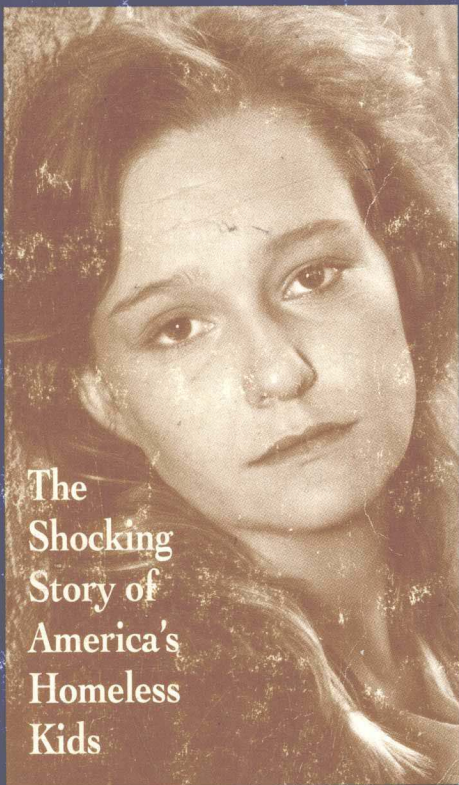


Children of Eve

*With an introduction by
Sister Mary Rose McGeady*



**The
Shocking
Story of
America's
Homeless
Kids**

by Kevin Casey

Book 2 in the Covenant House
Program of Public Awareness

CHILDREN OF EVE

Kevin Casey

Covenant House

DEDICATED

to

Ace, Amber, Bay-Girl, Bones, Lobo, Axe, Gypsy, Morbid,
Marsh, Kini, Peaches, Lucky, Quebec, Dr. Death, Cat,
Kitten, Space, Little Space, Wisdom, Wish, Worm, Wrath,
Zebra, Dragon, Turtle, Outback, Sin, Priest, Satan, Angel,
Beaker, Mignon, Reed, Bug, Shorty, Too Tall, Prince, Snake,
Crappy, Samurai, Poop-stain, Baby Boy, Confused, Starchild,
Red, Sasha, Fanny, Alexia, Nina, Marilyn, Sequoia, Jesse,
Connie, Stacy, Brittany, Rock-Ann, Cayote, Breeze, Tweaky
Dave, Punisher, Punisher II, Baser, Miown, Cupcake, Sad,
Patience, Insane, Shakespeare, Soda-pop, Whisper, Chance,
Rag Doll, Quiet, Happy, Smiley, Bambi, Candy, Stormy,
Stare, Sprite, Sweet-T, Chief, Mischief, Houston, Trash,
Mystic, Undertaker, Ratt, D-day, Riff-raff, Ricochet, Robin,
Hood, Puck, Catfish, Dopey, Cherry, Kong, Animal, Tranc,
Pockets, Bunny, Frostbite, Dusty, Borg, Weedhopper, Nikki,
Gadget, Skyy, Christmas, Hutch, Shadow, Crystle, Precious,
Silver, Gem, Sapphire, Tiara, Wolf, Wolfette, Little John,
Little One, Little Bit, Cat Eyes, Joy, Sunny, Tex, Daisy, Miss
T-Bird, Skywalker, Starmonkey, Polo, Giggles, Happenin',
Ice, Loaded, Misty, Craft, Raven, Baron, Coda, Hawk,
Shaggy, Shytown, Honey, Moondrop, Brandy, Raccoon,
Lizard, Gidget, Butterfly, Skunk, and the many other kids
who, to hide something, to be something, or wanting to
believe it was cool to be homeless, re-named themselves.

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FIRST EDITION

Introduction

by Sister Mary Rose McGeady

You've opened a book that tells the story of a modern American tragedy. The story about America's homeless kids.

The kids you'll meet in this book come from everywhere and nowhere, the suburbs and the slums, in all shapes and sizes. But as different as they are, they all have one thing in common — each one of these kids you'll meet has no sense of belonging to anyone, any place anything. They are *disconnected*.

We discover them broke, tired, homeless, and most of all, lonely. They come to our Covenant House crisis shelters because, quite simply, they have no place else to go.

In talking with these kids about what has brought them to us, we hear many things again and again.

Many have long histories of sexual abuse, or physical or emotional neglect.

Some come from families burdened with drug or alcohol addiction, or psychological and emotional problems.

Many are stepchildren, casualties of the growing incidence of divorce and remarriage.

Or they are kids who don't have families at all: raised in foster homes or in institutions, then aging out of the system by eighteen, or simply walking away at an earlier age without looking back.

Other young men are fleeing the destruction that war has brought to their homes and families in Central America. They leave behind towns stricken with poverty, come north to Los Angeles pursuing a dream akin to the one that founded our country.

