

EXCLUSIVE

# Miracle on 1300th Street

1300 Joseph E. Boone Boulevard in Atlanta, USA is home to City of Refuge, a place of hope for so many people living in one of the city's most dangerous neighbourhoods. *Christopher Kerr* sat down with their founder and CEO, Bruce Deel, to find out how he brought light into the darkest of situations.

Every city has a neighbourhood that people want to avoid. In Atlanta, USA, that place is known as "The Bluff", short for "Better Leave, You [F-word] Fool". On the face of it, that seems like good advice, as 60% of the city's murders happen in this neighbourhood. It also tops some unwanted league tables, leading the way for the number of people who end up in prison, who commit violent crimes, who are addicted to drugs and so on.

Residents who can leave The Bluff inevitably do. Others stay well clear. But beyond the terrifying stories and statistics are real people who have experienced terrible things. As a result, they are trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime, with no way out.

You may know an area near you just like this. What if, instead of avoiding it, God is asking you to step into it? To bring hope and light into the darkest of places? Perhaps you don't think that's for you. Be warned, neither did Bruce Deel, until one fateful day 25 years ago. Now he leads City of Refuge, which is located right in the middle of The Bluff, bringing hope, protection and a better future for local people. Here is Bruce's story, and the lessons he learned along the way.

## LESSON 1: CALLING IS JUST ANOTHER WORD FOR SERVING

In 1997, Bruce Deel was working for a nice church in the Atlanta suburbs when he was asked to go and close down a struggling church located near The Bluff. He was doing just that when God threw him a curveball. A young lady walked to the front of the church and, with tears rolling down her cheek, said to Bruce: "I've been hooking and stripping for 14 years – can you help me?" →



That's the thing about calling. Rather than the loud, booming voice of God, it mostly comes from the quiet, feeble cry for help from people around us. Just ask Bruce.

"This one question changed everything. We helped that young lady and, as a result, she came back the following week bringing one of her drug-addicted former clients with her."

Two people quickly became a hundred, as word spread about Bruce and his willingness to help. "All of these people looked at me as if to say, 'Can you help us?' I felt God say he had already empowered us to help that young lady, and that the question was therefore not 'Can you help them?' but 'Will you help them?'"

Bruce and his wife Rhonda answered that question with an emphatic 'yes', moving out of their home in the suburbs and into the very church that Bruce was sent to condemn. Shortly after, he set up City of Refuge, which has gone on to help over 20,000 people to escape the cycles of poverty, human trafficking, homelessness, joblessness and addictions.

Bruce couldn't have known the impact his answer to that young lady's cry for help would be, but it is a sobering thought that the fate of 20,000 people (and counting) would be impacted by his choice that day.

#### LESSON 2: IF YOU SAY YES, GOD WILL PROVIDE

Too often, I suspect someone is in need and I do nothing. My compassion gets overpowered by a sense that I cannot help, so it's best not to try. This attitude is wrong. We can focus too much on what we lack – time, energy and resources. But when God calls us to help others, he will provide everything we need. He certainly did for Bruce when the numbers of people coming to City of Refuge for help increased exponentially. "We knew we needed to move to a much bigger facility, preferably in The Bluff, to keep up with the ever-increasing need for our services. There was just one problem with that. We had no



money!"  
Be warned, if you answer God's call, your will to help will be tested by the brick wall we mere mortals call 'the impossible'.

"My real-estate buddy Rick called me to say he'd found the perfect property for us. It was a five-acre warehouse, on an eight-acre site with an eight-foot fence and an armed guard at the gate. Perfect, I thought. Until Rick told me the price: \$1.6million. Our counter-offer was \$0."

That offer was understandably rejected. Over the coming months, Bruce would occasionally reach out to the landowner, Malon Mimms, to see if he'd had a change of heart. He hadn't. The price always remained the same: \$1.6million. Then, out of the blue, Malon's lawyer called Rick to ask him when City of Refuge could complete the transaction. "We were baffled, as our offer had never been accepted," says Bruce. "That's when the lawyer told us Malon wanted to give us the building for free. We were shocked and elated."

Too many dreams die at the point of seemingly insurmountable barriers. When you inevitably come up against one, persist.

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#### LESSON 3: MIRACLES HAPPEN, BUT IT'S MOSTLY HARD WORK

Sometimes people tell me they need help and my response is, 'I will pray for you.' Sometimes, this is wise. Other times, it is lazy. I am basically saying, 'Over to you, Lord, I have better things to be doing.'

If we are serious about helping people, we need to take a 'heads-up, heads-down' approach to service. By that, I mean we need to lift our heads up to God and then get our heads down and do the hard work needed to see a breakthrough.

