

# Teenage Holy War

JESUS IS REALLY, REALLY PISSED — AT HOLLYWOOD, AT THE MEDIA, EVEN AT MOST CHRISTIANS. BUT BATTLECRY, THE NATION'S LARGEST AND MOST RADICAL YOUTH CRUSADE, IS RECRUITING A NEW GENERATION OF CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS TO FIGHT BACK. INSIDE THE SHOCK TROOPS OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

**T**HIS IS HOW YOU ENLIST IN THE ARMY OF GOD: First come the fireworks and the prayers, and then 4,000 kids scream, "We won't be silent anymore!" Then the kids drop to their knees, still but for the weeping and regrets of fifteen-year-olds. The lights in the Cleveland arena fade to blue, and a man on the stage whispers to them about sin and love and the Father-God. They rise, heartened; the crowd, en masse, swears off "harlots and adultery"; the twenty-one-year-old MC twitches taut a chain across the ass of her skintight red jeans and summons the followers to show off their best dance moves for God. "Gimme what you got!" she shouts. They dance — hip-hop, tap, toe and pelvic thrusting. Then they're ready. They're about to accept "the mark of a warrior," explains Ron Luce, commander in chief of BattleCry, the most furious youth crusade since young sinners in the hands of an angry God flogged themselves with shame in eighteenth-century New England. Nearly three centuries later, these 4,000 teens are about to become "branded by God." It's like getting your head shaved when you join the Marines, Luce says, only the kids get to keep their hair. His assistants roll out a cowhide

draped over a sawhorse, and Luce presses red-hot iron into the dead flesh, projecting a close-up of sizzling cow skin on giant movie screens above the stage.

"When you enlist in the military, there's a code of honor," Luce preaches, "same as being a follower of Christ." His Christian code requires a "wartime mentality": a "survival orientation" and a readiness to face "real enemies." The queers and communists, feminists and Muslims, to be sure, but also the entire American cultural apparatus of marketing and merchandising, the

"techno-terrorists" of mass media, doing to the morality of a generation what Osama bin Laden did to the Twin Towers. "Just as the events of September 11th, 2001, permanently changed our perspective on the world," Luce writes, "so we ought to be awakened to the alarming influence of today's culture terrorists. They are wealthy, they are smart, and they are real."

Luce is forty-five, his brown hair floppy, his lips pouty. On the screens above the stage, his green eyes blink furiously. "The devil hates us," he exhorts, "and we gotta be

By Jeff Sharlet

ready to fight and not be these passive little lukewarm, namby-pamby, kum-ba-yah, thumb-sucking babies that call themselves Christians. Jesus? He got mad!" Luce considers most evangelicals too soft, too ready to pass off as piety their preference for a bland suburban lifestyle. He hates what he sees as the weakness of "accepting" Christ, of "trusting" the Lord. "I want an attacking church!" he shouts, his normally smooth tones raw and desperate and alarming. He isn't just looking for followers — he wants "stalkers" who'll bring a criminal passion to their pursuit of godliness.

Cue Christian metal on the mammoth screens flanking the stage: "Frontline," a music video produced at Luce's Honor Academy in east Texas for the band Pillar. It opens with a broken guitar magically re-assembling itself, a redemptive reversal of four decades of rock & roll nihilism. Then comes the gospel: "Everybody with your fist raised high/Let me hear your battle cry!"

In the hall outside the arena, kids line up to buy BattleCry T-shirts and hoodies and trucker caps, a dozen designs scrolled with goth and skater patterns. A brown tee for boys features a white silhouette of a kid with a baseball bat, a devil behind him rubbing his horns after a beat down. NO MORE LIES, reads the legend. On the second day, when the time comes for even the youngest to enlist in Luce's army, I find myself sitting on the main floor of the arena next to a couple of twelve-year-olds, Hanneh and Mallory. Hanneh has straight blond hair; Mallory's a redhead with curls. Mallory wants to borrow my pen. "I have to

write a message to MTV," she says. She hunches over in her seat, her hair hiding her hand as she scratches it out. "Dear MTV," she reads aloud, "leave those kids alone!"

Then she adds a kicker: "Repent." I ask her what she means. She giggles as if I'm teasing her. "Ron Luce said so!"

