Radical Stubbornness

By Kevin Ryan, B.A. 1989

I was born on Riker’s Island, the New York City jail,” 19-year-old Daria told the audience of more than 1,000 Covenant House supporters, including many CUA alumni. She stood center stage at Lincoln Center last June, her voice tentative at first, struggling to manage her addiction behind prison walls, disinterested in her surroundings. She paused. “But I’m never going back.”

Daria was born into a hellish childhood. Dad was long gone, hot pursuit of the drugs that ruined his life. Mom sat in jail, struggling to get drunk and advise her. “You’re going to end up a failure, just like your mother.” She is just a child’s head: “You’re going to end up a failure, just like your mother.”

But there she stood, radiant and rising above the past. There she stood, radiant and rising above the past. The crowd she had been living on the streets, alone in the world, just a few months ago, the theater was rapt. “I may have been born there,” she paused. “But I’m never going back.”

Daria was sent to live with a grandmother who didn’t like her, didn’t want her, and drilled one singular refrain into the child’s head: “You’re going to end up a failure, just like your mother.”

Daria was born into a hellish childhood. Dad was long gone, hot pursuit of the drugs that ruined his life. Mom sat in jail, struggling to manage her addiction behind prison walls, disinterested in her new daughter. Daria was sent to live with a grandmother who didn’t like her, didn’t want her, and drilled one singular refrain into the child’s head: “You’re going to end up a failure, just like your mother.” She is just a child’s head: “You’re going to end up a failure, just like your mother.”

But there she stood, radiant and rising above the past. Daria’s promise would have been lost to the streets forever, except for the safety net to catch her. A safety net built on the ground, the sweat, and the radical stubbornness of people of faith who have dedicated their lives to abused, exploited, and desperate kids like Daria.

Covenant House is but one of countless and worthy options. One of the largest charities in the Americas, Covenant House protects homeless, trafficked, and runaway youth in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The Vatican Mission to the United Nations presented Ryan with its 2010 Path to Peace Award, recognizing his effort to save thousands of desperate and abandoned children from the streets. Ryan and his wife, Clare, have six children.

When I think of CUA’s 125th anniversary celebration, and how the cornerstones of this celebration is the Cardinal Service Commitment with a goal of 125,000 hours of service, it makes me so very proud to be a CUA graduate.

Every day I see what just being present can mean to a hurting kid. Last summer, our board member Brian Cashman (B.A. 1989), general manager of the New York Yankees, invited several of the kids from Covenant House to Yankee Stadium. He spared no corner of the stadium, showering the kids with time and encouragement. After Brian showed them the Yankee clubhouse, Joshua, just 17, beamed. “This is the best day of my life.” If you knew Joshua’s story, you’d believe it. And it took just a few minutes of Brian’s day to give Joshua the attention, the praise, and the memories that will last a lifetime. The same is true for thousands of volunteers across all 32 Covenant House sites. Roberta Degenhardt who teaches stress reduction in Anchorage; Stan Mustal who supports kids in the crisis shelter in St. Louis; Capathia Jenkins who takes time off from a busy Broadway career to encourage our aspiring singers in Washington, D.C.; Detroit, New York, and Newark; Father Andy who counsels the kids in Honduras; Sister Nancy who ministers to teen victims of human trafficking in Vancouver.

For more than 10 years after I finished graduate school, I worked with homeless and trafficked youth at Covenant House. I spent the next seven years working to reform child protection systems and helping to launch a global support program with the United Nations to reduce deaths from malaria, which several years ago killed more than one million children annually, most under the age of 5.

This was compelling work, and when I was presented with the opportunity to lead Covenant House, I was torn between these passions. I sought the advice of my pastor, Father Bob Schechinger in Fair Haven, N.J. We spoke about the opportunity, and how hard it is to know the right thing to do. Father Bob spoke about God calling out to Samuel and Samuel replying, “Here I am Lord, your servant is here.” He urged me to listen to that voice and follow that example.

Those words led me back to Covenant House and to kids like Daria, who today is thriving in our New York City house, going to school, working part-time, and vowing she will be a nurse someday. Do not bet against her.

That night up on stage, Daria stood there alone, but not really. She knew she was surrounded by love. Love from incredible people with families and jobs and worries of their own, but who found room in their hearts to serve others in need.

It made me especially proud that in the crowd that night were so many of my fellow CUA alumni. Literally thousands of homeless kids’ lives have been changed because of the service of these CUA graduates, and I could not be more grateful.

Choosing your service is an intensely personal decision. Working with homeless children is but one of countless and worthy options. You must follow your heart and follow your passion. You could wait for a sign but, for me, no sign dropped out of the sky telling me what to do. Pray about it. Learn about the cause. Talk with your family your spiritual advisers, those whose opinions you respect.

And then, get going. Watch as you bring your faith to life in a new way. The service you provide to others will enrich your own life in ways you never thought possible. I promise.

125,000 hours of service by CUA alumni, faculty, staff, and students! A year of miracles awaits us all.

Kevin Ryan became president and CEO of Covenant House in 2009. One of the largest charities in the Americas, Covenant House protects homeless, trafficked, and runaway youth in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The Vatican Mission to the United Nations presented Ryan with its 2010 Path to Peace Award, recognizing his effort to save thousands of desperate and abandoned children from the streets. Ryan and his wife, Clare, have six children.

For more information on the Cardinal Service Commitment, visit www.cua.edu/125.