

"If one is really in earnest and prays unceasingly with intensity, and if he gets inspiration, guidance, and advice from God-knowing saints, he too will be able to see Jesus Christ resurrected in the flesh."

--Paramahansa Yogananda

Sept-1974

Church Made Dennis Weaver A New Man

by GARY YORK

One hour in a church changed the life of actor Dennis Weaver, star of the TV series, "McCloud."

It caused him to give up drinking and to take life more calmly.

"More out of curiosity than anything else, I dropped into this little church on Hollywood's Sunset Boulevard one Sunday morning in 1959," he says. "It was the meeting place of the Self Realization Fellowship."

Weaver, who became famous as the limping deputy in TV's long-running "Gunsmoke," says he didn't go running up the street preaching pure living. He merely went home quietly to think about things that had been bothering him and had a long talk with his wife.

"I thought about the nights that I had been drinking," he recalls. "And how, in the morning, I couldn't even remember all the fun I'd had the night before."

He decided to give up drinking — even beer.

Weaver says he found himself with a kind of peace of mind and a calm assurance that is rare among the stars in a place where tranquilizers are sold by the million.

A country boy at heart, Weaver grew up in a small farmhouse outside Joplin, Mo., in the middle of the depression.

Although money was scarce, his mother always managed to scrape up enough to send her three sons to the movies.

"I was absolutely enthralled by my cowboy heroes — Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, Hoot Gibson and other hard-fightin' fast-shootin' good guys," he says.

"They were great. I used to daydream about being like them — galloping off to rescue some girl in distress. Well, as Chester in 'Gunsmoke,' I was able to realize part of that dream. And now my dream has come true by playing the U.S. marshal in the 'McCloud' TV series. Some times they even allow McCloud to ride a horse, even in New York."

Speaking of his part in 'Gunsmoke,' Weaver says the role originally was secondary but it made him a star.

"It also made me a lot of money," he says. "The funny thing is that my wife, Gerry, and I scraped up a lot of dough to pay for a voice coach so that I could get rid of my Missouri accent. I had to work hard to get it back to fit the part of Chester."

"The part was hard work. There I was, an athlete, hopping around all the time. That stiff leg aroused a lot of viewer sym-

pathy. I used to get a lot of letters about it.

"A lot of people who wrote were crippled and it wasn't easy to explain to them that I could really run and jump and do all the things they and Chester couldn't do."

After playing the part for five years, the strain began to show on Weaver.

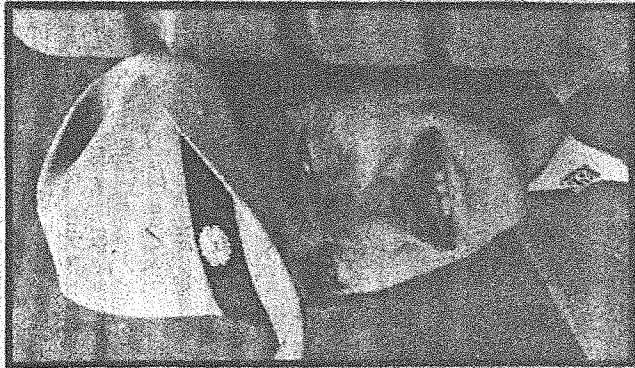
"That's when I called in at the church," he says.

"I started practicing meditation for an hour each morning. I started it by doing it yoga style by standing on my head. But I found you can do it just as easily sitting in a chair.

"All this is based on Christianity and some eastern religions — nobody's cornered the market on the truth.

"It's hard to explain — meditation brings a kind of contact with the presence of God.

"It gives you a deep feeling of peace."



DENNIS WEAVER

presence of God

Dennis Weaver: I Grew Up in Poverty — Now I Work in the Streets to Feed the Needy

Bighearted TV star Dennis Weaver, touched by the plight of the nation's hungry, has organized a group that distributes food to needy families.

Members of LIFE, which stands for Love Is Feeding Everyone, pick up food that supermarkets would otherwise throw away, then give it to the hungry. And LIFE volunteers also collect canned goods.

Weaver and other stars work right out on the streets helping to get food donations.

"Right now we're feeding over 1,000 families a day. It's a growing thing," Weaver — star of TV's "McCloud," "Emerald Point N.A.S." and "Gunsmoke" — proudly explained in an exclusive interview.

"It makes me feel wonderful. When I go to bed at night, it makes me sleep well."

And the actor says his own poor childhood helped spark his interest in LIFE. "I grew up in the Depression. I saw hunger. I know about wanting and needing food," he recalled.

