

## A network of many faiths

**This is no checkbook charity; Gainesville's Interfaith Hospitality Network unites people of diverse faiths to help families in need**

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Fourteen-year-old Michael, standing, and his father, Michael, watch movies in their room, a Sunday school classroom that is converted to a living quarters at Highlands Presbyterian Church. Father and son became homeless after their California home was destroyed by fire. They were visiting friends in Gainesville when their car caught fire, and they lost all their belongings.

The smell of spaghetti sauce and garlic bread drifts together over the tables just as the bits of conversation of work days and favorite school subjects mingle.

With a "Hey mama" alert, an impish 4-year-old demonstrates his newly perfected skill of spaghetti noodle slurping as the white string quickly snakes off his plate and whiplashes sauce onto his nose.

The setting is the Fellowship Hall of Highlands Presbyterian Church, and the crowd of adults and children looks like what you might expect at a weekday church supper, except this group is different. It's a mixture of homeless families with children and volunteers from the Interfaith

Hospitality Network breaking bread together. Separating helpers from helped can prove challenging.

Bonnie Hummel, a long-time IHN volunteer and member of First Church of the Nazarene, recalls the time a friend brought her teenagers to a similar supper so they could get a lesson on the homeless.

"When they came in, they said, 'Where are the homeless people?' Well, they were all around," she says.

IHN is a nonprofit organization that combines the efforts of more than two dozen area congregations to help homeless families with children in and around Gainesville. The families live in "host" church buildings, usually for a week at a time, before moving to another congregation. During the stay, volunteers serve as hosts, make the meals and help with transportation.

There are only two paid staffers, executive director Donna Watson Lawson and case manager Sunemaura O'Brien, who oversee the operation and work to cut the red tape to help family members find jobs and permanent housing, while the army of volunteers helps to sustain them.

A chart taped to a display board behind the diners at Highlands has the job assignments for the week. Each box is filled with a name. Highlands pastor Barry Ferguson says he has an active membership of about 90, and nearly a third pitch in when the church hosts.

"It's a lot of work. It really is a lot of energy and effort, and it takes lots of people doing lots of things," he says.

And that's part of the attraction.

"It's a chance to be in a relationship with the people we're helping. It's not just checkbook charity," Ferguson says.

### **Safe haven for kids**

Before the meal, a 26-year-old mother of two girls, ages 2 and 6 months, sits on a couch in what on Sunday will be a classroom and gets reconnected to her kids.

"I missed you," she tells the toddler, while popping a bottle into the baby's mouth.

Her story serves as an example of just how quickly life can turn. A single mom, she came to Gainesville from a Chicago suburb to be near her mother who was dying of cancer. She had a job waitressing, she had an apartment and she was getting by, but just barely. Her mother eventually died. She began to get behind on the rent, then the car died, then she lost her job. She had nowhere to go, and a social worker told her about IHN.

She misses the privacy of her own place. She misses coming home to the quiet, playing with her daughters and reading to them. There's more hubbub at the church, other kids, other people, shared bathrooms, all of which runs counter to her natural introverted tendencies. But she does appreciate having a roof over her head. There's formula and diapers for the baby, her meals are

cooked, and she's getting help toward finding subsidized housing.

She's landed a job working in a fast-food restaurant near the mall. She's grateful for work, and exhausted from a day on her feet and a commute home across town that requires three buses and nearly 90 minutes to get to the day-care center to pick up the kids.

And these are struggles that to most of the outside world she keeps to herself. She's reluctant to have her name used and doesn't want her picture taken. Only a couple of her closest friends know that when she says she's going home, she's going to a Sunday school classroom in a church across town.

Another mother of a 6-year-old and 4-year-old is wearing the colorful smock and loose fitting pants from her job at Shands. She works for a temp agency handling medical records. She's been in the network for more than four months. She's stayed with each of the host congregations at least once, but hopes to move into her own apartment in a few weeks.

"I really didn't expect as much help as they have offered," she says.

But don't use her name or take her picture, she insists. She knows the stigma that comes when someone connects a name or face to being homeless. She says they automatically think you're abused, crazy or on drugs.