Luce knows that most of the kids who attend his shows come for the music (P.O.D. headline his biggest events; a screamo band called Flyleaf gets top billing in Cleveland), but he also knows that from their numbers, he's growing a new hard core for American fundamentalism. Luce recruits the politically powerless — kids too young to vote. "That makes 'em want to fight," he tells me backstage after one of his events. "They get so livid. They're mad. They've been very cleverly marketed to. Kids started finding out that we cannot just stand back and let these people do this to us."

Luce calls his crusade a "counter-rebellion" or a "reverse rebellion" or sometimes simply "revolution." The Cleveland event, Acquire the Fire, only one stop in what is becoming Luce's permanently touring road-show, is not meant to save souls — most of the kids say they accepted Jesus when they were four or five — but to radicalize them. He's been doing this for two decades, but it didn't take off until days after the Columbine shootings of 1999, when Luce rallied 70,000 angry, weeping kids at the Pontiac Silverdome outside Detroit. In 2006, he brought his rallies to more than 200,000 kids. Overall, he's preached to 12 million.

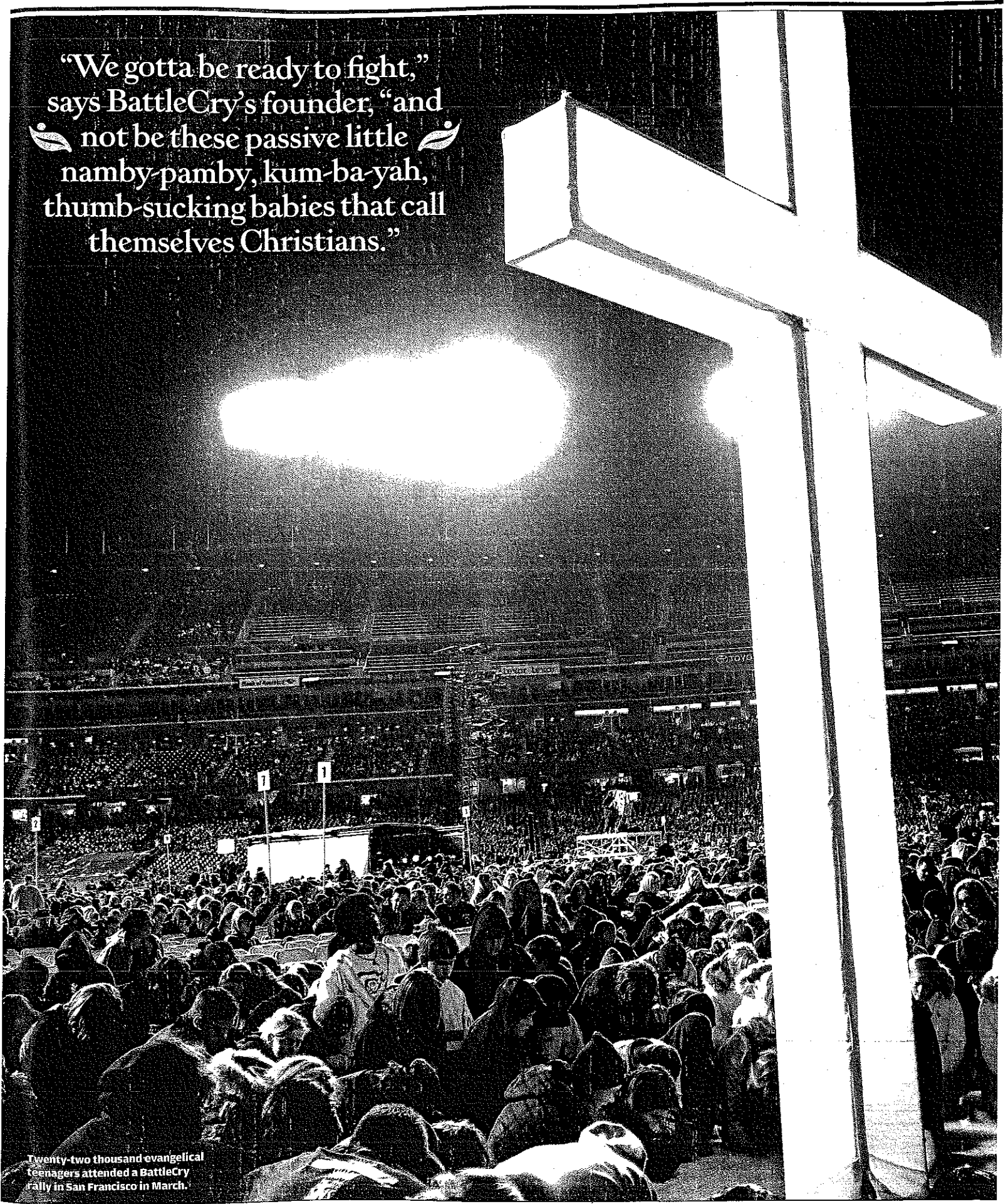
They're the base. Of that number, Luce has sent 53,000 teen missionaries around the globe to preach spiritual "purity" — chastity, sobriety and a commitment to laissez-faire capitalism — in Romania, Guatemala and dozens of other "strongholds" that require young Americans to bring them "freedom" — a Christ they believe needs no translation. Luce selected more than 6,000 for his Honor Academy, some of whom become political operatives, media activists and militant preachers who then funnel fresh kids into the Academy. It's a vertically integrated movement, a machine that produces "leaders for the army," a command cadre that can count on the masses Luce conditions as its infantry.