"One night we had no food left except some lard, sugar, mustard and a piece of a loaf of bread. My mother said to my brother and me, 'You have a choice. You can have lard and sugar sandwiches or mustard and sugar sandwiches.' When you have gone through something like that, it has a lasting effect."

The handsome star says he got the idea for LIFE from his daughter-in-law, who was a supermarket checker.

"She told me all about the food that was thrown away. After a certain date, food has to be taken off the supermarket shelves, particularly dairy products, deli products and baked goods. But that food is still very nutritious and good to eat," Weaver explained. With that in mind, Weaver and some friends organized LIFE.

"The first thing we did was go to the supermarkets and get them to give us the food they'd have to throw out," said Weaver, who's president of the charitable organization.

"Volunteers go to supermarket



HELPING HAND: Celebrity Valerie Harper helps Weaver display some of the food they've collected for the poor.

kets and ask shoppers to buy a little something and just give it to us," Weaver explained. "It's amazing how much food people have given. One weekend, we collected six tons of food!"

Weaver frequently stands out in front of stores asking for canned goods — and he's not the only celebrity who does.

"Valerie Harper as well as Bar-

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



'IT MAKES ME FEEL WONDERFUL,' says Weaver, who is shown giving away food to needy kids.

— PAUL F. LEVY

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DENNIS WEAVER HOLLYWOOD'S GENTLE MAVERICK

BY RICK MCGUIRE

To excite most celebrities, all you have to do is ask about their latest movie, TV show, album, etc. But in order to see Dennis Weaver's eyes widen, the discussion needs to focus on feeding the hungry, meditation or vegetarianism.

In a town as self-promoting as Hollywood, Weaver's attitude is unique. While other stars bristle when the conversation turns away too soon from their latest role, Dennis Weaver would just as soon discuss his local food project, "Love Is Feeding Everyone" (LIFE).

As the organization's president, the actor oversees a food distribution program in East Los Angeles which, during the most recent month for which figures are available, used 250 volunteers to collect 15,000 pounds of food for delivery to 750 needy families.

LIFE began when Weaver and a few friends discovered a gaping hole in the local social services programs. They noted that several organizations were collecting food donations, including local soup kitchens that receive foodstuffs from area manufacturers. But the founders of LIFE realized no group was utilizing a major source of free food.

Food that can't be legally sold anymore is thrown away. When legislators passed consumer protection laws which specified the saleable life of perishable goods, ample safeguards were built into the ordinances to protect the public. Thus, as Weaver notes, "If we can get that food, such as baked goods, dairy products, deli products and produce to the hungry within a day, it is really quite nourishing."

He laughs when it's suggested that he obviously doesn't share the view that the hungry are not out there. With a trace of his native Missouri still in his voice, Weaver says, "Well, of course I don't believe it. I mean, all you have to do is go look!" For a man who rarely uses anything as bold as an exclamation mark in his conversation, the subject matter has definitely struck an emotional chord. "You don't need any statistics! But even if you just look at the figures for the past five years, poverty and hunger have both increased!"



With three area grocery chains expressing their willingness to cooperate as soon as LIFE can handle their volume, there is a potential for feeding 21,000 people. But Weaver won't allow himself to be overwhelmed by what this project could become. He prefers instead to guide the program carefully, assuring its success, so that it may be used as a model for similar efforts throughout the Southwest and, perhaps, throughout the country.

This kind of civic responsibility is not unknown in Hollywood, but usually it manifests itself in larger (read "more visible") programs. Yet it's most appropriate that Dennis Weaver takes this less-traveled route, preferring effectiveness over publicity; it matches his maverick style.

Few in the entertainment industry have consistently bucked convention like Weaver has, while managing to avoid being trampled to professional death by righteous indignation. Like some struggling society of adolescents, Hollywood prizes individuality, but only within certain conformist parameters; rarely has Weaver found himself within these accepted boundaries. As seen, his charity efforts extend far beyond a concern for public relations. His ascetic lifestyle precludes almost all of the glitter good life.

Weaver has enjoyed a consistent and varied career. He is indelibly linked to not one but two classic characterizations: the comic relief deputy who limped along in one of TV's longest running hits, *Gun - smoke*, and the endearing lawman from Taos, New Mexico, who taught the city slickers a few tricks in *McCloud*. More surprising still, he has managed such success without succumbing to that nemesis of actors, typecasting.

In the TV movie *Intimate Strangers*, Weaver convincingly portrayed a wife-beater; in the Jerry Lewis farce *Way... Way Out*, he was a loony astronaut on the moon; in the television film *Cocaine: One Man's Seduction*, the actor depicted a life-ruining chemical obsession.

