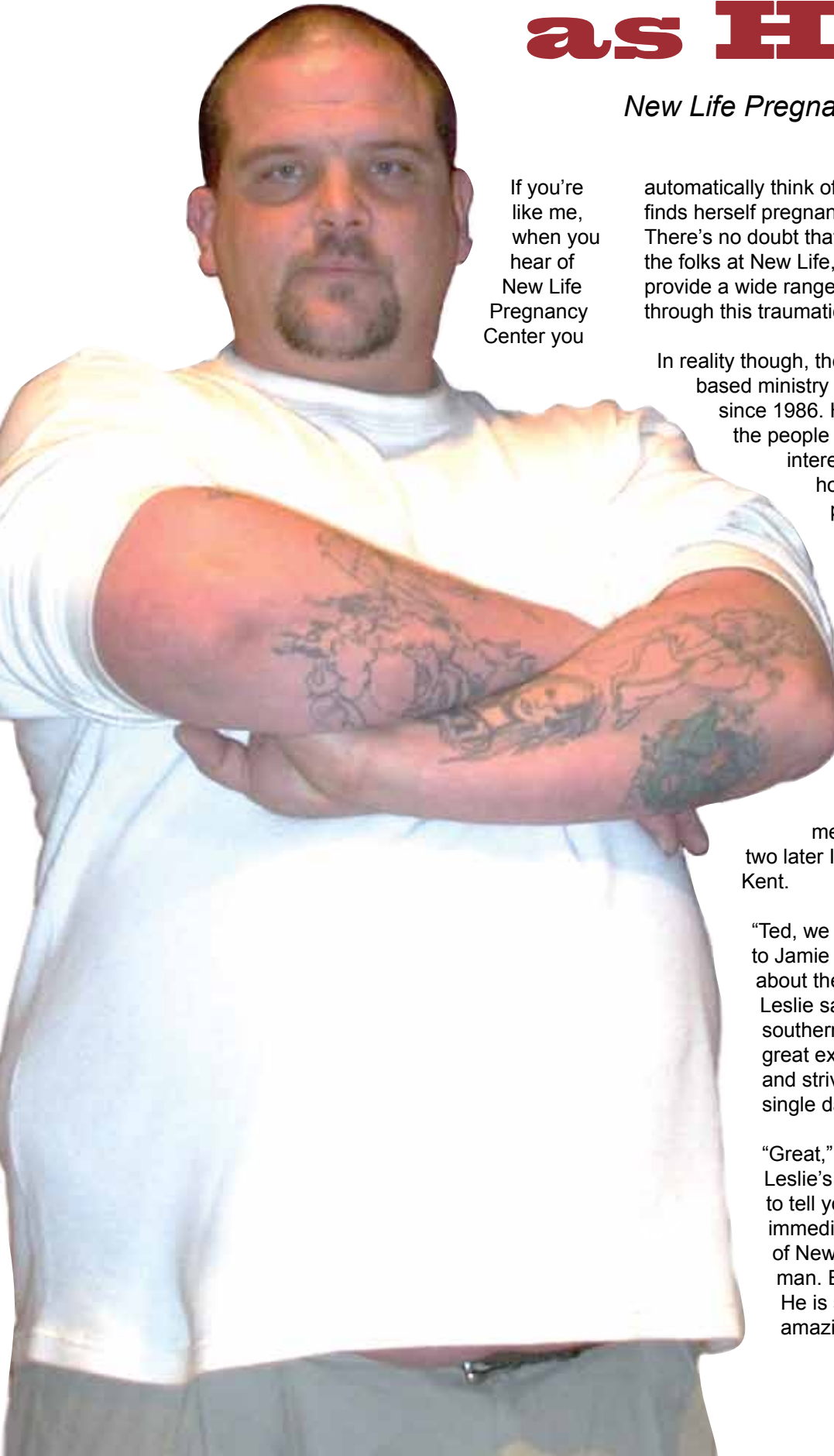


A Heart as Big as He Is...