Luce says only four percent of the U.S. will be Christian, by which he means "Bible-believing," when the current generation, the largest in American history, comes of age. To understand how a nation more actively Christian than at any point in its past is about to become some vast Sweden — Luce's archetypical wasteland of guilt-free sex and socialized medicine — you have to know that his antagonism toward secularism is dwarfed by a contempt bordering on hatred for what he dubs "cultural Christians." He considers them traitors.

At Acquire the Fire, Luce tells the kids to make lists of secular pleasures they'll sacrifice for the cause. Hanneh starts with Bow Wow and Usher, bites her pen, and then

Contributing editor JEFF SHARLET profiled Sen. Sam Brownback in RS 993.

“We gotta be ready to fight,” says BattleCry’s founder, “and not be these passive little namby-pamby, kum-ba-yah, thumb-sucking babies that call themselves Christians.”



Twenty-two thousand evangelical teenagers attended a BattleCry rally in San Francisco in March.

decides to go big: "Music," she writes, then "Friends" – the nonfundamentalist ones – and "Party." This, she explains, is a polite way of saying "sex." Not that she's had any, or knows anyone her age who has, but she's learned from Luce that "the culture" wants to force it upon her at a young age. "The world," he tells her, is a forty-five-year-old pervert posing as another tween online.

Luce sometimes brings a garbage truck onto the floor to cart the lists away, but this is a relatively small event, so Hanneh and Mallory trot over to one of the trash bins stationed around the arena and drop theirs in. "I feel so much better," Mallory tells Hanneh. Hanneh nods, smiling now. "I feel free," she says.

Later, one of Luce's PR reps takes me backstage to sift through the bins of rejected affections. Most kids mention music, movies, girlfriends and boyfriends, sex or, surprisingly often, just condoms, but a number of new warriors are oddly precise about their proposed abandonings. They cast into perdition Starbucks (multiple votes), Victoria's Secret (ditto; Luce encourages kids to confront the managers of lingerie stores), cereal (Special K and Cap'n Crunch), hip-huggers, "smelling amazing," "vengeance," "medication" and A&W root beer. "I would say it's ridiculous what they are doing to root beer," wrote the boy who will drink A&W no more.

"This is a real war," Luce preaches. When he talks like that, he growls. "This is not a metaphor!" In Cleveland, he intercuts his sermons with videos of suicide bombers and marching Christian teens. One of the most popular, "Casualties of War," features an elegiac beat by a Christian rapper named KJ-52 laid over flickering pictures of kids holding signs declaring the collapse of Christendom: 1/2 OF US ARE NO LONGER VIRGINS, reads a poster board displayed by a pigtailed girl. 40% OF US HAVE INFLICTED SELF-INJURY, says a sign propped up over a sink in which we see the hands of a girl about to cut herself. 53% OF US BELIEVE JESUS SINNED, declares the placard of a young black man standing in a graffiti-filled alley.

Luce lays out cooked statistics, images, assertions. He doesn't explain – he warns. To the crowd of watery-eyed teens he recites letters he says their peers have sent him, souls lost to what he calls, over and over, the "pigpen" of secularism. It's a reference to the sorry fate of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke, who wound up tending hogs until he submitted to the authority of God and was restored to his riches. There's an unnamed girl who left Jesus and then "got date raped." There's "Emily," who dated a non-Christian boy – "now she works in pornography and lives a bisexual lifestyle." Luce sneers: "pigpen." There's "Heather," who wrote to Luce to complain that "my father is passive, and my mom is controlling."