These are all objectively bad situations, and while running away is not the best response in many cases, it is often a sign that this child is healthy in a place wrought with sickness. Many of these kids were the only ones in their environment brave enough to say, "There is some-

thing wrong here, and I won't live this way." Then they find themselves on the street.

This book charts the fallout from our shifting culture as seen through the eyes of our counselors on the front lines of this struggle. These are caring adults who try day and night to reach these kids, to re-connect them to society, to healthy lives, to the love of God.

The founder of my religious order, St. Vincent de Paul, taught us that before we can teach the poor about God we must first take care of their bodily needs. At Covenant House, we can't tell a kid God loves her if she's dirty, cold, hungry, and sick.

Words like love don't work on our kids. We are challenged as Christians to *show* our kids we love them, not tell them.

So this is also a book about a machine, a concrete, material presence in the lives of the kids we try to save. It's a blue 1988 custom Chevy van (with a white dove on the side, the symbol of Covenant House) that goes out into the streets every night searching for homeless kids.

Our van counselors are on the street most of the night, from seven in the evening to four or five in the morning. They meet teen prosti-

tutes, homeless youth, and hard-core street kids. What they face is often unpredictable. In a span of minutes, they are called upon to do everything from handing a hungry child a sandwich to taking a razor blade from a youth with freshly slashed wrists.

Whether a child needs medical attention, food, clothing, or shelter, it can be arranged immediately. If the child needs to talk, to cry, to sort things out, the van team is there as well.

On a night that's bitter cold or wet, there may be as many as ten kids huddled in the van, soaking in the warmth of the heater, eating sandwiches, and sipping hot chocolate.

An hour later there may be one child in the warm van, exhausted and alone, who called from the bus station or a payphone and heard, "OK, we're in the van. We know where you are. We're turning onto the freeway now. I want you to stay on the line until you actually see us pull up in front of you and wave. OK?"

With this same phone, the van team can work with hospitals, police stations, shelters, parents and relatives, whatever the child needs . . . wherever the child is. Many of the kids wouldn't step foot in an office with its desks and intimidating forms and counselors, so we

bring a different kind of office to them.

And so of course, this is a book about a very special group of people, a group I am proud of, our street outreach team.

Please, I ask you to take the time to read this book, to learn about these brave people, our kids and our staff (it won't take long!) And if you can spare a few minutes more, please pray for courage and strength for our staff that we may be effective instruments of God's love and for human dignity for our troubled youth. And pray, please, that healthy, loving family life may become a priority in our parishes, in our schools, and most importantly, in our own homes.

In God's love,
Sr. Mary Rose McGeady
New York, August, 1991

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Chapter 1

Lisa is a spent shell. She lies gleaming on the sidewalk in the hot California sun.

“Hi, Lisa,” I call, passing in the van, en route from Covenant House to Venice to find two tired kids who called seeking shelter.

“Hey,” she salutes hoarsely. Lisa is a Hollywood street kid, perhaps the one I love the most, though she’ll never know it.

The curb, and the city of Los Angeles, is a dry and dusty place in the summer, which lasts about eight months. Then we have fall for a little while, and then it’s summer again.

“You’ve got to remember,” Lisa often says, “this is a desert. Somebody came along and there was absolutely nothing and he said, let’s build a city *here*. Now there are millions of people living here, stuck here. We’re running out of water.

“It’s a desert,” she says, shaking her head, waving an arm at the dark green ivy sloping up from the freeway. “If you don’t water it, it’ll wither; it’ll die.”

She speaks as much of herself as the land.

Lisa was born and has lived her entire life within walking distance of Hollywood Boulevard and Bronson Avenue, a block from where Hollywood Boulevard crosses the Hollywood Freeway, five blocks from Covenant House.

She stands, brushing the sidewalk grit from the seat of her jeans. What Lisa wears is an American adolescent uniform: jeans and white sneakers, a t-shirt, and a button down cotton shirt. The latter is too large and hangs loosely from the thin frame.

Standing on the corner of Hollywood and Bronson, tall and pale, long weathered locks of auburn hair swinging around her shoulders, her arms hanging at her side, Lisa looks like an urban scarecrow. Like most rural scarecrows, there’s nothing particularly frightening about her, to birds, to anybody. She’s just a kid, eighteen, and she lives on the street.

What to do today, she thinks, having stood up for some reason. Her stomach provides the answer as it does every morning, with an acidic

twinge and its own gastric dialogue. Today she will eat.

Like most of the people in the third world and in Los Angeles, Lisa is beginning a day in which her considerable efforts will ultimately put food in her stomach.

What direction those efforts take is very much up to her.

She sets off towards the touristy strip of Hollywood Boulevard, where for a dozen blocks the concrete turns black and stars appear, imbedded in the sidewalk and labeled with the names of a lot of people nobody remembers.

Lisa grew up here, but she's seen so many runaways drawn to Hollywood from somewhere else by the promise of paradise offered in the movies.