New Life Pregnancy Center's Unlikely Client



If you're like me, when you hear of New Life Pregnancy Center you

automatically think of a young teenage girl who suddenly finds herself pregnant, confused, and scared to death. There's no doubt that situation does arise and thankfully the folks at New Life, as it is commonly called, are there to provide a wide range of services to help see young women through this traumatic time in their life.

In reality though, there are many sides to this Christian based ministry that has been serving our community since 1986. Having worked with several of the people at New Life, I thought it would be interesting to get an inside glimpse at just how this heartfelt ministry serves the people of our community.

I knew confidentiality was a high priority for both New Life and their clients so I offered to tell their story using an alias, if that would help. It didn't surprise me when I asked Penny Weaver, the Executive Director, if it would be possible for me to visit with one of their clients that said she would bring it up in their next meeting and ask the other staff members what they thought. A day or two later I received a phone call from Leslie Kent.

"Ted, we all agreed you really need to speak to Jamie Hawkins. It is truly an amazing story about the work we do here at New Life," Leslie said excitedly, but still in her smooth southern draw. "We all think this story is a great example of the kind of thing we pray for and strive to achieve here at New Life every single day."

"Great," I replied, "that sounds super!" Then Leslie's voice lowered as she said, "I have to tell you though, Jamie is not what might immediately come to mind when you think of New Life Pregnancy Center. Jamie is a man. But Ted, his heart is as big as he is. He is such a sweetheart and has an such amazing story."

I admit I was taken back a bit but I've learned to trust what God places in front of me for LIVING Christian magazine. I also know New Life's heart and decided to explore things further. Leslie gave me Jamie's number and I called him to set up a time and place for the interview.

When I walked into Starbuck's to meet with Jamie, it was pretty easy to pick him out. Leslie was right. Jamie's six-foot, four inch, 300 pound frame was easy to spot. As he rose to his feet and stretched out his hand I knew this guy was the real deal. His huge arms may have been covered with tattoos, but his face sported an engaging smile. Before I even took the first sip of my grande non-fat latte, Jamie had me taking notes as fast as I could write.

"When Leslie called me and said you wanted to talk with me I couldn't believe it. I am deeply honored. The ladies at New Life are amazing and I know they played a huge part in transforming my life," Jamie said as if he couldn't wait for me to hear what God had done in his life.

"I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of. I guess a lot of it started when I was about six years old. My grandfather died of cancer and I just couldn't understand how this supposedly all-loving God people talked about could take somebody away like that. I just stopped going to church at that point and gave up thinking there even was a God. I guess I thought it was all pretty meaningless. After that it seemed I just starting getting into trouble; doing drugs, getting into gangs, that sort of thing.

Because of my size it was easy to intimidate people into giving me stuff or doing stuff for me. I did cocaine, heroin, and loved to just drink and party as long as I could, whenever I could. People were literally scared of me, and with good cause. If someone looked at me the wrong way, I might very well beat the living daylight out of them, just because I could.

I pushed everyone in my family away, thinking I was the one in control. I ended up moving to Michigan and it's hard to believe, but things got even worse. I got arrested for armed robbery and even attempted murder. Eventually I burned every bridge I had up there and ended up living in the streets. That's when I think I hit rock bottom and moved back to Illinois. Up to about two years ago I was still hooked on cocaine, alcohol, and was even still doing heroine.

Thankfully, I met Tanya, who is now my wife. We both had kids from previous marriages. My oldest is twenty and Tanya's oldest are in their teens. When Tanya found out she was pregnant, it had been a long time since either one of us had raised a baby. She thought it would be a good idea to take some parenting classes since things have changed so much over the past ten to fifteen years. Learn stuff like CPR and that sort of thing. That's when she called New Life Pregnancy Center to see what they had to offer."

I seized a moment to relax my hand from scribbling indiscernible notes and to sip my latte, but Jamie was on a roll and I knew I had to try and keep up.