### SEE IT NOW!

Judge America's crusade yourself: Watch footage from a recent BattleCry rally and see one teen's haunting testimony, all at [ROLLINGSTONE.COM/BATTLECRY](http://ROLLINGSTONE.COM/BATTLECRY)

"Pigpen," Luce says, his voice filled with sorrow for the girl with the sissy dad.

**L**UCE DOESN'T SO MUCH PREACH THE Bible as read his own life story through the filter of Scripture. That's a method as old as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, but usually the story of "Once I was lost, now I'm found" ends in joy. What makes Luce unusual is that he's wired the happy ending back to the anger of being lost, a rage he won't leave behind.

When Luce was fifteen, he ran away from his mother, who beat him, to look for his father, who had abandoned the family when Luce was seven. "I hated my mom's guts. I'd gone to court to testify what she did to me." Luce was certain his father would save him. He found him near San Francisco. He asked if he could move in. Sure, said his dad, but he set a condition. "Son," Luce remembers him saying, "if you're going to try any of that pot, be sure to bring it home so we can all try it together." Luce was a dutiful boy. He bought some weed and trotted back to his father's house, and with his dad and stepmother, he got high. Or rather, they did; Luce says he wanted to inhale, but he didn't know how.

These days, Luce refers to his fifteen-year-old self as a "party animal," because he thinks doing so helps him relate to the kids. But the truth is that Luce's wild days were limited to the year he spent in his father's house. Then he left it for God's. In 1978, a friend took him to a "packed-out little church" filled with people singing like they were in love. "I was so smitten," he remembers. "I marched back to school and told all my friends, 'People are lying about God!'" He meant the people who said God was nothing but a happy hippie in the sky. Luce's new God was as mad as he was. "I was a little obnoxious. But that's part of the principle of confrontation" – the ethos of intensity that makes Luce's BattleCry more thrilling than other Christian youth groups, such as Young Life and Campus Crusade.

## "This is a real war," BattleCry's Ron Luce preaches to the crowd. "I want an attacking church!"

Luce's shock troops want point and click, sight and sound, sensation. To that end Luce works with a former producer of VH1's *Behind the Music* named Doug Rittenhouse to make videos and DVDs shown to Christian youth groups around the country, online or at massive rallies. Rittenhouse, a burly, forty-six-year-old Emmy winner, doesn't think what he's doing is all that different from what he used to do when he worked with Satan at VH1. He's not afraid of secular media, because he doesn't think it's really all that secular. "Think about *Behind the Music*," he says. "What's the story, every time? Rise, fall, redemption."

Luce recruited Rittenhouse to create

## Crusader Rock

**1** BattleCry's mission is to radicalize evangelical teenagers. At rallies across the country, Christian hard-rock bands, videos and fiery sermons bring MTV-style fundamentalism to young audiences. **2** For the finale, pastors hack up mannequins that represent sins such as porn. The body parts are then distributed as the crowd screams for an arm, a thigh or a hand. **3** At the shows, pastors tell the teens to write down what secular pleasures they are willing to sacrifice for the cause. **4** The crusade's founder, Ron Luce, has preached his angry gospel to more than 12 million souls across the world and says being a Christian requires "a soldier's mentality."



pop-culture missionaries. "He pitched me a wild idea," Rittenhouse says: "Let's start a production company and train up and raise a new kind of Christian media." Ritten-

house also got starring roles in a video featuring crowds stampeding as a city collapses, under mysterious attack. Only a small band of teens, gripping a cross like a sword, stand ready to fight terror. Like the throb and fire of Luce's stage shows, it's meant to evoke 9/11 – a "jolt," Luce says, after which war "became the demand of the masses." He'd like to see that jolt replicated as often as possible. "Without the horror," he adds.

Luce equates 9/11 with Columbine, and both to the scourge of secular media. "Like the one kiss between Madonna and Britney that went boom! The whole country took a step down. And they play it again, and again, and again, so you've got twelve-, fourteen-year-old girls thinking, 'Oh, it's OK.' And nobody seems to care."

