

From the Press Box

by JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

I was seated in the press box of Shea Stadium in New York City. Below me were 40,000 people, at least half of whom were under 25. On the infield, covering the second base area, was a huge platform. Behind the pitcher's mound was a battery of TV cameras. On a banner stretching across the center-field fence were the words of Jesus, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (John 14:6).

Beyond the ball park I could see the lights of the Whitestone Bridge across Long Island Sound. Beyond that was the city. At the microphone was a product of the city. A former Puerto Rican gang leader. School dropout. Criminal. Dope addict. Rebel against society. His name was Nicky Cruz.

My mind raced back to November, 1968, when I was introduced to Nicky and asked to write a book about his life.* None of us dared to dream back then that one day this former hoodlum, who could barely speak English, would be testifying before tens of thousands and over nationwide TV.

That afternoon the parking lot attendant at Luchow's took the keys to my car and said, 'You going to the Crusade tonight? Tonight's the big night, you know.'

'Oh, how's that?' I asked.

■ *The Reverend James W. Buckingham is the author of several books and pastor of The Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Florida. He graduated from Mercer University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and served as a chaplain in the Army. This article first appeared in 'Perspective,' Buckingham's regular column in the 'Vero Beach Press Journal.'*


'Man, don't you know? Nicky Cruz is gonna speak. He's one of us. He came from the ghetto, man.'

Later that afternoon Nicky and I walked the old streets in Brooklyn where the Mau Maus used to rumble and kill. He met two old friends, China and Joe. They had been with Nicky in the gang. Both had recently lost their jobs and were back on dope. Heroin. We brought them to the meeting to hear their former leader.

China and Joe sat beside me in the press box while Nicky was on the platform. At the close of the service Mr. Graham extended a simple invitation for all those who wanted to make a decision for Christ to come forward. I glanced at China and Joe. Both were deep in thought. I talked to them for a few moments, explaining the decision, and then Joe said, 'If Christ can change Nicky, then he can change me too. Come on, China, let's go.'

Down the escalator and out onto the playing field. The choir was still singing 'Just As I Am' when we knelt in the lush green grass of right field and two more Mau Maus came to Christ.

Nicky said it better than anyone else when he stated, 'Jesus didn't come to get man out of the ghetto. He came to get the ghetto out of man.'

Mission accomplished! 

*'Run Baby Run,' by Nicky Cruz (with Jamie Buckingham), Logos International, Plainfield, New Jersey, 1968