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"I agreed to go with her to the parenting classes. At that point I was still an atheist and had no desire to hear anything about Christianity at all. My attitude was 'you do your thing and I'll do mine.' One time when we got to class they changed what they were going to talk about that night and showed a Christian film instead. I got up and walked out. I honestly thought they were just out to get me - kind of like a cult trying to recruit members. I wasn't having anything to do with that.

We continued to go to the classes and my son James, Jr. was born in 2007. I remember the day he was born I celebrated with a 30-pack of beer. But the first time Tanya sat my new son in my lap I instantly knew I didn't want him to grow up to be like me."

For the first time since we met, Jamie paused and took a deep breath. It was evident sharing his story was getting a bit more difficult, a bit more closer to that great big heart Leslie had told me about. Jamie shook his head and shrugged his shoulders to loosen up a bit and continued.

"I haven't touched a drop or done any drugs since that day. I still smoke cigarettes but I'm working on that, too. I just quit right then and there. I thought I was the one that had done it. It never crossed my mind that God had a hand in it. Looking back, I now see God was the one who put James Jr. in my life and started working on me.

Due to my past and a huge misunderstanding, Tanya and I found ourselves being investigated by the DCFS. Before we knew it, they wanted to take our kids away from us. We tried everything we could think of but they were convinced that it needed to be done.

One day they just showed up at our door. They were going to take James Jr. I knew one of the police officers who came with them and he knew me. He also knew what I was capable of. He told me to just keep my hands in my pockets and stay calm. As they were getting ready to take my son away I noticed they didn't even have a car seat for him. There was no way I was going to let them take him away like that. As hard as it was for me, I went and got our car seat for them. I put it in the car and fastened it in just like they had told us to do at New Life. Then I put my son in it and strapped him in. He was crying and didn't want to go. It was the worst day of my life. When they took my son, they took my heart."

Even though there was a long line at the coffee counter, the music was louder than normal, and three ladies were seated about three feet from us, Jamie and I were oblivious to all the distractions.

"I called Leslie at New Life and told her what had happened. She said, 'I'll be right there.' Then I called Pastor Wayne Dunning over at Faith Fellowship. I didn't call for myself. I called because I thought it might help Tanya. I thought she was the one who could really use some support.

It was right after that I started examining the life I had led. I had tried to do it my way and that obviously wasn't working. I woke up one Sunday morning and told Tanya I felt like I wanted to go to church. She couldn't believe what she heard." Then with a chuckle Jamie said, "I couldn't believe what I had said!" Jamie added that since that first time, Tanya has always been very supportive and helps him get to church on a regular basis.

"One morning Tanya couldn't go so I called my sister and asked if she would meet me at the church because I didn't feel comfortable going there by myself quite yet. I was going to go to New Beginnings (Church of God) but when I got there my sister called and said she wasn't going to be able to make it because one of her kids just got sick. I sat there in the parking lot, afraid to go in on my own.

I tried to convince myself this was a sign that I didn't really need it - that I could work things out for myself. For some reason I remembered Pastor Dunning and gave him a call but I didn't get answer. I left him a message. I drove by another church in that area but there weren't any cars in the parking lot. It looked all closed up. I was ready to just go back home when Pastor Dunning called back. I told him I felt like I needed to go to church that morning. He said they were getting ready to open the church for services and to come on over!

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When I was in the church service I noticed my leg wouldn't stop moving! It just kept jumping around on me! The next thing I knew I was up on my feet and walking toward the front of the church. That day I turned my life over to Christ. I just put it all down and honestly, it felt like the weight of the world came off my shoulders. I literally felt the weight being taken off."

By this time we were both pretty much exhausted and took a break to finally drink a bit of our coffee. I sat there in amazement trying to think of something to say. All that came to mind was, "Amen." "So what happened with James Jr. and the DCFS?" I anxiously asked. "How did that turn out?" Jamie's face lit up as he seized the opportunity to share another story of God at work in his life.