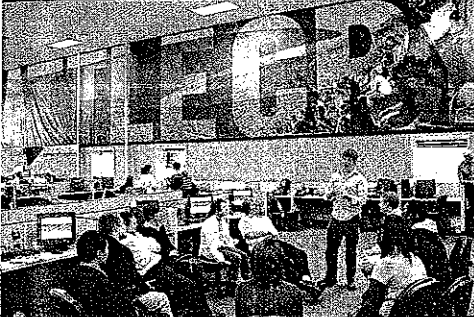
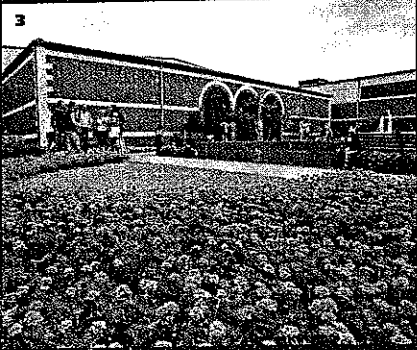
When Luce was sixteen, three weeks after he was saved, he came home to find a small pile of bluejeans, barbells and a clock radio on the front porch: "All my stuff. The door's locked." His stepmother had given Luce's father an ultimatum: her, or the pumped-up, pissed-off kid with the big cross dangling from his neck. "Jesus freak," she called Ron. Luce gathered up his things and moved in with his new pastor. "Jesus freak" – he liked that name.

house packed up his family and moved to Garden Valley, Texas, where his wife homeschooled their kids, and Rittenhouse began teaching young fundamentalists the big secret of television: rise, fall, redemption.

Rittenhouse's students produce a half-hour show, *Acquire the Fire TV*, broadcast nationally on Christian channels. They made Pillar's "Frontline" video, which played on MTV's *Headbangers Ball*. And they make the propaganda videos Luce uses to seduce kids to the cause and scare adults into supporting it. One centers on a teenage suicide bomber, sin personified as a Muslim terrorist with a wicked grin, detonating himself and an MTV slacker. The BattleCry

## The Training Ground

1 At BattleCry's Honor Academy in Texas, hundreds of interns like Valerie Rooks are trained each year to be shock troops in the war against secularism. Rooks says she wants to be a journalist; she monitors the news for signs of the Lord's triumph. 2 The curriculum is physical as well as spiritual. Interns are put through a series of grueling physical tests, such as the Emotionally Stretching Opportunity of a Lifetime, a fifty-to-ninety-hour sleep-deprived endurance challenge. 3 The Academy's campus sits on several hundred acres of sprawling east Texas flatlands. 4 The students are trained to infiltrate pop-culture strongholds and become multimedia warriors.



the stories of teens hurting. . . .

It reads like a clumsy echo of the gay Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's famous *Howl*: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked. . . ." And yet Ginsberg's hallucinations contained poetic precision. *Howl*'s hurting teens were a 1950s "lost battalion of platonic conversationalists," burned out by the "scholars of war" and the "one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar," diagnosed as

crazy because of their lust and the poetry that brought them joy, unsuccessful even in suicide when the big, empty earnestness of postwar America began to eat them alive. Luce, too, often speaks of suicide, and he, too, blames it on what Ginsberg described as "the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors." Luce hates Madison Avenue, hates big media. He shortens this all down to two words: "the Enemy."

Luce absorbs influences without reflec-

tion. There's also what they call the "Back 40," several hundred acres on which stand more primitive structures, retreats for toughening up the kids, and a Quonset-hut officer's club for those who stay to become employees or permanent volunteers, forgoing college or earning mail-order degrees from Jerry Falwell's Liberty University.

occurred to him or Luce that they were appropriating the ethos of the Evil Empire. "We just wanted a branding experience," he told me. "Red's a color that's in right now." Luce ends his rallies with an illustration from the Book of Judges: the story of a man who, after he gives over his concubine to be gang-raped, kills the disgraced woman and cuts her into twelve pieces, then sends one to each of the tribes of Israel as a reminder of what happens to the ungodly. For a finale, Luce or one of his junior pastors dissects a mannequin labeled with the sins of secularism and then — to the cheer "Cut up the concubine!" — sends his assistants into the crowd to distribute the pieces.

In Cleveland, one sensible fourteen-year-old boy snorted at the sight of a girl hugging her prize, a naked male torso labeled PORN. "Imagine carrying that home," he whispered. Thousands of kids had envisioned it; they shrieked for the prize of the head. Such teens are likely prospects to join the 800 interns who pay \$7,800 a year, plus mission fees, to attend Luce's Honor Academy.

