

Covenant House
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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT COVENANT HOUSE

Los Angeles, California

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much, Fred. Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for the tour. I can't wait to go home and tell my daughter how clean your rooms are. (Laughter.)

Your Eminence, Cardinal Mahoney; Sister Mary Rose; Dennis Coleman; John Donovan; members of the board and the staff, and residents of Covenant House; and particularly, Cindy Williams, who did write to me about a month ago and described eloquently what she has once again described so well to you -- the impact that Covenant House had on her life.

I am delighted to be here for this dedication. I remember so well the last time Sister Mary Rose and I were together, in Washington when the Covenant House there was dedicated. We were with our mutual friend and longtime supporter of Covenant House, Nancy Dickerson Whitehead, who has recently suffered a stroke. And we hope that you will pray for her and remember her, because she is, like many of the volunteers, donors, and board members here today, someone who has believed in Covenant House and its mission through good times and bad -- because what was important was providing the love, the attention, the discipline, the help that the kids who came here so desperately needed.

I have kept a copy of the mission statement of Covenant House in a collection of statements and scripture and sayings that I have, and I want to remind all of us about the real purpose for which we are here and the reason why all who support Covenant House do so. The mission statement begins by saying: We who recognize God's providence and fidelity to His people are dedicated to living out His covenant among ourselves and those children we serve, with absolute respect and unconditional love. That commitment calls us to serve suffering children in the street and to protect and safeguard all children.

We are here today because we share that mission. And we know that children, all children, not just those in our own families

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or the ones we personally know, but every child is part of who we are as a people, a nation, and a world.

I was pleased that Sister Mary Rose mentioned the international dimensions of the problems of street kids. I have visited programs in places as far away from here as Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, where I met with street kids, who in the most bitter winter weather any of us can imagine, live in the sewers, try to find some respite in any facility that will let them stay for just a day. I've also visited in Brazil, a program that is taking street kids and trying to give them schooling and support and help, just as Covenant House is doing. And whether it's Mongolia, Brazil, or the United States, we have to acknowledge that there are many children and young people in this world today who are falling -- falling through the cracks of family love and support; falling beyond the reach of schools; falling into despair.

And we can either decide to worry about and bemoan the facts as we see them, which is all too common; to watch the stories on the television and sort of cluck and click and say how terrible it is. We can wring our hands, or we can roll up our sleeves, and do all we know to do to reach out to as many children and youth as possible.

The work that is done in Covenant House is both a model and a challenge. The young people who are lucky enough to find their way here will be given a chance, sometimes a dozen chances or two dozen chances -- whatever it takes to reach that heart and spirit and turn that life around. But for every person who raised his or her hand when Sister Mary Rose asked that the residents let us see them, there are hundreds and even thousands here in Hollywood and Los Angeles who are not being reached.

That means we have to have a partnership -- a partnership among individuals and institutions like those who have contributed to this new facility; a partnership between the private, not for profit sector; between our religious community; and between our government. I'm pleased that the Department of Housing and Urban Development could provide a \$1-million construction grant for this new shelter, and another \$1 million for the operation of the transitional living program. It is an example of how all of us, pulling together, privately and publicly, can address the needs that these young people bring to the door here.

All of us know that we face problems in America. What I sometimes worry about, though, is not as many of us know that every problem in America is being solved somewhere. I am fortunate enough to travel around the country and see those solutions coming to pass. And I want the positive stories of the Covenant Houses to be the

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headline-makers. I want young people to know that we as adults do not believe that our young people are bad in America, we know they are good. We know that they deserve our love and attention and resources. (Applause.) And I'm a little tired of people playing on the stereotypes, the labels, the negative images, instead of seeing people and individuals as they are. (Applause.)

Any of us who have been involved with any program attempting to help a child or give new skills and direction to a teenager or a young adult knows that it is the most difficult, but rewarding task that can be undertaken. There is nothing like the stories of the Cindys to give us the feeling that there is work to be done, and it is work that all of us can be involved in doing.

Covenant House stands not only for the covenant that it talks about in its mission statement -- a covenant rooted in God's love for all of his people -- it also stands for the covenant that we who are part of this land should share as well. When I leave a place like Mongolia or Brazil I am struck by the enormity of the problems that they face. And my heart is warmed that people with so few resources are attempting to deal with those difficulties. But when I return home, I am always moved both by the blessings we have and by our frequent willingness to take them for granted, and not to realize what we are capable of doing if we work together as a people, if we see each other across racial and ethnic and other lines that divide us. (Applause.)

So I come to thank everyone associated with Covenant House for giving us hope, for showing us what can be done, for reminding us of our own covenant. And I also come to challenge myself and others to keep looking for the solutions; never to give up in the face of any problem that affects our children; never to give up on any single child. If we recommit ourselves in this nation to supporting programs like this, people like Sister Mary Rose and Fred, all of you who are on the front lines helping our children, and realize that we can take this model, we can take the love you feel today, the emotions that I saw on these faces as these stories were told, and translate it into positive action on behalf of our children, then we will not only see Covenant House flourish, but we will find our way to helping so many more children and young people have the experience that those lucky enough to be here enjoy.

That is my hope and my prayer. And I give thanks to all of you who are making it come to pass every single day. God bless you all. (Applause.)

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