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By BRENT FLYNN / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Dare to Dream aims to inspire troubled kids to turn lives around

Growing up in a foster home in New York City, Jan Tennyson learned firsthand how hopeless life could be without a family, or even without feeling like someone cared about her well being and her future.

"From my personal experience, I know kids shouldn't have to grow up thinking they're a nobody," she said. "They need to know they're special and can make it."

That knowledge has guided her 18-year crusade to show at-risk children in foster homes and juvenile detention centers in Dallas that there is more to life than blighted urban streets, addiction and crime. She is the founder of Dare to Dream Children's Foundation, a nonprofit, faith-based organization that strives to stop destructive youth behavior through educational programs, recreation and mentoring.

Since its inception in 1987, Dare to Dream has reached out to more than 15,000 young people in group homes, shelters, detention facilities and orphanages, using a mix of positive reinforcement and Christian faith.

One of the mentors, Eric Calloway, had his own spiritual awakening while in jail five years ago. Homeless and addicted to drugs, he hit rock bottom before turning his life around, he said.

"I'm a living witness that things can get better," he said. "They are victims of their environment, same as me. I want to warn them about what they are up against and let them know things won't always be this way."

Taking the teens and young adults outside of their everyday existence is one of the program's main priorities – whether it's a riverboat tour, a first plane ride or simply taking youths to a nice restaurant and letting them order anything they want.

"We're getting them to dream and think out of the box," Ms. Tennyson said. "They think they have to live on the same street their whole lives. We want to teach them how to trust and not be afraid to step out of their comfort zone."

Obviously, for those in juvenile detention, a field trip is impossible. That's where the personal testimonials have the most effect. Mr. Calloway recalled one visit to a detention center where he mentioned what church he attended. Three months later, one of the teens in the audience showed up at the church with his mother.

"His mom told me when he got out he had changed, and he said he wanted to go to church and see me. Calloway said. "If I can reach just one kid, that's worth millions."