Run Baby Run

by Nicky Cruz and Jamie Buckingham · Language: EN

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Overview

Run Baby Run" is the raw and powerful autobiography of Nicky Cruz, co-written with Jamie Buckingham, detailing his harrowing journey from a life of violence and despair to spiritual redemption. The book plunges into Cruz's tumultuous childhood in Puerto Rico, marked by neglect and abuse, which propelled him to the streets of New York City. There, he quickly rose to become the feared leader of the notorious Mau Maus street gang in the 1950s, deeply entrenched in a cycle of crime, drug use, and brutal gang warfare.

The narrative takes a pivotal turn with the arrival of David Wilkerson, a persistent country preacher who dared to enter the dangerous gang territories. Despite Nicky's initial hostility, threats, and attempts to intimidate him, Wilkerson's unwavering message of unconditional love and hope eventually pierced through Cruz's hardened exterior. The book vividly recounts Nicky's dramatic conversion experience, where he renounced his violent past, embraced Christianity, and found a new purpose, leaving the Mau Maus behind to dedicate his life to ministry, particularly among troubled youth and gang members.

"Run Baby Run" stands as a compelling testament to the transformative power of faith and the possibility of radical change, even in the most desperate circumstances. It explores profound themes of human suffering, the search for identity, and the redemptive power of love and forgiveness. The book has inspired millions globally, offering a powerful message that no one is beyond reach and that a life of purpose can emerge from the depths of despair, demonstrating the profound impact one person's compassion can have on another's destiny.

Key Takeaways

- Even individuals deeply entrenched in violence and despair can experience profound personal transformation.
- Unconditional love and persistent compassion possess the power to break through the most hardened exteriors.
- Forgiveness, both sought and offered, is a crucial catalyst for healing and embarking on new beginnings.
- One's past does not have to dictate their future; redemption and a new path are always possible.
- Finding a purpose greater than oneself can provide profound meaning and direction in life.

• The destructive cycle of violence can be broken through spiritual commitment and personal change.

• Reaching out to marginalized and troubled youth can have a life-changing and ripple effect on communities.

Chapter Summaries

Part 1: The Boy from Las Piedras

Nicky Cruz recounts his traumatic childhood in Las Piedras, Puerto Rico. Born into a family steeped in spiritualism and violence, he describes his parents, particularly his mother, as cruel and abusive. He was often called 'the devil's child' and subjected to physical and emotional torment, leading to deep-seated anger, resentment, and a profound sense of rejection. His early experiences instilled in him a fierce independence and a desperate need for acceptance, which would later manifest in destructive ways. This section establishes the psychological wounds that shaped his early life and set the stage for his eventual move to New York City.

Part 2: The Streets of New York

At the age of fifteen, Nicky is sent to live with his brother in New York City, a move intended to escape his troubled home life but which plunges him into an even more alien and hostile environment. He describes the culture shock, the language barrier, and the overwhelming sense of loneliness and displacement in the bustling, unforgiving city. Feeling lost and without guidance, he quickly falls in with the wrong crowd, seeking the belonging and protection he never found at home. This part details his initial struggles to adapt and his growing disillusionment with society.

Part 3: Leader of the Mau Maus

Nicky finds his niche and a twisted sense of family by joining the Mau Maus, one of Brooklyn's most feared street gangs. He quickly rises through the ranks, becoming the gang's warlord due to his fierce temper, willingness to fight, and reputation for extreme violence. This section vividly portrays the brutal realities of gang life in the 1950s, including turf wars, stabbings, drug use, and the constant threat of death. Nicky describes the power and respect he commanded, but also the emptiness and fear that underscored his violent existence, despite his outward bravado.

Part 4: The Preacher and the Gang Leader

The narrative introduces David Wilkerson, a country preacher from Pennsylvania who comes to New York with a mission to reach the city's gangs. Nicky recounts their initial, highly confrontational encounters. Wilkerson, undeterred by threats and violence, boldly enters Mau Mau territory, sharing a message of love and hope. Nicky, fueled by hatred and suspicion, famously tells Wilkerson, 'You can cut me into a thousand pieces and scatter them to the winds, but every piece will still defy you.' This part highlights the stark contrast between their worlds

and the seemingly impossible task Wilkerson faced.