THE HONOR ACADEMY IS A POLISHED campus of new brick buildings growing out of the red dirt of an east Texas compound Luce bought from the wife of a country singer named Keith Green, who found Jesus after much searching, built a ministry called Last Days, then fulfilled his own story by dying in a plane crash. From the fountain near the entrance — a geyser of mud water that on windy days spreads out like a red-veil — you can see nearly every building: four sex-segregated dorms, named for Luce's favorite missionaries; the headquarters of Global Expeditions, which sends out thousands of missionaries every year; the cafeteria and the campus store, which offers BattleCry's skate-chic gear, Luce's books and little else; and the building that houses the main auditorium, pillared with artificial stone set in a biblical

Students, called interns, come for a year or more between high school and college. "It's a bubble," one girl says, a safe haven in which to purify before battle. Once accepted, interns pledge to uphold the Academy's tenets. They must promise not only to never criticize the Academy, but also to never allow any aspect of Luce's ministry to be "portrayed in a negative light."

Luce's goal is to immunize them from secularism's appeal so that they can "infiltrate" the "strongholds" of godless humanism — Hollywood, Manhattan, Washington — without fear for their purity. That's why every student must pledge to confront other students if their behavior is ungodly or simply too arousing. Politely, of course: "God is a gentleman," one goth boy told me.

Intern days begin as early as 4:45 A.M. with an hour of group exercise on the court near the Academy's swimming pool. Mornings are for classes: There's "Character Development," which focuses on "obedience" and "purity," and the "World View Module," in which one learns to see current events around the world through the lens of obedience and purity.

Further reinforcement comes from the Academy's required "Life Transforming Events," the most grueling of which is ESOAL (Emotionally Stretching Opportunity of a Lifetime). Luce was reluctant to share details about the "Opportunity," a fifty-to-ninety-hour sleep-deprived endurance test, but a short video of the 2005 ESOAL provides revealing glimpses: students weeping and dragging giant wooden crosses on their shoulders; a boy rolling and puking across a field while a senior intern "sergeant" in camouflage and a helmet urges him on; a platoon of weeping girls; a shell-shocked boy mumbling into the camera, "Don't know what time it is. . . . Don't know what matters. . . . Don't even necessarily know who I can trust."

Luce lectures at least once a week on "character." The Academy also brings in guest speakers, Christian management gurus, rock bands and even old war chiefs of fundamentalism such as Jerry Falwell and Ted Haggard. Chuck Colson, the former Watergate felon who has since become the most politically connected fundamentalist in Washington, created a curriculum for Luce called "Rewired," featuring a series of *Matrix*-like videos suggesting that ideas such as creationism are powerful, dangerous secrets hidden by media elites, who code evolutionary propaganda into movies such as *Predator* and the *Alien* series.

The week I'm at the Academy, the guest is Rebecca Contreras, a pretty, thirty-eight-year-old professional evangelist in bluejeans who was a special assistant to President Bush in his first term. She was responsible for 1,200 presidential appointments, an impressive job considering she had not gone to college. She tells us about one of her first days in Washington. "The vice president is sitting there, and the president is sitting in his chair," she says. "There I was, little Latina Rebecca from the inner city. The devil began to say, [Cont. on 67]"

God gave Luce a "heart message":  
"Come back," said the Lord.  
Luce's job was to save America's teens.

tion and repackages them as hip and Christian without concern for allusion. The BattleCry aesthetic, for instance, looks as if it were stolen from Stalin's archives, a triangular red flag as its banner and set-jawed kids in silhouette as the new comrades — "trenchmates," in the BattleCry vernacular. Rittenhouse insists it never

style. There's also what they call the "Back 40," several hundred acres on which stand more primitive structures, retreats for toughening up the kids, and a Quonset-hut officer's club for those who stay to become employees or permanent volunteers, forgoing college or earning mail-order degrees from Jerry Falwell's Liberty University.

WHY DO I BEGIN BY SPEAKING of war?" opens Luce's most popular book, *Battle Cry for a Generation*. "I have seen the enemies of our children march across the land, leaving ravished young hearts in their wake. I have seen the wounding effects. I've listened to

[Cont. from 53] 'Look at you, you don't belong here. You're not credentialed.' Then I heard the Lord say, 'Put your eyes on me!' She raises her finger in imitation of God. "I credentialed you! I have placed you here!"

The moral of the story is that obedience to God matters more than education. Contreras speaks of "generational curses" for those who do not obey – the idea that one must pay for the sins of one's fathers, a notion rejected even by most fundamentalists – and then she closes her eyes and begins swaying as she prays in an alto singsong for the BattleCry interns. "I pray, Father-God, that these young people, that they would impact. That, Father-God, some would even, Father-God, become missionaries and pastors, some of them would become, oh Father-God, senators! And congressmen! I thank you, Father-God!" The boy next to me, a towering slab of earnestness, shakes with tears as the class comes to a close.

