

## Program gets homeless back on their feet

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By [Jason Hardin](#)

Staff Writer

GREENSBORO — Gerald Hammonds has a big red cross on his kitchen wall and a night stand full of religious pamphlets.

He doesn't have a microwave, doesn't have a vacuum cleaner, doesn't have a lot of room.

But he's got what he needs.

"The main thing is the roof over my head," he said. "I can live."

It was a long road for the 46-year-old, one that took him from a childhood in the church through the streets, to prison, to homelessness and back.

Hammonds is among the successful graduates of a Salvation Army program that seeks to help homeless people get their lives back in order.

The program, housed at the Center of Hope on South Eugene Street, combines support with strict rules in a mix workers there call "tough love."

Growing numbers of people are needing help, Salvation Army officials say. There's a waiting list to get in, and, with the economy sinking, demand for other services such as help in paying rent and utility bills is rising.

For Hammonds, it was a way to refocus his life, to "get my head clear."

Two years ago, he was staying with his sister in a crowded house where he felt he was getting in the way.

He'd been adrift for some time. As a younger man, he'd run with a bad crowd, he said. He took drugs, got involved in crime.

At times, he found himself with no place to stay.

"A couple of nights, I didn't have nowhere to go. But I just wrapped up, and I still knew there was a God," Hammonds said. "I have been in tough situations. I would not wish nobody else to go there."

The Center of Hope wasn't Hammonds' only option.

"I could have went somewhere else. Got in a hotel room or something. But I figured that was the best direction," he said.

Once at the center, he found support — and restrictions. Not everyone liked the rules, including a curfew and a requirement that everyone either be working or looking during the day.

But Hammonds came to welcome them.

“I know if I didn’t abide by that, I wasn’t going to be there,” he said. “Tough love got me here. It’s great to have tough love.”

At the same time, there is help. Child care. Help with skills such as budgeting and job finding. Transportation assistance.

Hammonds is working now, cleaning up at a FedEx facility.

Finally, late last year, he was ready to move out into his own place.

Now he’s got a place where there’s a dumbbell on the floor and stuffed animals all over. Next to the couch sits a picture of his daughter, who’s in college.

And he’s got plans. He wants to open another facility for the homeless.

“I want to do that before I die,” he said.

Not everyone has the same result. Center officials say close to half of those who come in the program leave — or are asked to.

Jackie Lucas, the center’s executive director, said the program isn’t easy.

“We don’t like excuses. We know your dad was an alcoholic. We know your husband left you, but that has nothing to do with you,” she said. “We preach and we practice discipline, and we expect them to do the same thing.”

The program has strict rules, but there can be room for second chances. Sometimes.

“They say, I tried. I didn’t have a good week,” Lucas said. “If I feel ... that person is genuine, they’re really trying to work the program, I’ll say OK. But instead of one AA class a week, you’re going to do five.”

Although the program is tough, it has a softer side.

Tara Partin entered a few years ago as a high school student when staying with her mother wasn’t working out.

It was an adjustment for her and her 8-month-old baby.

“This was the only place to stay,” she said. “Some people were nice. Some people were not in their right minds. Some people were not keeping up with the program.”

But there were some personal touches.

When she thought about skipping the prom, staffers encouraged her to go. They bought her a dress. She’d dreamed of a limo, but that was out of the question. But the head of the local Salvation Army chauffeured her around that night in a Ford Crown Victoria.

When she was ready to leave, they helped her with furnishings and little touches for her apartment: Shades. A bookshelf. Washer and dryer.

And all the while, she was staying in school and managing to save up a little.

Now, she’s set to begin her sophomore year at N.C. A&T.

Make no mistake, she said, the program was tough.

“You either go along with it. Or you don’t. And you’re just out of here,” she said.

But she’s glad she did it.

“In the beginning, I wasn’t. In the end, I am.”

On a recent weekday evening, participants in a job skills class at the center sat around a U-shaped array of folding tables.

At the head of the class, Irish Spencer had a message.

“We’re going to find a job,” she said.

She dispensed advice ranging from how to fill out applications to how to present themselves to employers. “Talk clearly,” she said. “With a smile.”

She asks a series of questions that at first might have seemed off topic.

She asked, what was their favorite thing to study in school?

Chemistry, one said. Reading. Math. Shop. “I liked girls,” said one man.

And what do they like doing in their free time?

Many mentioned some kind of outdoor activities. So how about working for the city’s parks and recreation department, she asked.

“You’ve got to think out of the box when you’re looking for a job,” she said.

Despite tough times, everyone in the class has a dream job. Chef. Social worker. Owning a heating and air company.

And, where, Spencer asks, do they see themselves in five years?

“Rich and famous,” one said. “Having a place for me and my son to live,” said another. “Only God knows.”

The small stack of DVDs in the living room next to Hammonds’ TV includes a diverse set of stars. A Martin Lawrence movie sits next to a disc with Pat Robertson.

Hammonds, who grew up in the church, credits religion for helping get him where he is now. “God is good, y’all,” he said. “I’ve got to say it again. God is good.”

He also credits his time at the center.

“They touched me in a lot of ways. They’re like family. The Salvation Army will always be my home,” he said. “Anything I can do for them I will.”

Hammonds said his experiences have made him sensitive to the plight of the homeless.

He wonders why it’s so easy for so many people to pass them by without helping.

“Maybe they’re just caught up in themselves, trying to see what they can get out of life,” he said. “Greed’ll kill you. It ain’t going to do you no good to keep it all for yourself.”

While he’s still fixing up his apartment the way he wants it, he’s enjoying his life. He’s got plans.

And hope for the future.

“I hope to live to be another 46.”

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