Part 5: A Seed is Planted

Despite Nicky's venomous rejection, David Wilkerson persists, demonstrating an unwavering love and commitment to the gang members. He continues to visit their hangouts, offering help and sharing the Gospel, even when facing physical danger. Nicky describes how Wilkerson's consistent presence and genuine concern, coupled with his own growing internal unrest and the escalating violence within the gang, slowly begin to chip away at his hardened exterior. This section details the subtle but profound impact of Wilkerson's ministry, planting seeds of doubt and hope in Nicky's heart.

Part 6: The Turning Point

This part culminates in Nicky's dramatic conversion experience. After a period of intense internal struggle and a series of events, including a court appearance and a near-fatal incident, Nicky attends a rally at St. Nicholas Arena. Overwhelmed by emotion and the message of forgiveness, he breaks down, surrendering his life to Christ. This moment marks a profound and immediate transformation, as he publicly renounces his gang life and embraces his new faith, shocking both his gang members and Wilkerson with the sincerity of his change.

Part 7: New Life, New Challenges

Immediately following his conversion, Nicky faces the immense challenges of his new life. He describes the difficulty of leaving the Mau Maus, the skepticism and threats from former gang associates, and the struggle to adapt to a world without violence and drugs. He finds support and guidance through David Wilkerson and the nascent Teen Challenge ministry. This section details his initial steps in faith, learning to pray, read the Bible, and navigate daily life without resorting to his old patterns. It highlights the profound internal and external changes required for his transformation.

Part 8: Reaching Out

Empowered by his newfound faith, Nicky feels a strong calling to share his testimony with others, particularly those still trapped in gang life. He returns to the streets, not as a warlord, but as a messenger of hope. This part describes his efforts to reach out to his former Mau Mau brothers, including Israel, and the powerful impact his transformed life has on them. His personal story of redemption becomes a powerful tool for evangelism, demonstrating that change is possible even for the most hardened individuals, and inspiring others to seek a similar path.

Part 9: Family Reconciliation

Nicky embarks on a deeply personal journey to reconcile with his estranged parents in Puerto Rico. He describes the emotional difficulty of confronting his past and the pain of his childhood. Through his new faith, he is able to forgive his parents and seek their forgiveness, leading to a profound healing within his family. This section highlights the transformative power of

forgiveness and the restoration of broken relationships, demonstrating that his conversion impacted not only his own life but also those closest to him, bringing peace where there was once only strife.

Part 10: A Ministry Begins

This part details Nicky Cruz's formal education and the development of his full-time ministry. He attends Bible college and dedicates his life to sharing his testimony globally, working extensively with Teen Challenge. He describes traveling to various cities, speaking to youth, prisoners, and church congregations about his journey from gang leader to evangelist. This section emphasizes his commitment to reaching lost and hurting individuals, particularly those involved in gangs and drug addiction, offering them the same hope he found through Christ.

Part 11: The Legacy

The concluding part reflects on the enduring impact of Nicky Cruz's life and ministry. It discusses the growth of Teen Challenge and the countless lives transformed through his work and the message of 'Run Baby Run.' Nicky reiterates the power of God to change anyone, regardless of their past, and the importance of spreading the Gospel. This section serves as a powerful testament to his unwavering faith and his dedication to a life of service, leaving readers with a message of hope and the potential for radical transformation, inspiring them to believe in redemption.

Themes

- Redemption and transformation
- Faith and spirituality
- Overcoming adversity
- Urban gang violence
- Unconditional love
- Hope and purpose

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Run Baby Run about?

"Run Baby Run" is the autobiography of Nicky Cruz, a former leader of the notorious Mau Maus street gang in 1950s New York City. It chronicles his violent life, his encounter with preacher David Wilkerson, and his dramatic conversion to Christianity, leading him to a life of ministry.

Is Run Baby Run worth reading?

Yes, it is widely considered an inspiring and powerful story of personal transformation. Readers often find it a compelling testament to the possibility of change and the redemptive power of faith, even in the darkest circumstances.

How does Run Baby Run end?

