

Room In The Inn

You know the feeling. It's dark, cold and raining, the end of a long winter day, and you just want to get home.

Suppose you didn't have one.

From November through March, congregations throughout the Nashville area open their buildings to our neighbors who don't have homes. On Tuesday nights, twenty-four men come to Donelson Church of Christ. Volunteer drivers pick them up at the Room In the Inn downtown Campus for Human Development. They choose clothing at the Help Center and eat a full, hot meal prepared and served by Donelson volunteers. They take showers, have the opportunity to call family, and sleep, safe and warm, in the Donelson Christian Activity Center before having breakfast and returning, sack lunch in hand, to the Room in the Inn campus the next morning.

Room in the Inn began in 1986 when Charles Strobel, parish priest at Holy Name Catholic Church in East Nashville, saw homeless families sleeping in their cars in the church parking lot. He opened the church cafeteria. The next fall four churches opened their buildings on week nights when these houses of worship would otherwise have been closed and dark, and at least thirteen congregations were involved by spring. A board was formed, and the first two chairs were members of churches of Christ, Jim Olive and Deby Samuels.

Samuels remembers the ministry's beginning. "In the early days, there were very few weeks when new congregations did not come on board." The ministry grew rapidly, but there were challenges. One was "finding a place from which to send our guests out. Our original location, an old Salvation Army building downtown, was razed for what is now the Sommet center. Also, what to do on bad snow/ice nights when the shelter was needed most but congregations had trouble getting volunteers safely to their locations as well as getting downtown to pick up guests." Samuels remembers one night when she, with one other board member and some Belmont University students, "hosted about sixty guests at the Youth Hobby shop downtown because we could get there and the congregations could not." There were "lots of guests and limited resources. It was kind of like the loaves and fishes story. We just accepted all the guests we could, and the food and other needs were met."

Donna and Phil Mitchell headed up the new ministry at Donelson, recruiting volunteers to drive, prepare meals, serve meals, distribute clothing, and spend the night – every Tuesday, November through March. Sheets and towels had to be laundered. Cots and supplies such as soap, shaving cream, combs, razors and more had to be collected or purchased. The Mitchells made contingency plans for nights when volunteers forgot or unusual cold meant extra meals were needed. They retired from the ministry at the end of the 2006 season. Tom Burns accepted their role and is now in his third year coordinating the ministry at Donelson.

"Room in the Inn is an opportunity for us to live out God's word," Burns said. He pointed out that Jesus said "the second command is to 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" Donelson's Room in the Inn program gives twenty-four homeless men, twenty-four neighbors "a place to spend the night, dinner, a light breakfast and a sack lunch as well as

showing them God's love. Many of these men have jobs and are trying to save enough money to get an apartment."

In early fall, lists are circulated through home churches and Sunday classes, and Donelson members are asked to volunteer prepare food and serve on specific nights. Tom sends out reminder letters, and a volunteer calls to remind volunteers. Other volunteers drive the vans on Tuesday nights and again on Wednesday mornings. Others prepare lunches and distribute clothing in the Help Center. Local businesses such as Whitt's Barbecue and Tennessee Car and Van Rental give the program generous discounts.

Donelson's greatest need continues to be innkeepers, the men who spend the night. While spending the night and possibly not getting an ideal night's sleep may seem like a sacrifice, Burns has found that the men who stay always feel rewarded. One of the blessings is getting to know the other volunteers, often people who hadn't known each other well before the shared experience.

Ed Williams has stayed several nights. Williams sees in Room in the Inn an opportunity to "give back a little to folks who are struggling. It doesn't take much talent," he said, "just a little time."

Burns hasn't always felt called to help Nashville's homeless. The turning point for him came about five years ago while he was working for Metro's Department of Parks and Recreation, setting up Riverfront Park for the city's annual Fourth of July celebration. "A homeless man was sitting there," and he and Burns began talking. "He had been an attorney somewhere up north. His wife and daughter had been killed in a car wreck. Then he started drinking and lost his job." Burns felt an empathy he hadn't before. "Where would I be if I'd lost Kay and the kids?"

Burns's wife Kay is often in the Donelson kitchen on winter Tuesday nights, serving meals.

Carter Thomas has helped serve for years. Thomas often sits with the men while they're eating. "I feel like sometimes they're lonely and just want someone to talk to." Now a sophomore at Lipscomb University, Thomas was a child when he began helping. "They like talking to kids. Some of them may have had kids," and, he said, "they want to give you advice sometimes." Thomas feels the ministry's most important impact is that "they know they have somewhere to go, know somebody cares for them."

Now nearly 150 congregations in Nashville, Jewish synagogues as well as Christian churches, participate each week. The program has spread to other cities as well. Samuels pointed out that programs have grown out of Room in the Inn "that go beyond shelter and safety and work toward rehab. In essence, the program has grown from a great program that offers 'a cup of water in my name' to one that has programs to move those who can get off the streets, off."

Samuels said, "One of the serendipities that I believe came out of Room in the Inn is that this was a citywide program that brought a lot of congregations together in one cause for the first time in Nashville's history. It was, and is, truly a ministry that honored what we all agreed on rather than our differences."

[Our thanks to Peggy Peden for this report.]