Such lessons, however, are secondary to the grunt work of building the BattleCry brand. Interns must log at least thirty-one hours a week working for the cause. Around seventy of Luce's disciples learn how to produce visual media of sufficient quality that in the four years since Luce hired Rittenhouse, several of his protégés have started climbing the ranks in secular media, fulfilling Luce's "infiltration" dream.

often was that of Abraham and his only son, Isaac, whom God commanded Abraham to sacrifice. Abraham consents, but as he's about to drive in the knife, God stays his hand and lets Abraham know he was only testing him. Abraham passed, and for that, he got to be the patriarch of monotheism. "Awesome" is the word most used to describe Abraham's single-minded willingness to destroy that which was most dear to him.

One Friday night, I join a table full of girls in the cafeteria to talk about what they sacrificed when they came to the Honor Academy. For most of them, it's music – they claim now that they don't even want to hear music that doesn't glorify God. I ask if Bach counts. That blows their minds. They promise me they'll consider the possibility that music besides P.O.D. and Skillet, Christian rock bands piped in over the cafeteria's sound system, might be holy.

There's one young woman who's different, an avid reader who says *Crime and Punishment* is her favorite novel. Her name is Valerie Rooks. Valerie wears thick, oversize sweat shirts and ties her dirty-blond hair back in a ponytail. She's very small, pretty but deliberately plain, her pale lips and dark almond eyes alert. She thinks she might want to be a journalist, since she has learned to follow the news for signs of God's victory.

## Obedience to God matters more than education, President Bush's former assistant tells the Academy students.

Most, however, work in theological boiler rooms: cubicle mazes in which they spend their days cold-calling youth pastors to sell them blocks of tickets to upcoming events or counseling would-be teen missionaries by phone on how to raise the funds to pay for a trip through Global Expeditions.

Every intern must complete at least one missionary trip. They don't learn the languages of the lands to which they travel, nor do they do much relief work. Mainly they talk to poor Third World kids – through translators – in South Africa, Cambodia or Honduras. "I talked to this one missionary," an intern in a recruiting class tells her teacher the day I sit in, "but actually it was his dad, because he" – the prospective missionary – "was, like, twelve." The father couldn't wait to send his son to foreign lands, but the boy's mother nixed the idea. The student wants to know if she should call this prospect again. Yes, the teacher, herself only a year or two older, instructs; but only if she could avoid speaking to the mom.

EVERYONE AT THE HONOR ACADEMY has a favorite Scripture verse to keep them pure and holy (some of the boys abbreviate them in ink across their knuckles), but the Bible story I heard cited most

Rooks' parents home-schooled her up to fourth grade in the strictest interpretation of Christianity. Then they gave her a computer and told her to educate herself. The last thing they taught her was that puberty was sin physicalized. When she was seventeen, a virgin, but guilty of kissing a boy, they exiled her for the crime of coming of age, kicking her out of their home. She called her youth pastor, but he was busy. So she slept in a gazebo behind an abandoned house. Finally, three days later, she called the boy, and that night moved in with him and his family. They had separate beds, but that didn't matter. Everyone thought she was having sex, she decided, so she might as well play the role they'd chosen for her.

She loved it. She was good at it. She wanted to do it as often as possible. But she was enrolled in school, trying to get a diploma. So she studied and waited tables, and when she wasn't working or reading, Rooks wanted to get laid. She wouldn't use those words, but she wouldn't call it "making love," either. She wanted sweat and grabbing and heavy breathing, not so much an escape from the world as a full immersion in it. But her boyfriend remembered his church lessons, felt guilty, freaked out and started [Cont. on 72]

[Cont. from 67] staying out late and lying to her about drugs. Then he began threatening her. The choices were: He could kill her or himself. Which would she prefer?

Rooks tells me this at the dinner table, surrounded by the girlfriends with whom she's been "practicing intimacy" — that's a spiritual thing — for three months, but this information is new to them. The girls stare, envious of her confession. She's not the only "fallen woman" at the table — another girl later tells me of her days of drunken blow jobs — but Rooks' friends are stunned by the bleak complexity of her story. There aren't any villains, only victims: Rooks, the boy, her parents, all bullied into bad choices by fundamentalism's contradictions.