Bruce and the team at City of Refuge have had that revelation and used it to great effect. "Getting that warehouse for free was a miracle, but it wasn't in a good state. I wanted to give people access to an environment like the one I grew up in – safe, loving and rich with opportunity. It had to be a one-stop shop, with an array of services that would give people in crisis every possible resource they needed to thrive. It took two years and thousands upon thousands of manhours to make that happen."

Today, City of Refuge provides transitional housing, on-site medical and mental health care, childcare, vocational training and more. As you may expect, Bruce and the team see plenty of miracles, but mostly transformation is happening with plain old hard work. "Our philosophy is an adaption of Eugenie Peterson's quote. Obedience to God means taking a long, slow walk in the same direction. Faith in God is the most important aspect of what we do but we also need a

strong work ethic. We understand that we aren't going to get from A to B without a ton of hard work."

When God calls you to help others it means He wants to partner with you. So, if you couple your prayers with some serious hard work, you will go far. Heads up, heads down.

#### LESSON 4: STAND STRONG WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

Here's the other thing about doing the Lord's work. The enemy isn't going to like it, so you can expect some resistance. At times, everything in you will want to quit and seek comfort but the people you are called to help desperately need you to push through.

Bruce knows this all too well. "My first attempt at serving people in The Bluff did not go smoothly. In fact, for three terrifying minutes, I wondered if I should go home and throw in the towel for good."

These three terrifying minutes happened as Bruce was serving free hot chilli to those in need of food. "I looked up and saw that a woman had pulled a gun out of her pocket and pointed it at a man. The man reacted aggressively, and things reached boiling point quickly. People scattered fearing the worst."

Time seemed to stand still until something stirred deep within Bruce. "I stepped gingerly between the two and gently placed my hand on Gloria's [the woman with the gun]. I said, 'You don't really want to do this, do you?' and I put the slightest bit of gentle pressure on her hand. I felt the tension in her body ease, and she walked away."

## "OBEDIENCE TO GOD MEANS TAKING A LONG, SLOW WALK IN THE SAME DIRECTION"

After the event, Bruce worked to calm his breathing and steadied himself on the table. He could have died, and he knows it. "I just knew deep down that I was called to do this. There have been many days since where something like this happens leaving me shaking and sweating profusely, but in the moment that sense of calling and trust in the Lord gets me through."

Bruce returned to the same location the next day with more chilli, but only one person showed up. That man was called Jake, and he told Bruce why nobody else came: "You aren't the first preacher to come down here planning to help out some folks. Problem is, every time a little trouble comes up, those preachers all pack up and head home. We never see them again, and we figured you would be the same."

Bruce's response would set the tone for City of Refuge's future and provides a call to action for all of us who face trouble in the line of duty: "Jake, we come back."

#### LESSON 5: WHEN IT COMES TO PEOPLE THERE ARE NO LOST CAUSES

Often the hardest people to love are the ones who need it the most. They are the people who scare us, who make us uncomfortable and who are by their very nature, unsafe. They commit crimes, join gangs, get addicted to substances and cause others a lot of pain and suffering.

Ask any prisoner, addict or gang member for their life story and you will inevitably hear how they experienced abandonment, trauma, abuse, tragedy or violence. Take Ryan for example. When Ryan arrived at City of Refuge, he was a street gang member with a bond on his head, a PCP addiction and a track record of robbing and terrorising people. This life was the result of his own emotional scars brought about by his dad abandoning him as a kid, violent outbursts from his stepfather (once leaving a 13-year-old Ryan in hospital) and regular beatings by adult gang members in his area.

It's not that Ryan was a bad person. He was just acting out of a place of brokenness. His scars resulted in more scars, and that's the cycle City of Refuge knew they had to break with love. I don't mean the odd act of charity here or there, but the real kind of love laid out in 1 Corinthians 13 – unrelenting, unconditional and ever-forgiving.

"Ryan bailed on us at least seven times over the next five years to return to his life of crime. Each and every time he did, we went after to him to bring him back. It's not fair to expect people who have had tough lives to transform themselves quickly. We need to give them second, third, 50th chances if they are willing. That's why we are committed to starting each day with a blank slate."

Now, 15 years after he first showed up at City of Refuge, Ryan has turned his life around. His criminal record has been expunged and he owns his own security company with 35 employees, all of whom came to City of Refuge for help, just like Ryan. Such a transformation is not uncommon at this amazing place: "We are proud of the fact that a third of our staff once came to us in need. Now they are lights in the darkness, helping others in the difficulty they were once in."

As far as Bruce and his team are concerned, there are no lost causes that God, hard work and a whole load of love can't transform. Would you step into that neighbourhood that everyone else in your town goes out of their way to avoid? If you do, it may just be the start of a great adventure for you, and all that live there. **ES**



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