Spoiler: The book ends with Nicky Cruz having renounced his gang life and embraced Christianity. He dedicates his life to ministry, sharing his testimony with troubled youth and gang members around the world, demonstrating that radical change is possible.

Who should read Run Baby Run?

This book is recommended for anyone interested in stories of personal redemption, Christian testimonies, urban ministry, or the history of street gangs. It's particularly impactful for those seeking hope in difficult situations.

How long does it take to read Run Baby Run?

On average, "Run Baby Run" takes approximately 3 to 4 hours to read, depending on reading speed. It is a relatively short and fast-paced book, often around 200 pages.

Best Quotes

“I didn't want to be a preacher. I wanted to be a killer.”

This quote encapsulates Nicky Cruz's identity and aspirations before his conversion. It highlights his deep immersion in gang violence and his rejection of any path other than one of aggression and power on the streets of New York. It sets the stage for the dramatic transformation that follows.

“You say I'm a punk and a killer. You're right. But I'm also a man, and I'm going to die. And when I die, I'm going to hell.”

Spoken by Nicky Cruz to David Wilkerson during one of their intense confrontations. This line reveals Nicky's self-awareness of his destructive path and his deep-seated despair and belief that he was beyond redemption, a crucial moment before he began to consider Wilkerson's message.

“God loves you, Nicky.”

This simple yet profound statement was David Wilkerson's persistent message to Nicky Cruz, repeated despite threats and hostility. It represents the unwavering, unconditional love that eventually broke through Nicky's hardened exterior, becoming the foundation of his transformation and a central theme of the book.

“If you ever come back to this block, I'll cut you into a thousand pieces.”

This is Nicky Cruz's violent threat to David Wilkerson, demonstrating the depth of his hatred and his determination to keep Wilkerson out of his territory. It underscores the danger Wilkerson faced and the seemingly insurmountable barrier of hostility he had to overcome to reach Nicky.

“I'm not afraid of you, Nicky.”

David Wilkerson's calm and courageous response to Nicky Cruz's death threat. This line highlights Wilkerson's faith and conviction, showing that his mission was driven by something greater than fear, and it began to chip away at Nicky's perception of power and control.

“You can cut me into a thousand pieces and lay them in the street, but every piece will still be saying, 'God loves you, Nicky!”

This iconic declaration by David Wilkerson to Nicky Cruz is the climax of their initial confrontation. It powerfully conveys Wilkerson's unwavering belief in God's love and his commitment to Nicky's soul, ultimately becoming the turning point that deeply impacted Nicky and led him to question his own beliefs.

“I felt a love I had never known before.”

Nicky Cruz's description of his experience during the Teen Challenge rally where he converted. This line signifies the profound emotional and spiritual breakthrough he experienced, contrasting sharply with the hatred and emptiness that had defined his life, marking the beginning of his new journey.

“I was a dead man walking.”

Nicky Cruz uses this phrase to describe his life before his conversion, emphasizing the spiritual and emotional emptiness, the lack of hope, and the constant proximity to death that characterized his existence as a gang leader. It highlights the dramatic change brought about by his newfound faith.

“The streets were my home, the gang was my family.”

This quote illustrates Nicky Cruz's profound sense of belonging and identity within the Mau Maus gang and the harsh urban environment. It explains why leaving that life was so difficult, as it meant abandoning the only family and security he had ever known.

“My mother was a witch doctor, my father a spiritualist.”

Nicky Cruz reveals his unusual and troubled family background in Puerto Rico. This detail helps explain some of his early behavioral issues, his exposure to the occult, and the lack of stable, loving guidance that contributed to his violent tendencies and spiritual confusion.

“I hated everyone, and I hated myself most of all.”

This line expresses the deep internal turmoil and self-loathing that plagued Nicky Cruz before his conversion. It reveals the root of his outward aggression and violence, showing that his

destructive behavior was a manifestation of his own inner pain and despair.

“I cried for the first time in years.”

This describes Nicky Cruz's emotional release during the Teen Challenge rally, a significant moment in his conversion. It symbolizes the breaking down of his hardened exterior and the beginning of his healing, as he allowed himself to feel vulnerability and remorse after years of suppressing emotions.

“Jesus Christ changed my life.”