Rooks takes out her Bible. "I have to read you something," she says to me, ignoring her friends. She leans across the table to make sure I understand, propping herself up on her elbows, her body prone, and begins reading from the Book of Proverbs. "Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies." She continues, her voice low and breathy, through twenty verses. "Charm is deceitful," she finishes, "and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised."

Rooks closes her Bible. This to her is the law of obedience and purity, and she knows it to be true from hard living.

**O**N MY LAST DAY AT THE HONOR Academy, I go looking for the campus library. Luce seems to be proud of it. Evangelicalism, he says, has for too long suffered from a fear of ideas. When I find his collection, in a small room above the cafeteria, the door is locked. But in the hall I find a girl who does not want to be found. I'll call her Janice. She's round and shy, and although she had wanted to go to the Academy ever since she was a little girl, it isn't working out. Her internship — her "ministry placement," in Academy-speak — is mopping floors and cleaning toilets. She tries to make the most of it — "it's humbling," she squeaks — but she seems like she's been plenty humbled already, so I don't push the issue. Instead, I ask her about the library.

"It's never been open since I've been here," Janice says sadly. "I like to read. We don't have enough interns. So we had to give up something." The weight room and the chapel are open every day.

What they give up at the Academy are books and all the contradictions they're home to. The new fundamentalism creates a mirror image of every other aspect of secularism. Once, that reflection was pale and distorted, an incomplete subculture defined by bands such as Stryper, the 1980s "yellow-and-black attack" of gospel metal. Then fundamentalist pop culture exploded; now BattleCry kids worry about the effects of the "Christian MTV mentality." As they hope to infiltrate the secular world, they're certain secularists are infiltrating theirs, which is why they're closing off more and more avenues of communication by making their mirror world such a complete replica of secular consumerism that one can no

longer tell the difference. BattleCry's rallies, for all their rage against the secular machine, are the fulfillment of that ambition.

In Cleveland, I wander the arena looking for kids who resent the frequent intrusions into the concert of sermons and video presentations on culture war and other dull subjects. But most of the kids light up about them. In the earnest, cautious voices of high school freshmen who've just learned new facts, they rattle off Luce's statistics back at me with as much certainty as they join Lacey Mosley, the lead singer of Flyleaf, in her arena-shaking tribute to Cassie Bernall, the "martyr of Columbine." The killers pointed a gun at Cassie and asked her if she believed in God, and seven years later, 4,000 kids scream, "SHE — SAID — YES!" The official investigation concluded that she didn't, but when I mention this to a couple of chaste teen lovers, they shrug. It doesn't matter. "I think she's a symbol," says the girl, an honor student from a liberal family who has come to Acquire the Fire for the first time, at the behest of her boyfriend.

But a symbol for what? A defiant faith? Permanent culture war? That's what Luce would have his followers believe, but when I speak to Mosley, she tells me she related to Cassie Bernall not because she'd ever been held at gunpoint by evil secularists, but because, like Luce, she grew up hard, very hard, until she found a faith that promised not answers but an end to questions. That's the meaning of a battle cry: Turn down the volume, and what you have is a statement that leaves no room for discussion of any kind. Luce's BattleCry gives kids a concert, a T-shirt and a conviction, a universe as broad as the consumer culture it's meant to replace. That is, a very small world, after all — a cramped little country in which there is not enough room to be either lost or found, only "saved" as a static condition. BattleCry, a distillation of teenage anxiety and ambition, also functions as a sort of antidote to adolescence, a cure meant to fix a generation in a permanent state of "counterrevolution."

That Saturday afternoon in Cleveland, I meet a slouchy, curly-haired boy who calls himself John Fire and who is slinking around the arena looking for some more exciting action than the three-movie-screen diatribe against the Hollister clothing line now playing. That's boring, so John Fire goes for his walkabout. He seems stoned, but before I can even ask, he volunteers that everybody always thinks he's stoned. "But, dude," he says, "I am not."

But he is surely snared in Satan's web of deception when he swears to me that he's totally into Luce's sermons. How can I tell he is lying? Because he doesn't know who Luce is. The guy who keeps interrupting the music, I explain. John Fire nods. "The pigpen dude." John has been coming to Acquire the Fire for several years, has heard it all before. "Love the learning," he says.

He cannot, at that moment, recall what he has learned — something about "secularism," which he can't define. He doesn't need to. His world is complete without it. ☛