

Show a godsend for Camden groups

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CAMDEN

The 20/20 documentary "Waiting on the World to Change" has compelled hundreds of people across the nation to send heartfelt letters and donations to two organizations in Camden.

The documentary, aired last week, chronicled the lives of three Camden youngsters. Over the course of 18 months, ABC journalist Diane Sawyer followed Ivan Stevens, 4, Andriana Rodriguez, 6, and Billy Joe Marrero, 17. All three struggle to find hope in a city plagued by poverty, drugs and lack of jobs.

Ivan and his mother, Precious, attend the Community Baptist Church in Camden. The church, which was featured in the documentary, has received numerous donations for Ivan and other needy Camden children. The Rev. David King said the church Web site has received more than 20,000 hits since Jan. 26.

"People have been donating boxes of Bibles, heaters and clothing," King said. "The phones won't stop ringing."

Urban Promise, a Camden-based ministry, was also featured in the hour-long piece. Organization officials said families from Alaska to Maine are opening up their homes to the children featured in the program.

"The response has been overwhelming," said Shannon Oberg, development coordinator at Urban Promise. "We've had a huge outpouring of support from all over the country. People just want to know what they can do to help."

The organization's executive director, Bruce Main, said he was pleasantly surprised by the response. Officials have received about 3,500 donations since Jan. 26. Some have offered to help establish educational funds for the children featured in the program.

"A lot of people were moved by the individual stories and courage of the young people and their ability to maintain hope in the midst of challenging circumstances," Main said.

The message is resonating with adults as well as youngsters. A young girl, Main said, sent a letter to Urban Promise with \$200 she received at her bat mitzvah.

"In the letter, she said someone in Camden needed it more than she did," Main said. "The whole response has been quite moving. There seems to be a newly

sparked interest in the city, the children and programs that work directly with young people."

Urban Promise sponsors mentoring, after-school and summer camp programs. Main urged Camden residents to mentor students in the city.

"It's one thing to talk to students about possibility. It's another to introduce them and connect them to it," Main said.

About 20 representatives from various city organizations gathered Friday to discuss the 20/20 documentary and the future of Camden. The group discussed the establishment of mentoring programs and increasing parental and school involvement.

"We have found there is a correlation between truancy in schools and curfew violations. It's usually a strong indicator of a child's future involvement in undesirable activities," said Haddonfield attorney and former Camden County Prosecutor Vincent P. Sarubbi during a private lunch Friday in Camden. "There's a lack of supervision. There's a lack of encouragement and guidance. We hope that a mentoring program can help fill that void in a child's life."

Msgr. Michael T. Mannion of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden organized Friday's event. He hopes the discussion will open the door to more communication among various city agencies.

"We are encouraging ongoing communication and planning so that those in need are aware of the resources at their disposal," he said. "We also want to be aware of the resources that are still needed so that we can better plan and support those people who are still hurting."

Mannion added that he is in the infancy stages of planning a summer internship program for Camden students.

Both Victor Marrero and his son Billy Joe were featured in the 20/20 documentary. On Friday they received support for their plan to create a center for single fathers.

"There are a lot of struggles that exist for single fathers and there's not a lot of support for them," Victor Marrero said. Billy Joe, who is studying criminal justice at Camden County College, said a mentoring program linking men with youth in Camden would help young boys learn how to make better decisions.

"They say you're a product of your environment. I am a positive product of my environment. My father was my best mentor," he said.