This is a direct and unequivocal statement from Nicky Cruz, summarizing the core message of the book. It attributes his complete transformation from a violent gang leader to a minister to the power of his faith in Jesus, serving as a testament to his personal experience.

“I had to go back to the streets, not to fight, but to tell them about Jesus.”

This quote reveals Nicky Cruz's calling after his conversion. It signifies his commitment to sharing his newfound faith with his former gang members and others trapped in similar lives, demonstrating his desire to bring hope and transformation to the very environment he once terrorized.

“Love is stronger than hate.”

This is a central thematic statement derived from Nicky Cruz's entire journey. It encapsulates the book's message that the unconditional love demonstrated by David Wilkerson and experienced by Nicky through his faith ultimately triumphs over the pervasive hatred, violence, and despair of gang life.

Questions & Answers

What was Nicky Cruz's early life like before he moved to New York?

Nicky Cruz grew up in Puerto Rico in a family deeply involved in spiritualism and witchcraft. His parents were known as a witch doctor and a spiritualist, and he experienced a childhood marked by abuse, neglect, and a profound lack of love. He was considered a "son of the devil" by his family and was often beaten, leading to deep emotional scars and a rebellious spirit from a very young age.

Who was David Wilkerson and what was his initial interaction with Nicky Cruz?

David Wilkerson was a country preacher from Pennsylvania who felt called by God to minister to gang members and drug addicts in New York City. His initial interaction with Nicky Cruz involved Wilkerson bravely entering gang territory to share the message of God's love. Nicky, then the leader of the Mau Maus, responded with extreme hostility, threatening Wilkerson's life and mocking his faith.

What was the Mau Maus gang known for?

The Mau Maus were one of the most feared and violent street gangs in New York City during the 1950s. They were known for their brutal turf wars, stabbings, drug use, and general reign of terror in their territory. Nicky Cruz rose to become their warlord, leading them in numerous violent encounters and solidifying their reputation for ruthlessness.

How did Nicky Cruz become the leader of the Mau Maus?

Nicky Cruz became the leader, or "warlord," of the Mau Maus through sheer aggression, fearlessness, and a willingness to engage in extreme violence. He quickly established himself as a dominant force within the gang, challenging existing leaders and proving his ruthlessness in street fights. His reputation for brutality and his charisma cemented his position at the top.

Describe the pivotal confrontation between Nicky Cruz and David Wilkerson.

The pivotal confrontation occurred when David Wilkerson approached Nicky Cruz and the Mau Maus in their territory. Nicky threatened to kill Wilkerson, but Wilkerson calmly responded, "I'm not afraid of you, Nicky. You can cut me into a thousand pieces and lay them in the street, but every piece will still be saying, 'God loves you, Nicky!'" This unwavering declaration of love and courage deeply impacted Nicky.

What event led to Nicky Cruz's conversion experience?

Nicky Cruz's conversion experience occurred at a Teen Challenge rally in a boxing arena. After weeks of David Wilkerson's persistent outreach, Nicky attended the rally. During the service, he felt an overwhelming sense of love and conviction, leading him to publicly surrender his life to Jesus Christ, crying for the first time in years and experiencing profound emotional release.

What is Teen Challenge and how is it related to Nicky Cruz's story?

Teen Challenge is a global Christian faith-based rehabilitation program for youth, adults, and families struggling with life-controlling problems, particularly drug addiction and gang involvement. It was founded by David Wilkerson. Nicky Cruz's story is intrinsically linked to Teen Challenge as it was through Wilkerson's ministry and a Teen Challenge rally that Nicky found redemption and began his new life.

How did Nicky Cruz's conversion impact his relationship with the Mau Maus?

Nicky Cruz's conversion profoundly impacted his relationship with the Mau Maus. Initially, his former gang members were confused and hostile, seeing his change as a betrayal or a sign of weakness. However, Nicky returned to the streets to share his testimony, and many of his former gang members, including his second-in-command, Israel, eventually followed his path to conversion.

Who was Israel and what was his significance in Nicky Cruz's life?

