

WE WALK OUR TALK

Told by Reverend Cecil Williams

Adapted from his book *No Hiding Place*, written with Rebecca Laird

In the heart of San Francisco is the Glide Memorial Church. Glide is much more than a church, it's a community, a place of unconditional love and support. For thousands—rich and poor, young and old—Glide is a place of healing, of starting over. My African ancestors, who endured slavery, carried with them across the Atlantic a tradition that remains solidly rooted in African-American culture today. At Glide, we speak our truth by storytelling, engaging one another through dialogue and immersing ourselves in the Spirit.

We estimate that 80 percent of the people who come to us are in recovery. One of the first things we learned about fighting the war on addiction was that traditional drug-treatment programs didn't work for most African Americans. Twelve Step programs focus on individual recovery, as if independently getting clean and sober were the ultimate goal. But African Americans are a communal people—we fight for our freedom together.

I grew up in San Angelo, Texas, a segregated town prior to the Civil Rights Movement. The buses, the drinking fountains, the railroad tracks, the rest rooms, everything in San Angelo, constantly reminded me that I was colored, black, a nigger. When I grew up and became a minister, I wanted to change that—to make life better for my people. Over 65 percent of blacks in San Francisco live in crime-ridden, boarded-up, graffiti-plastered housing projects. Many folks are on drugs. And even if they manage to stay drug-free during the day, they eventually have to go home to projects that have become havens for every imaginable habit. The temptations are great. Since our people were living in the projects, Glide had to go there, too.

One of the things I preach at Glide is to “walk the talk that you talk.” So we walked our talk and decided to march on the most troubled housing projects in San Francisco, Valencia Gardens. We decided to march and call out the good news of recovery to our brothers and sisters. We spent dozens of hours gathering together people from the community; the public-housing tenants' association, the mayor's office, and about six hundred people from Glide. We also decided not to be stupid with our faith. We took the police with us, too.

We created a human force to influence the people in the projects. Our goal was not to run the pushers, pimps, and drug users out of public housing. We were coming to embrace them with unconditional love and declare that there was another way to live. So we boarded buses, drove up Market Street, and turned on to Valencia Street, singing songs of freedom. When we arrived, we got off the buses and marched around the projects. Those in the front carried a street-wide banner that declared our nonviolent battle cry, it's recovery time. Others carried placards reading the user needs recovery and welcome home to recovery.

We marched as a posse of lovers, heralding freedom from drugs, addiction, and despair. As Jesus has said to each of us, “I'm with you.” Glide marched to say to our hurting extended family, “We are with you.” Each heart bore a commitment to accepting those we met. No one marched empty-handed, either. Some carried paintbrushes and gallons of paint. Others bore heaping plates of fried chicken and potato salad. It does no good to go in shouting and screaming for change with your empty hand shaking in the air. You've got to have something to offer.

When the hundreds of marchers had converged in the center of the housing complex, I took a bullhorn and began to shout to those peeking out of the top-floor apartments: “C'mon down. Join us. It's recovery time! We know who you are. You're our sons and daughters. It's time for you to take control of your lives!”

Slowly people started coming down, some from apartments currently serving as crack houses. We put them right up on stage and gave them the microphone. They talked about their lives. Then, late in the day, one of my staff members came up to me and said a group of pushers wanted to play a tape over our public-address system. I said okay, seeing it as an opening to talk with the young men. I walked up to the door where these young pushers were holed up. Someone from the crowd yelled to me, “You ought not do that, Cecil.” But I did it anyway, and that’s how I met Alex.

Earlier in the week, Alex had begun to reflect on his life. He later told us, “I had been taught by my father that if I was going to live, then I should be the best at whatever I was doin’. I took the bad road, being crooked, a criminal, and I was good at it. I had no mercy or concern for another’s physical well-being. I did some time in jail. I was growing tired of life.

“I was thinking, ‘I can get a job and if I don’t make it, I can always turn back to what I was doin’—selling drugs.’ But the one who is always by my side, my baby’s mother, said, ‘You can make an honest living.’ So I started thinking about it. That Saturday was the day Cecil and all the people came in marching.

“I listened to Cecil. What he was talking about was what I wanted to be about. After the walls at Valencia Gardens got painted, I realized that the march wasn’t about covering up the dirty walls; it was about the people. There was a total change in the people who lived in the projects. People in the projects who never talked to each other were now talking. There had been so much bad around V.G., I wanted to help make some good.”

Soon after, Alex started coming to Glide. Many months later he spoke about the march on Valencia Gardens to some visitors who were interested in our recovery program. Alex said, “I remember my father telling me so many times that by being born in 1968 I missed out on everything: Malcolm X, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Vietnam, the hippie movement, and the Black Panthers. After I came to Glide, I began to see that I hadn’t missed everything. I’ve lived to see Glide and to know the Reverend Cecil Williams, who is not a killer but a saver. Glide saved me and my family from the madness. One of the coolest things about finding myself is that I never had to go find Glide. Glide came to my home and found me.”

Alex now has a job, and he’s good at it. He’s a new man. “Coming to Glide was like facing a mountain where there weren’t any stairs or a clearcut path. Instead there were hands, all different colors of hands, reaching down to help me. All I had to do was hang on and keep climbing until I got to the top. When I reached the top, then I looked back and saw how far I’d come. It was, and is, a beautiful view—this is recovery.”

Lift up your eyes upon this day breaking for you. Give birth to the dream.

Maya Angelou

To support Glide’s thirty-seven comprehensive programs that serve thousands of homeless, drug-addicted, downtrodden, hopeless, or outcast people, visit the church’s Web site, www.glide.org.