Along with variety, Weaver has achieved widespread critical acclaim. In fact, when noted TV critic Tom Shales (*The Washington Post*) named his choices for the Top Ten TV Movies Ever Made, Dennis Weaver starred in three of them: *Duel* (with a novice director named Steven Spielberg), *Amber Waves* and *Ishi—The Last of His Tribe*.

In addition to his extremely busy career in dramatic TV, Weaver is indulging his musical side. His lifelong love of singing and country music has led him to record some half dozen LPs, for his own label as well as for other companies. Among



numerous single releases, two have enjoyed national popularity—a duet with his wife, Gerry, on *Calhoun*, produced by Hoyt Axton for Hoyt's Jeremiah label, and *The World Needs Country Music*.

It's seldom possible to pin down one man's success, but Weaver's inner strength, integrity and sense of commitment have to be given some credit. His positive public image is another consideration; one critic suggested that Weaver was the only Hollywood star who could have headlined the TV movie *Cocaine* and not be suspected of personal use. And, if you ask the man himself, he'll credit his spiritual base for 27 years.

The grandson of a minister, the actor is a lay preacher two Sundays a month for the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) Temple



of the Lake Shrine in Los Angeles. Drawing from both the New Testament and the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita, the group puts their international membership at 500,000.

Weaver was originally attracted to the group because of the meditation techniques it offered. He recalls, "I was with a church prior to [SRF] which offered a period of silence, but they never told me what to do with the silence. So I ended up just sitting there, silently worrying about whatever happened to be on my mind. Just what I didn't need—a structured worry time."

Today Weaver's strong religious beliefs form the center of his life. Always soft-spoken, he was almost inaudible when he admitted, "I truly believe that if it weren't for my religious beliefs, my life would probably be a shambles right now."

There is no hint, however, of such dishevelment. Looking at Weaver in his flowered Western shirt, faded jeans and brown boots, one sees only a relaxed man who apparently has made peace with himself and the world. There is a natural greying at the temples and a hint of middle-aged spread, but these are hardly unreasonable manifestations for a 60-year-old man with three grown sons.

Once a nationally recognized track and field champion, Weaver's fit appearance is partly due to the fact that he jogs a little and does calisthenics each morning, although his favorite exercise is basketball—"pretending that [Los Angeles Lakers forward] Magic Johnson is guarding me." With a laugh, Weaver admits, "I've got the basket down to 8'6", so I can still stuff it."

He also credits some of his fitness to the fact that he uses no alcohol, drugs, tobacco or meat. Asked if he's a strict vegetarian, Weaver raises his voice slightly and shoots back with, "I'm not a *strict* anything. I think the rule should be made for us, rather than us made for the rule. Any time you feel the need for some [regimen] so bad that any variation is going to disrupt or kill you, you'd better get rid of it."

As an example, he cites a recent occasion when, for the first time in a long time, he ate a piece of fish. "I was at a dinner party and the hostess served fish. Instead of making a big stink about it, I just ate it."

On the set of his recent series, *Emerald Point*, the script sometimes calls for food props. "My personal beliefs can't be forced on every character I play," he says, admitting that some compromise is possible. Once his character was seen in the kitchen with some fresh fish. "You saw me handle them, but you didn't see me clean or eat them," he says with a grin. Likewise, during a dinner later in that episode, everyone was eating roast; Weaver notes, "If the camera caught my plate, you'd see there was *no* meat there."

At home, he eats an egg "once in a great while," but he can't remember the last time he had any milk. The basic diet for Weaver, and for his wife of 38 years, is greens and sprouts, or what he calls "living, raw food."

"We like, for the most part, that which we get used to eating," says Weaver, and according to his down-home reasoning, "You might just as well get used to eating those foods which are good for you."

"Gerry and I are kitchen gardeners; you can grow a lot of food indoors, and do it year round." A walk through their Calabasas home finds sunflower greens, buckwheat lettuce, alfalfa sprouts and wheat grass all flourishing. Jars are sprouting lentils, adzuki beans and cabbage seeds.

"Not only do these ingredients make a real tasty salad, but I also use them in other dishes. For example, I blend a cold, living soup, sometimes called cosmic soup. We also make nut and seed cheeses."

Although many West Coast residents prefer to hide behind their pioneer "new age" efforts, few people maintain anything approaching the holistic lifestyle of Dennis Weaver. Thus, most people here still view the actor and his practices with much chagrin.

"That's all right; I like to be a maverick, myself. I've always enjoyed that. Going out and experimenting and doing something out of the ruts that other people make—I think that's important."

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