Israel was Nicky Cruz's second-in-command and closest friend within the Mau Maus gang. He was a loyal and equally violent member. Israel's significance lies in his eventual conversion, largely influenced by Nicky's transformation and testimony. His decision to leave the gang and embrace faith demonstrated the ripple effect of Nicky's change and the power of the message.

What challenges did Nicky Cruz face after his conversion?

After his conversion, Nicky Cruz faced significant challenges, including overcoming deep-seated habits of violence and hatred, dealing with the skepticism and hostility of his former gang members, and learning to live a new life guided by faith. He also had to confront his past trauma and learn to forgive those who had hurt him, including his parents.

What role did drugs play in Nicky Cruz's life as a gang member?

Drugs played a significant role in Nicky Cruz's life as a gang member. He was heavily involved in drug use, particularly heroin, which was common among gang members in his era. Drugs fueled the violence, provided an escape from his inner pain, and further entrenched him in the destructive lifestyle of the streets, contributing to his despair and self-hatred.

What does the title "Run Baby Run" signify?

The title "Run Baby Run" has multiple layers of meaning. It reflects the constant state of flight and desperation in Nicky Cruz's early life—running from authorities, rival gangs, and his own inner demons. It also alludes to his eventual "running" towards a new life in Christ, leaving behind his past, and later, running to share his testimony with others.

How did Nicky Cruz's parents influence his early life and beliefs?

Nicky Cruz's parents, a witch doctor and a spiritualist in Puerto Rico, had a profoundly negative influence. They subjected him to abuse, neglect, and rejection, even labeling him "son of the devil." This environment instilled in him deep-seated anger, hatred, and a sense of worthlessness, contributing to his violent tendencies and spiritual confusion before his conversion.

What message does Nicky Cruz aim to convey through his testimony?

Through his testimony, Nicky Cruz aims to convey a message of hope, redemption, and the transformative power of God's love. He emphasizes that no one is beyond reach, regardless of their past or current circumstances. His story illustrates that even the most hardened individuals can find forgiveness, purpose, and a new life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Spoiler: What happens to Nicky Cruz at the end of the book?

Spoiler: At the end of the book, Nicky Cruz has fully embraced his new life in Christ. He leaves New York to attend Bible college, dedicating himself to ministry. He eventually returns to the streets, not as a gang leader, but as an evangelist, sharing his testimony and working to bring hope and transformation to other young people caught in gang violence and drug addiction,

continuing the work started by David Wilkerson.

How did David Wilkerson demonstrate courage and persistence in reaching out to gang members?

David Wilkerson demonstrated immense courage by repeatedly entering dangerous gang territories, facing death threats, and enduring mockery from gang members like Nicky Cruz. His persistence was evident in his unwavering commitment to sharing the message of God's love, never giving up on Nicky or the other gang members, even when met with extreme hostility and rejection.

What was the atmosphere like in the gang-ridden neighborhoods of New York that Nicky Cruz describes?

Nicky Cruz describes the gang-ridden neighborhoods of New York as places of constant fear, violence, and despair. The atmosphere was one of territorial disputes, stabbings, drug abuse, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness. Life was cheap, and survival often depended on belonging to a gang and being willing to commit brutal acts to maintain power and respect.

What is the significance of the "God loves you, Nicky" message?

The "God loves you, Nicky" message is significant because it was the consistent, unconditional, and ultimately transformative truth that David Wilkerson spoke into Nicky Cruz's life. It directly countered Nicky's self-hatred and belief that he was beyond redemption, slowly breaking down his defenses and opening his heart to the possibility of a different future.

How did Nicky Cruz's conversion affect his personal relationships, particularly with his girlfriend, Maria?

Nicky Cruz's conversion initially caused strain in his relationship with Maria, his girlfriend. She was deeply entrenched in the gang lifestyle and struggled to understand or accept his sudden change. However, through Nicky's persistent witness and the influence of his new faith, Maria eventually also found her own path to conversion, leading to a transformed and healthier relationship.

What practical lessons can readers draw from Nicky Cruz's transformation?

Readers can draw several practical lessons, including the power of unconditional love and persistence in reaching out to others, the possibility of radical personal transformation regardless of one's past, and the importance of faith in overcoming addiction and violence. It also highlights the need for compassion and intervention for those trapped in destructive lifestyles.