an on-fire Christian wife, mother of two and the founder of an evangelistic outreach to thousands of strippers across Georgia. Called Victoria's Friends, her ministry relies on volunteers from a statewide network of 13 churches. Each month, teams of church women in different cities deliver handmade "Mary Magdalene" baskets—containing goodies like brightly colored scarves, Godiva chocolates and books about God's redeeming love—to women in strip-club dressing rooms. They've made more than 3,000 deliveries. Their goal is to reach the approximately 4,000 women involved in Georgia's sex industry.

"We are saying, 'We are here and we love you if you want another way out,'" Teague said.

Teague and her basket teams don't make their deliveries alone. Male parishioners stand outside, providing protective prayer.

"You are in a war when you go into a strip club for Jesus," Teague said. "I tell [the volunteers] that everybody you see around you is going to hell unless they see Jesus in you."

At least 74 dancers have made professions of faith and sought help since Teague first began her ministry in 2000.

Many times, girls sob when they receive the baskets. "I was pretty shocked that she [Teague] gave me one," said 27-year-old Charity Comeaux, who, through the help of Victoria's Friends, stopped strip-dancing 17 months ago. "It shows they are not just another person trying to use you."

It usually takes at least three contacts before a dancer responds to the ministry's overtures, Teague said. The ones who do are immediately assigned to mentors who meet with them in a local coffee shop or restaurant. Once they profess Christ, the women are given the option of living with a host church family (matched by a formal application process).

Teague and her teams have no trouble getting into strippers' dressing rooms, because the club managers are only too happy for them to deal with the dancers who've become too damaged to be profitable. "They allow us in because they know we are speaking the truth," she said. "Owners will say things like, 'This one slept on my couch, her arm's been broken by a drug dealer. And she's not making money for the club.'"

Drug use and fast money is common; they make anywhere from \$700 to \$2,000 a night. "Every sin has a honeymoon period to it ... but it doesn't last long," Teague said. "You are just barely making enough money to feed your addiction ... your friends start dying and overdosing." Once their bodies deteriorate, the girls find themselves cast aside—relegated to the trashiest clubs, or worse, the streets.

And it's the women who've hit bottom whom Teague targets. "I feel that this is what Jesus did," she said. "He said to reach out to the least of these."

'I was raw, I was rough'

Teague says she might have died were it not for the Christians who entered her own ugly world. In particular, she cites Pam Younker, the woman who gave her the Gideon Bible so many years ago.

Younker took Teague into her home after she was stranded at the Waffle House. "Her family took me to church every time the doors opened, helped me do my budget, my resume. ... That was really the key in my pulling out of the sex industry."

And now Teague has modeled her entire ministry on that example.

"We want to surround the girls—like Pam Younker surrounded me—with people that can see the potential inside these women," Teague said. "I was raw, I was rough. I had been on cocaine for 11 years. I was carrying a lot of baggage. But Pam Younker looked into me and pulled out the good traits. ... She pointed me to who I could be in Christ.

"And that's the church's role."

Twenty nine-year-old Carrie Lounnarath strip danced for the last time several months ago. She was able to escape the industry, even getting a computer job, through the help of one of Teague's church families. "They teach you about God and how He died on the cross," she said. "That just really touched my heart. I never knew that Christ did that, you know?"

"At first, I used to think, 'Why do they care?' But now I think they care because God cares."

And that's exactly the point, Teague said—to mirror God's grace. "We let God grab their heart and we just come alongside as coaches."

Resources:

Victoria's Friends

Hotline: 678-614-0045

Web: www.victoriasfriends.com

Email: victoriasfriends@msn.com

Nationwide hotline for state ministries: 1-866-232-4112

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