

NC community center provides services for homeless

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By JERI ROWE / Associated Press

Stand in the long hallway — even if a woman gets on the phone and yells, "I have no money to get downtown!" — and you can hear it.

It's the tinny sound of an upright piano, slightly off-key. Someone is playing something from Bill Witherson the lounge piano. It's "Lean On Me."

Pretty appropriate.

This long hallway of nine rooms has become Greensboro's new place where potential and hope try to take root.

The News & Record of Greensboro reported that it's the Interactive Resource Center. It opened in January inside the Bessemer United Methodist Church, and it's become the spot during the day where the area's homeless seek professional support and spiritual guidance.

And they find it.

There, Grandma Butchie lobbies landlords, Jenny Hudson works the phones and the Rev. Melvin DuBose carries on about finding guidance through whom he calls "Father God."

It all happens along a former Sunday school hallway that sat silent for 16 years. Today, it's boisterous and loud with people trying to claw their way out of a life of confusion and chaos.

Like Robert Watlington. On this particular morning, he's nursing a cup of instant coffee as he surfs the Internet on one of the center's donated computers. He wants a job. He hasn't found a job. But he still comes. He has to.

"This environment is like an energy drink," said Watlington, a 41-year-old man with no home. "It keeps me going. It gives me the water that I need to finish the race."

Funded by the city, donations and local foundations, the center has become the answer to help the area's 5,000 homeless living under the radar in Guilford County.

The day center is one of four statewide. Asheville, Charlotte and Raleigh have similar operations. But this day center off East Bessemer, where Spanish is spoken and old mill houses hug the road, is a bit different.

It's comprehensive, planned by area homeless and homeless advocates. But maybe more importantly, it's made dreams happen.

"It kept me off the streets," said William Burton, 55, a former homeless man who makes \$10 an hour as one of the center's four staff members.

"No money. Didn't have an option. And it got me back on my feet," he said. "It gave me hope and a sense of direction. If you don't have that, you'll walk around Greensboro lost. But you have to have someone believe in you, too."

By November, the center will leave the long hallway — the 1,500 square feet it rents at Bessemer United Methodist Church — and move into a donated warehouse on East Washington Street.

It'll give the center 22,000 square feet — enough space to help at least 120 people every weekday near downtown Greensboro, the epicenter of the county's homeless population.

The center will need \$200,000 a year to operate. Already the city of Greensboro has promised \$100,000, and the center will soon start raising funds by doing everything from writing grants to washing cars.

After six months of operation, it seems the center has made it, especially for people like Barbara.

She's 45, a former house painter. She's slept in shelters and in the woods, on and off, for the past three years in Greensboro. But one night recently, she slept behind Bessemer United Methodist.

She used her coat as a blanket and a concrete patio as her bed.

She came for a shower, some clothes and some direction. She also needed a place to stay. She didn't find one. But she did get a new pair of jeans and a new T-shirt, with a stitched message that read: "Top Of The World."

Barbara's pretty typical. Monday through Friday, the homeless come by bus, by car, by foot. They often come by first light — as many as 60 at a time — because they know what they can do along that long hallway.

They can take showers, wash clothes, get a haircut, get lunch, see a nurse, use the phone, write a resume, learn interviewing skills, learn the Bible and surf the Internet on a donated computer to find a job.

They can bend the ear of center director Liz Seymour, hear from Hudson about jobs and housing and sit down with one of at least 15 volunteers who come every week to see what they can do.

One of those volunteers is Mildred Surgeon. She comes every weekday. She's the short, white-haired woman who wears a "Mom" ring on her left hand. She should. She's 70, a mother of 12, a grandmother of 16.

She's also the one known as Grandma Butchie. She's found homes and apartments. And she's called landlords and utility companies, lobbying them to have a little compassion. Sometimes, it works.

"I just want everybody to have something," she said. "You never know what they've been through. All I know is I've been blessed, and I don't want to see no one suffer."

One morning recently, Hudson worked the phones for Barbara in a front office as Watlington surfed the Internet two doors down.

Next door, in a humid room with the construction-paper words "Love" and "Joy" taped on the windows, the Rev. Dubose had just finished his Bible study when a homeless man named James came up to talk.

James wanted to show DuBose pictures of his children. As always, DuBose had a message.

"You got something to live for, James," DuBose told him. "You know what I'm saying? A whole new man."

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Information from: News & Record, <http://www.news-record.com>