For what, she wonders: for pimps and drug dealers, pizza places and tattoo parlors, and for homeless kids like herself, asking for change.

"How can you do that?" a friend on the street asks. "I can't panhandle. I get embarrassed."

"If you're embarrassed you're not hungry enough," Lisa says. She's only embarrassed when cute boys her age pass by. Then she pre-

tends she's combing her hair in the store window.

"Forget this change stuff," her friend says, "Come make money with me."

Lisa once again has the opportunity to sell cocaine for tremendous amounts of money. Being a dealer is near the top of the street survival food chain. She'd have a lot of money to play with and she could make out well if she kept her head about her. It's pretty dangerous, though.

Moving down the chain, she could steal cars or just car radios, break into houses, or rob people of their wallets and leather jackets on the streets at night.

Lisa knows the score: someone has to suffer if you want to survive on the street in Hollywood. It's either somebody else, or it's you. If you decide to take the suffering on yourself, you can sell your body, panhandle, or eat out of dumpsters. After three years on the street, Lisa chooses to panhandle.

"No thanks, man," Lisa tells her coke dealer friend hoarsely, looking down. "I'm fine."

This way nobody else gets hurt.

Lisa's been hurt enough by people here: other kids, not so benign drug dealers, and her parents. She knows how it feels. Her mother overdosed on prescribed antidepressants. Her dad became distant, unable to cope with the pain of his wife's suicide and the stress of raising his only daughter.

Strong of character and independent, Lisa had done her best to stay out of the way. And she'd been working hard. But her grades dropped one semester and nothing was said. Then she came home drunk at four one morning and no one noticed. Soon there were nights she didn't come home. Her dad never mentioned it.

After a prolonged absence of three nights—nights of walking, reading, sleeping on the beach—she was sure her dad would have something to say to her. Anything. Lisa came home to find the house locks changed and her t-shirts, jeans, and cassette tapes on the back steps. This intelligent, thoughtful girl withered. Two and a half years ago, at sixteen, Lisa became a Hollywood street kid.

Somewhere in this desert, there had to be someone with love to spare for Lisa.

HOW TO DEFUSE AN ANGRY TEENAGER

No one likes to deal with an angry person, but a certain amount of teenage anger is inevitable. Often, the key to success is to understand your child better by finding out where the anger is coming from, and then adjusting your own behavior to help your teenager overcome the underlying problems that are causing the anger.

If your child is given to angry outbursts, here are some suggestions that should help you negotiate a truce.

Don't panic. Even if you feel that you don't recognize your own child anymore accept it for the moment.

Listen carefully to what your teenager is blurting out to you. Try to read between the lines to find out what the real issue is. Although your teen's insults, complaints and demands may be hurting you, they are actually cries for help.

Don't retaliate. Don't come up with threats and punishments without trying to find out why your teen is angry. Parental retaliation against teenage anger often makes the situation worse.

Tell him that he's hurting you—not in such a way as to make him feel guilty—but in a way that will make him realize that you're concerned and just trying to understand what's bothering him.

Reexamine the rules. At a non-angry time try to explain to your teen that although there absolutely have to be rules in the house, perhaps some of the "old rules" can be adjusted. Negotiate to develop rules you can both live with.

Chapter 2

Two years ago at a family picnic, Tim watched his father put a bullet into his mother's head. His father momentarily trained the gun on Tim, but dropped it and waited silently for the police to come. His father went to prison. Tim went to a group home. He was thirteen.

At fourteen he was placed with a foster family, who were nice, stable people and told him he could stay as long as he wanted. "You can grow up here," they said. "Be part of our family."

"You are not my parents," he responded, refusing their love. It clashed violently with a deep feeling that he was worthless, and triggered an inner turmoil that sent him running to Hollywood. Now he lay under a thin gray blanket on the steps of Sunset Boulevard's Blessed Sacrament Church, hungry and cold at night.

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This suffering reinforced his belief that he was bad, and actually stabilized his world. But choosing to sleep at the door of a church expressed his unutterable need for redemption. Nevertheless, he consistently rejected the help of the Jesuit Fathers of Blessed Sacrament.

“I’m Tim,” the boy said to us, rising.

We met Tim while bustling in for Mass. It was the day after we arrived to open Covenant House Los Angeles in November of 1988. Six of us stood around on the church steps, a rather frightful greeting for him, I imagine. He was about five foot four inches tall, with straight black hair and mocha-colored skin, but painfully thin. We introduced ourselves awkwardly.

“I . . . I really don’t want to go to a shelter,” Tim stuttered when we told him about our work. But he let Robert get him a hamburger at the grease-pit across the street. When Robert returned we lingered a little too long and Tim became nervous and edgy.

“I’ve uh, got to meet somebody now,” Tim said, gathering up his blanket and his little transistor radio with a broken antenna.

We left him alone, and he sat back down.