

Hustler trades Cadillac cruiser for outreach van

If you asked V.J. Smith how he went from being a destitute nine-year-old orphan to a Cadillac-cruising drug lord to a guardian angel patrolling Minneapolis streets, it wouldn't be long until you heard about his faith, Urban Ventures and his wife Ruthie.

He and Ruthie still argue about who first "put the moves on" who. A popular D.J. at a Lake Street bar, V.J. hustled women for sport. Sporting a big toothy smile, slick and dressed to kill, V.J. drove a shiny Cadillac with gangster whitewall tires and few women tried to resist him, he says.

Until Ruthie, that is.

"I met Ruthie 22 years ago. I chased her at our workplace to get a kiss. She quit her job and never came back. I never forgot that. That's the only girl that never came back," says V.J., not so humbly.

A conscience was pricked. A pattern was broken. "Just Say No" may not have been the "end all" as a national anti-drug program, but on a personal level, it worked splendidly. Thanks to one woman's fortitude and his Creator's prodding, the tide in V.J.'s life began to turn. "I never ever chased a girl for a kiss after that."

Today, V.J. and the M.A.D. D.A.D.S. street patrol chase fathers. In alleys, parks, bars and prisons, they offer friendship, assistance and prayers to men who have left their families. Working in collaboration with Urban Ventures' Center for



V.J. hustled women for sport. But Ruthie said no. He's a heavenly hound now, says Ruthie of her husband. "I like him better that way."

Fathering since 1998, the patrol has clocked nearly 4000 hours.

"We refer men to job training, treatment centers, and Center for Fathering support groups," explains V.J. "These men won't come to church or Urban Ventures on their own. You have to go to them. They need a face, a feeling, and a caring hand."

And they get it from V.J., known for doling out holy hugs before he asks your name.

During our interview on 4th Avenue, a young black man walks right into V.J.'s love trap. "Hey, bro, how you doin, man? Just getting offa school?"

"Yup," said the perfect stranger.

"Whatchu studying?" asks V.J.

"Business management."

"That's good, brother. We're waiting for leaders like you with some skills. We'll put you in that

business on the corner! You can run that," said V.J. as though he owned the place.

Encouragement continues a mile a minute: "Don't let nobody get you hung up on that dope thing, man. People say it doesn't hurt you, but it does. Just get those skills and think about your future. Bless you, man." The kid leaves with a proud smile.

V.J. tells story after story about street encounters. One man in front of Urban Ventures' People's Exchange was so empowered by V.J.'s prayer that he spontaneously dumped all his pipes and drug paraphernalia in the trash. "He'd been roaming the streets for over a year. He said, 'This prayer changed my life. I'm going home.'"

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