

Suburban Life

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Bill Chapel (right) counsels a resident of the Detroit Rescue Mission, a home for ex-convicts, drug addicts and alcoholics in the Cass Corridor. The mission's dormitory house nearly 70 men.



Every week, hundreds of people who live in the Cass Corridor seek refuge and enjoy a free lunch at the Detroit Rescue Mission. A painting of Christ in a broad line serves as a reminder to vagrants that they, too, are worthy of being helped.

A mission for life

By Carol Azizian
staff writer

DRESSED in his Sunday best, a worn-out brown polyester suit and flowered shirt, Don Williams quietly enters the chapel.

As the pastor evangelizes in a Jamaican accent, Williams and his skid-row buddies shout, "Jesus is the best friend I have. Amen." They greet each other smiling and break out in a rousing chorus of "Silent Night."

Every morning, the 70 ex-convicts, former drug addicts, dope pushers and reformed alcoholics who live in the Detroit Rescue Mission shower and shave, eat breakfast and attend church services together.

Then they go to work, as janitors, cooks, carpenters, security guards, dishwashers, handymen.

Some believe divine guidance led them to the mission and consider themselves disciples. They preach the gospel on street corners and in "bread lines." Others aren't quite sure how they ended up there. They just know it's a place to get a blanket, a hot meal and a warm bed.

FOUNDED 75 years ago by the Rev. D.C. Stucky, the mission is located in a modest old building in the heart of Detroit's Cass Corridor. A neon sign with the message, "Christ died for our sins," blinks brightly in the entrance.

Displays of confiscated weapons — sickles, baseball bats, broken wine bottles — and drugs and alcohol substitutes such as Slermo, Aqua Velva and denatured alcohol serve as haunting reminders to residents who have made a decision to lead a new life.

A painting of a bread line with Christ in the middle with vagrants on both sides is an inspiration to many who walk in for the first time. "Christ died for the ungodly" is the message displayed across the top of the picture.

This mission is an oasis in the middle of a vast spiritual desert for many who come there seeking a way out.

"I was sent here through the spirit of God," said an exuberant Williams. "I was high, intoxicated. Something told me: Don, come here."

The 23-year-old former drug addict took his first step toward rehabilitation five months ago. It's been a dramatic change from his previous lifestyle.

"My life in the streets was doing everything — drugs, alcohol, I hurt people and myself. I didn't care about nothin' or nobody."

"I was tired of being that way. But it wasn't really me. It was the drugs and alcohol makin' me that way."

After sending his wife and son back to her hometown in Toledo, Williams felt lonely. Not knowing where to turn, he began to pray.

"I used to read the Bible a lot and get a good feeling from it. But I wasn't happy. There was somethin' missin'. It was gettin' to know Jesus Christ as my savior."

"Then, one day as the preacher was preachin', I started thinkin' about it. I was waitin' on this beautiful feelin' to come. I went up to the altar and the reverend prayed with me. This light showed up — not where you could see it, but it was like in a dream."

"I was out there gettin' high just for that feelin'. But this was a natural high."

SINCE THAT experience, Williams has spent every day reading the Bible and preaching the gospel to neighborhood junkies, friends and vagrants who walk into the mission. Not everyone receives the message as gladly as he did. "God's gifts is free," he proclaims. "You don't have to spend a dime for them. You can be rich and have all the things in the world, but you need the love that Jesus gave us."

"I go out in the streets and witness to my so-called friends. They still gettin' high. I tell them I'm saved. My high is Jesus. Their mind be blown. I ask them, 'How do you feel about your life? Do you see any future financially in this? Then I go to preachin'."

When he's not preaching, Williams cooks and cleans in the mission kitchen.

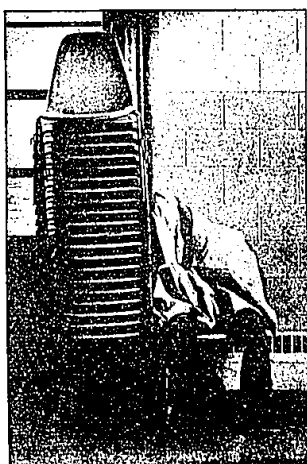
He says he'll stay there as long as "God wants me to."

Unlike Williams, Steve Blair wasn't down and out when he entered the mission.

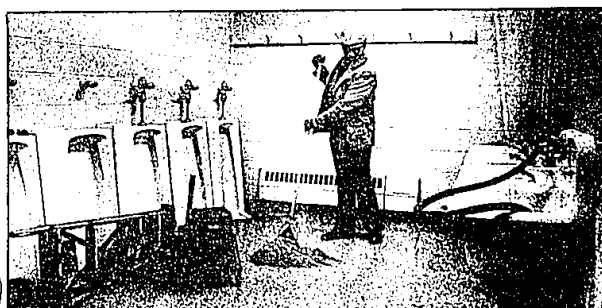
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Two vagrants slouch in their chairs in the mission's chapel.



Draping a blanket over his head, a transient finds a safe place to rest for a while.



Horace Smith, who had been imprisoned on assault charges, now lives and works at the mission. When he's not mopping up, he's attending chapel services.



Whether or not to attend daily chapel services is a big decision for many vagrants.

Staff photos by Stephen Cantrell