"They told us it would take at least a year for us to get our kids back. It ended up taking sixty days. I remember it was on a Wednesday when we went before the judge. I saw the case worker outside the courtroom. I told her I already knew the outcome. I told her I was taking my kids home that day. She didn't believe me. She said there was no way that was going to happen. Even if the judge ruled in our favor, she had never seen it go that fast.

There was a small group from Faith Fellowship that came to support us at the courthouse. They joined hands and prayed for us and told us, 'Good luck.' I told them I didn't need luck, I've got God on my side now. The kids are coming home with their dad.

We went before the judge and it felt like it took forever as he looked over the papers. He finally looked up and said he saw no reason why this case should have come before the court in the first place and the kids are to be released to their parents that day! The case worker was stunned!

Driving over to pick up my sons I was just praising God and giving Him thanks! We got them just in time to go to Wednesday night services. When we came into the church everyone had heard of what had happened and we got a standing ovation! It was that night I made up my mind to be baptized."

I had goose bumps all over. I've seen God do some amazing things but to hear Jamie's story and to hear how people are living out God's Word is truly humbling. Jamie and I paused for another short moment just soaking in the mystery and wonder of Christ. It wasn't long, however, when Jamie's heart showed itself again.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate the love and support I got from everyone at New Life Pregnancy Center. They played a huge role in helping me find my way to Jesus, let alone my becoming a better father to my kids.

I remember when we went to our first class after we got the kids back. I pulled into the parking lot and all these

ladies came out of the building and started walking towards me. I didn't know what to think. I thought I must have done something wrong! They all came out and gave me these great big hugs, patting me on the back, and shouting congratulations."

Jamie paused, gathered himself, looked me in the eye and softly said, "Ted, I had never felt love like that before in all my life."



James "Jamie" Hawkins

"I go to their (New Life's) Bible classes now on a regular basis. I still have my moments but I try to open my heart more and more. This Christian life isn't easy. It's hard. People from my past constantly want me back. But I'd rather disappoint them than disappoint my God. You know if your family isn't Christ-centered, they will try to keep you from Him.

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I think I've got enough control over my life now that I know I'm not going back. Having the power of Christ in your life is an unbelievable feeling. I especially want to thank Leslie, Glenda, Sharon, and Susan for their understanding, love, and support.

My Grandmother passed away just this past summer. I know after my Grandfather died I turned away from God. I'm so glad she was able to see me return to Christ and to see me as a transformed man."

I told Jamie I was more than happy to share his story using an assumed name if that would make him feel more comfortable. He immediately shook his head and said I was more than welcome to use his real name saying, "I've told lots of people about my coming to Christ. I'm proud of what He has done in my life."

Exhausted, Jamie and I visited for a few more minutes before we parted company. As we stood up to put on our jackets, Jamie spread those massive arms of his and we gave each other a well deserved hug.

After visiting with Jamie I have a new respect and appreciation for the ministry taking place at New Life Pregnancy Center. Yes, they help teenage girls who find themselves confused, scared, and pregnant. Yes, they

provide support and counseling. Yes, they offer pro-life alternatives to expectant mothers. And yes, they have an extremely well qualified staff, modern equipment. and a huge network of much needed resources.

But perhaps most importantly, they have hearts that go beyond providing a service. They take the time to look beyond their typical client profile to those who need Christ in their life. They don't let stereotypes, past or present circumstances, race, or as in this case, even gender keep them from reaching out and loving someone.

Because of their passion, love, and efforts, not only are the lives of infants spared, but whole families have been saved. Not to mention one very large fellow whose heart is as big as he is.

New Life Pregnancy Center relies on volunteers and donations for much of its operation. If you would like more information about how to volunteer or to make a donation, please call their office at 872-5555 or visit their web site at www.newlifepregnancycenter.com. Their office is located at 1698 East Pershing Road in Decatur.

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