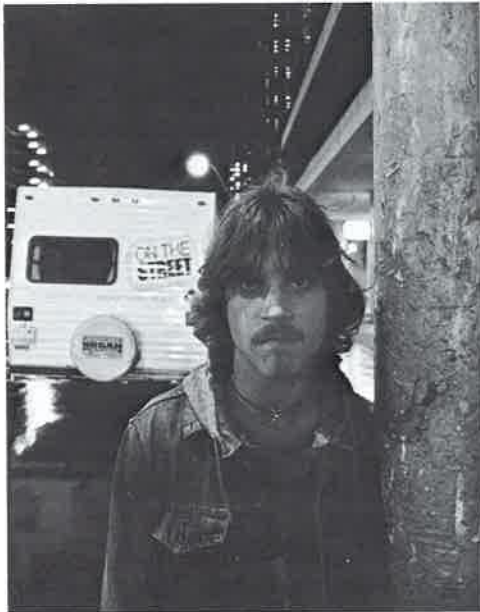


## Testimony from Times Square



*"Sometimes when I really look at their faces, and realize that they're dying, it makes me cry."*

**T**here are times, John Green says, when he regrets ever having decided to come to Times Square.

"It was a lot easier to ask the tough questions about sin and suffering from a comfortable distance," says Green. He left Wheaton College before his senior year when a sense of urgency about making a difference in the lives of troubled kids propelled the Midwesterner to New York.

He found the challenge he was seeking in our faith community. These special volunteers commit themselves for at least a year to helping kids at Covenant House while maintaining a rigorous schedule of prayer and community life. He also signed on as staff with "Off the Streets," a new street outreach program that works with young prostitutes and hustlers throughout New York City.

Since then, says the former youth minister, the experience of sharing the pain of these youngsters has deepened his own faith. But it has not been easy. "I have known at least five kids who died," he says. "One was stabbed through the heart by a john (a customer), one OD'd, one girl shot herself on the steps of a church..." His voice trails off. "The pain was just eating me up inside," but he didn't realize it until the night he saw a homeless, naked man commit suicide by jumping off the roof at nearby Port Authority. "I will never be able to forget him," Green says. "We got to him maybe 10 seconds later, but it was too late: I saw the blood streaming into the gutter."

The next morning, after daily Mass in the Covenant Community's chapel on Eighth Avenue, Green closed the doors. "I thought I would just talk to God politely," he recalls, "but as I looked at the faces on the mural behind the altar in our chapel — there among the pimps and pornographers and those crucifying Christ on Times Square — I looked at the faces of the young hustlers, and then I saw the real faces of those kids who had died. And I started crying and screaming, 'They're just children! They're

just children!'"

The burly, bearded Green rubs his eyes. "And then," he adds quietly, "I heard the words — are they from Psalm 12 or is it 23? — 'To the poor and oppressed, I Myself will arise, says the Lord. And grant them the salvation they thirst for.' And I realized God was allowing me to share their pain so I could share His. And the consolation was that God became very real to me, He was right there in that chapel sharing my pain.

"Now I feel whole in my relationship with God," says Green. "And I feel privileged to share the pain of these kids. I can say I'm totally in love with Him, and I feel my relationship growing."

"But sometimes," he says with a sigh, and then pauses for a moment. "I see how much I've changed, and it scares me, because I can't go back to where I was," says Green, who describes his pre-Covenant House experience as comfortable or "laissez-faire" Christianity. The saying goes, "You can't talk the talk if you don't walk the walk." And the Christian walk, says Green, is all uphill.

"Recently I sent a five-page letter back to a friend who heard all about my work here and then asked, 'But do these kids with AIDS realize the spiritual implications of their sin?' I'm afraid he probably didn't like my answer: 'The only way they're going to do that is if we suffer with them.' Didn't Wesley write a hymn about how he chose to ring his chapel bell outside the gates of hell? I guess that's how I feel."

Next spring, Green plans to return to Wheaton to finish his degree. And then? "I'm bound to end up back on the streets somewhere," he says with a laugh. A backpacking enthusiast, Green would prefer to live in the country, but "I see a man-made hell in the city," he says. "And that's where God is calling me."