

Compassion for Youths At Core of City Events

Vigil, Forum, Concert Focus on Helping

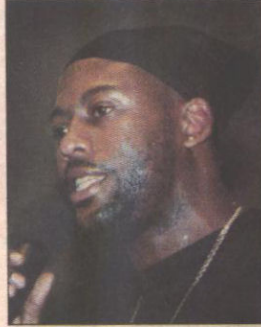
By HAMIL R. HARRIS
Washington Post Staff Writer

A flashlight-waving caravan of bands, community leaders and teenagers marched down Martin Luther King Avenue SE last week to dramatize the plight of some young people who will celebrate this Christmas on the city's cold streets.

Several thousand people turned out for last Thursday's "Light the Way for Children" candlelight vigil and march from Shepherd's Park to Ballou High School's football field. Vincent C. Gray, executive director of Covenant House Washington, which organized the vigil, said those feeling cold were getting a taste of what youths in distress feel every winter.

"There are a lot of children in this city and across the nation who live in pain every day," said Gray, whose organization provides programs, food and shelter for needy youths and is about to break ground on a \$4 million facility in Southeast Washington.

During the rally, young people heard from D.C. Council member Sandy Allen (D-Ward 8), members of the D.C. Board of Education and former National Football League star Steve Fitzhugh, who also has a



program for young people in Southeast called The House.

The Rev. Emmanuel Scott, director of ministry for Covenant House, said young people can be saved from the streets if more adults take the time to reach out and help. "We need to take every opportunity to let our young people know that we love them," Scott said.

James Lindsey, a 12th-grade football player for Ballou High School, said attending the vigil and rally was "a learning experience for me, and it helps me bond with my teammates during the off-season."

In the District, one out of every four children lives in poverty. Ac-



Michael Logan, foreground at left, and Cornelius Berkeley, members of the Gideon Band, entertain the crowd Saturday at the Teen Gospel Talent Show at Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church in Northeast. Vincent Todd, far left, known as Jaz-E, speaks to the youths.

PHOTOS BY MARIE FORBER MARZI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

ording city records, 42 youths, ages 3 days to 19 years old, were victims of homicides in 1999. Also last year, more than 2,000 children needed shelter because they were homeless or victims of abuse or domestic violence.

Given such pressing needs, Covenant House is not the only nonprofit group trying to tackle the problems and weave a stronger safety net for the city's troubled youth. Two other events also were held last week on behalf of teenagers and children.

City officials and area ministers gathered to discuss ways that churches can do more to put young people in positive environments and therefore reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy.

"We are trying to get ministers to open the doors of their churches one night a week in order to give

young people a safe place to participate in wholesome activities," said Joyce Forth, spokesman for the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "Teen pregnancy is not only talking about contraception and birth control, it is investing in our young people."

Brenda Rhodes Miller, director of the campaign, said it grew out of Mayor Anthony A. Williams's committee to reduce teenage pregnancy. But finding solutions is not easy.

"Young people have to be motivated to avoid teen pregnancy in the first place," Rhodes said.

At Greater Mount Calvary Holy Church in Northeast Washington on Saturday, Vincent Todd, better known as Jaz-E, hosted a party and Teen Gospel Talent Show for young

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BY MARIE FORBER MARZI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Jaz-E, now a born-again Christian, sports a T-shirt from Saturday's show.

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people who live in the city's group residences and foster homes. The youths are part of Ella's Kids Inc., a nonprofit ministry run by Ella Strother, a local physician assistant.

Todd was once well-known for throwing R-rated pajama and lingerie parties at area nightclubs. But he is now a born-again Christian,

preaching the gospel.

"God allowed me to see where I was going if I hadn't changed," Todd said. "We are trying to show young people that they don't have to stand on street corners. We want to support the positive things they want to do."

The church was filled with the sounds of hip-hop gospel by such groups as Gideon Band, Willie Blount, Radicals for Christ, and Reston Jackson and Grace.

"The goal of this event is to share a lot of love and to build self esteem with a group of children and their parents who don't think much of themselves," Strother said. "My goal is to help kids and parents get up, get out and get on with their lives."