

Michael W. Smith Reaches Out to Teens in Nashville

RCKTWN ministry designed to be relational, hoping to extend its reach

By Michael Barrick

NASHVILLE – Michael W. Smith may very well push the envelope when it comes to attracting teenagers to Rocketown (RCKTWN), a safe harbor he founded here three years ago, largely in response to the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999.

Yet, according to RCKTWN’s Director of Development, Audra Davis, the world in which teenagers live demands that Christians embrace unconventional, albeit biblical, methods in reaching teens. Davis explained, “Mr. Smith said, ‘It is time to make a decision. What if there had been something like RCKTWN in Columbine?’”

While the question is largely rhetorical, Smith’s response has not been. Just this week, on January 17, in recognition of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, RCKTWN staff and volunteers hosted a community-wide event designed to allow teens to discuss violence. It was held at RCKTWN’s humble brick building in downtown Nashville. Davis explained, “Its purpose was to engage youth on how they can make an impact in their community. It brought together teens from varying racial and economic backgrounds.” The gathering included about 100 teens. Noted Davis, “It was a wonderful exchange on how to prevent violence and love one another.”

She continued, “It was a community-wide civic event. RCKTWN tries to be a resource for the community, especially for teens. We want to provide an environment where they are comfortable in expressing their opinions, feel safe, and feel valued.” She acknowledged, “Violence is a very big issue in the life of teens. Whether they are abused, live in violent neighborhoods, feel threatened at school or are dealing with anger, they need an outlet to talk about this. It is very important to facilitate these kinds of events.”

Beginning in February, RCKTWN will host weekly discussion nights. Davis explained, “We will be looking at issues from a biblical worldview, from a faith perspective.”

The ministry will also celebrate its third anniversary on Feb. 25 with a full day of events, including a dance, skateboard competitions, and other events.

Also this spring, RCKTWN will offer an after-school enrichment program. Davis explained, “It’s about building relationships. We’re very excited about this and are making it a high priority. It’s so exciting to see the growth that is happening and the relationships that are happening. It’s so neat to be part of that.”

She added, “All of our staff and volunteers are Christians. All are committed to excellence and excellence in the Lord, and helping teens discover their skills and find a purpose in the Lord. These things aren’t always nurtured in the school system. We provide an outlet in those areas.”

But it has not been easy.

A similar effort in the mid 1990s in nearby Franklin morphed into a street ministry, but shut its doors about 1997. However, the killings and suicides at Columbine – an event that led to Smith penning a tune, “This Is Your Time” – compelled him to establish RCKTWN. The song is a tribute to Cassie Barnall, who reportedly refused to deny her faith in Jesus when challenged to by one of the young gunmen. She was murdered.

Indeed, RCKTWN could be viewed as a tribute to Ms. Barnall, the other victims of Columbine, and all teenagers – whether Christians or not – struggling with the challenges the culture is throwing their way.

Consequently, Smith is determined that every teen that wants to enjoy the many programs and outreaches of RCKTWN will do so, without being judged, but instead experience unconditional love. He is equally determined that they know that the source of that absolute, unqualified and unreserved love is made possible only by Jesus Christ.

Indeed, he sometimes makes unannounced appearances at RCKTWN events. Last August, for example, he welcomed the 1,000 or so teens gathered to hear Hillsong United, a highly energetic worship group from Sydney, Australia. Appearing onstage first, Smith encouraged those in attendance – all jammed as close to the stage as possible – to maintain an attitude of thanksgiving and worship towards Jesus.

When one considers the demands upon Smith’s schedule, the fact that he was at RCKTWN to introduce the praise band for both sold-out shows, and in fact recruited them so fervently that this was the only stop in America on their worldwide tour, his zealous attention he brings to his community’s youth is unquestioned.

These youth – from all levels of Nashville’s eclectic residents – must hear and see the Gospel, Smith knows, but they must feel safe for that to happen. And in fact, they have to want to come to this safe harbor where they slowly, perhaps sometimes only implicitly, but surely and clearly, see and hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

How is such a daunting task accomplished?

The first ingredient is an energetic visionary. Smith is well-suited for that role. Still, such a ministry requires passionate people, risk-takers, and discipline to hold onto the vision through the ups and downs that accompany the running of any ministry – in particular one that is determined to reach youth that others have abandoned, neglected or forgotten.

As with any successful ministry, people with a passion for the mission’s vision must guide and serve it. RCKTWN is no exception. It has a staff of 10 and a core of about 50 volunteers. It has 23 board members, including Ben Cissell of Audio Adrenaline.

Working together, the board, staff and volunteers provide the teenagers of Nashville with numerous programs and events designed to bring them together where they can be safe, grow spiritually and develop wholesome relationships.

In February, the ministry will host a “Battle of the Bands” contest. An after-school program also begins in February. Running for 10 weeks on every Thursday afternoon from 4:30 – 6:30 teens can involve themselves in numerous creative endeavors in the program, which is titled, “Be Creative. Be Empowered. Be Yourself.”

Also, this summer, six weekly sessions, to be held from early June until late July, will allow teenagers opportunities to focus on skateboarding, film, dance, performance and recording. Morning sessions will be times of concentrating on specific areas of interest. Lunchtime is designed for a time of relationship building, and afternoon sessions allow teens to explore areas they want to know more about. While the cost is \$125 per each week session, Davis pointed out that about 40 percent of the teens will receive scholarships.

With all of these efforts, RCKTWN also is designed to be a daily place of refuge. In addition to a music venue – a natural ministry considering the passion of its founder – the ministry also has an indoor skateboard park and a coffee shop.

“We’re here to build relationships,” noted Davis. “We wish to share the love of Jesus Christ, but we can do that only after the right has been earned. So we’re not too pushy.”

In fact, she said, the concept is to “just be available. That’s where the relationship-building starts.” She continued, “We don’t ask kids to be different. A lot don’t go to church. We’re not saying, ‘You have to change.’ We just say, ‘It’s great you’re here. We love you.’”

She said the music, the skateboarding and the other programs are a way to build common ground. “It’s a place that kids can feel safe. It’s a fine line. The kids know it’s a Christian-run organization. But we’re still breaking down barriers. We believe our purpose is to be here for the hard-to-reach kid. This place is a place they can hear about hope. We are reaching children in a very unique way.”

Davis acknowledges that funding is difficult, as RCKTWN is targeting teens largely ignored by churches, and is offering programs generally perceived as entertainment. So, the organization is hopeful that it will be self-sufficient.

In 2005, the ministry’s operating expenses were \$1,460,944. The ministry spent \$1,240,462 on ministry programs, \$113,782.00 on management and general expenses, and \$106,700 on fundraising. It had \$1,291,982 in revenues. According to Davis, the ministry’s projected budget for 2006 is \$1.2 million, with 55 percent of that expected to be self-generating revenue. The ministry hopes to cover the balance of expenses through donations.

Despite the funding challenges, the effort is essential, insisted Davis. “Many of these teenagers have never come into contact with Christians. Many other of the teenagers here are strong Christians.” That eclectic mix is ideal for creating the safe, inviting environment where God can work to form and strengthen relationships among peers.

Consequently, the organization is gaining notoriety. It is working to expand its ministry by helping other organizations across the country develop similar outreaches. Explained Davis, “One of the biggest things we dream about is helping others do what we’re doing.”

If you would like to know more about RCKTWN, visit www.rcktwn.com. To contact Audra Davis, write audra@rocketown.org.

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