

Faith Matters: A Westminster Presbyterian team gives hope

Friday, May 15, 2009

By [Meredith Barkley](#)

HOPE TEAMS

Faith communities interested in forming Hope Teams should contact Myla Erwin, Hope Team Coordinator for Partners Ending Homelessness at 889-6105, extension 1116.

While swapping stories over coffee recently with a couple of Westminster Presbyterian buddies, it occurred to Vincent Sims yet again that there are alternatives to bars and brews.

“It was a lot of heads-up,” said Sims, 48, who not long ago was locked in a downward swirl of alcohol, drugs, mental disorders and homelessness. “I was shown that there is a better side.”

These days he thinks of Westminster, especially the five-person Hope Team that helps him, as family. The team, one of three formed by faith communities in Guilford County, takes him regularly to wash clothes, for coffee and conversation, calls him frequently to see how he’s doing, and sends him cards. Recently they visited him in the hospital, took him medicine when needed and took him to the new movie “The Soloist,” which is about a homeless man.

The Hope Team, which has worked with Sims since December, operates alongside the county’s housing support team, adding a personal touch to the assistance Sims receives from agencies and organizations.

His battles with addictions and mental illness are far from over. But, says Hope Team member Amy Speas: “He knows we’re there to support him through this. If he makes a mistake we’ll be there. He can rely on us.”

Sims, who had been living on Greensboro’s streets and in its vacant buildings, turned an important corner one day in late 2007 when God sent a lifeline. He was invited into the county’s new Housing First program. The pilot program, part of the county’s Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, houses the chronically homeless quickly and wraps services around them.

Advocates insist that such programs are the best way to ensure success for this difficult group. While on the streets they siphon off large sums of tax money and community resources through hospitalizations, crime and imprisonment.

The nonprofit Partners Ending Homelessness has found homes for 99 of Guilford’s approximately 200 chronically homeless people. Not all the formerly homeless in the program want a Hope Team. But Partners Ending Homelessness, which is responsible for implementing the county’s Ten Year Plan, is forming more Hope Teams for those who do.

Sims wanted the support of a Hope Team because he felt isolated as he began making those tenuous steps back from a life on the streets.

“The Hope Team has given me an advantage, an opportunity to see what life is really like,” he said.

For their part, Hope Team members say they’re getting at least as much from their association with Sims as he’s getting.

“I know Vincent is benefiting but I think we’re benefiting even more, just by being able to give,” said Hope Team member Gayle Nadel, who got involved to honor a homeless brother who killed himself. “If you can develop a

relationship one-on-one with someone, it means a whole lot more than serving them a meal at a shelter or getting them into a home and leaving.”

Westminster’s Hope Team leader, Tom Jackson, has encountered enough people in the community with scant regard for the homeless that he’s puzzled.

“Why don’t they get a job?” many ask him incredulously. “I haven’t found many people who even want to understand why they’re homeless.”

Some, he said, “talk like a Christian, but they won’t admit how they feel. You have to have a heart. You have to care. Once you become their friend and understand the frustration and hopelessness they’re going through, you have to change.”

For Sue Cardwell, another Hope Team member, befriending Sims has led to an uncomfortable realization of how easy it would be for many of us to slip into hopelessness and homelessness ourselves.

“There but by the grace of God it would be me,” she said. “It’s a humbling experience to see what they actually go through and how they’re able to survive.”