"I'm none of those things," she says emphatically. "I'm homeless because of financial problems."

### **'What do you need?'**

One of the volunteers in the dining room is Susan Reinheimer, a third-grade teacher at High Springs Elementary School, who, with fellow teacher Kathy Franks, is one of the coordinators for Highlands. Looking over the assignment sheet, she can point to blocks filled in with the names of volunteers from other congregations. The list of participating congregations crosses denominational lines and encompasses many styles of worship.

"It's really neat. It doesn't matter; it's 'What do you need?'" she says, describing the attitude that allows such a diverse group to put aside differences and work together.

And Reinheimer can offer her own testimony of what she receives by giving.

"The inner feeling of helping others, you get an endless supply of energy when you're helping others," she says.

"You can immediately see you are doing some good," adds Chuck Womeldorf, who is serving as chef for an evening meal.

It can also be a learning experience for the volunteers. Hummell, who coordinates IHN at First Church of the Nazarene, plugs herself in where she's needed at other locations. With her husband Doug ("We're a team," she says), she also takes part in the Fire of God program that helps feed the homeless on Saturday and Monday nights.

"I think I've learned I'm very grateful for what I have. I've learned to see people from their side of

circumstances," she says, echoing a common theme among volunteers.

### **A circular route**

Lula Melton understands that lesson well. A year ago, she and her son Marcel were living in the network, moving from church to church until they were able to get their own apartment. She arrives at dinnertime at Highlands loaded down with pan of fried chicken. She remembers the volunteers who helped her. Now it's her turn.

"They were so nice, they were so caring, they made it very, very comfortable," she says.

This circular route from helped to helper isn't unusual, says Lawson, who has served as director for five years. When Lawson looks over the stats for the past year, she can see the program is making a difference.

In 2003, 24 families were served, a total of 80 people over the year. When she does the math for the year, it works out to 4,373 nights of shelter and 13,119 meals. Of those 24, three were still in the program at the end of the year, two were discharged for failing to work adequately on their cases or breaking program policies. Take away those five, and that leaves 17 families who'd remained in the program, 16 of which graduated and moved into housing of their own, what she sees as a 94 percent graduation rate.

And it's all done on a shoestring budget of \$115,000 a year. About 55 percent of that comes from fund-raisers and individual donations. Alachua County and the city of Gainesville kick in 20 percent, the congregations give another 20 percent and donations from small foundations make up the rest.

It hasn't been easy, in fact it's been tough. In 2002, the average family was in the network for 34 days, in 2004 that jumped to 66, an increase of 94 percent. The factors leading to their homelessness were more severe, the waiting lists for subsidized day-care and housing were longer, so the journey of making the move from the network to a home took longer. While IHN sets a 120-day limit for families to be in the network, four were allowed to stay beyond that because, in spite of their best efforts, they hadn't quite reached their goal.

Lawson also understands just how scary it can be for families. They may lose a home, live with relatives until the stress becomes too much, then it's life in the car or worse.

"We have folks tell us they've been sleeping in emergency-room waiting rooms at hospitals because they know they'll be warm, they know they'll be safe and have access to a bathroom," she says.

The maximum number of people that can be housed in the churches is 15. The numbers can fluctuate as families leave after finding homes, and others quickly enter.

### **Everything lost**

Michael Reichenbach is a rarity in the network; he's a single dad. He entered about a month ago.

"I'm going to be glad to see 2005," he says with a grin and a shake of his head.

That's because 2004 began with Reichenbach's home in Santa Cruz, Calif., going up in flames. He and his 14-year-old son Michael lost everything. A car wreck in 1995 put him into the hospital for a year, left him disabled and unable to work. So he got in the car and came East to see family. Then he headed to Gainesville, where he lived 20 years ago when he was working and thinking about going to college.

Reichenbach had a friend in town who was hospitalized following heart surgery and offered him a place to stay. On the way down Interstate 75, the car caught fire. All their possessions, including many that had been replaced since the house fire, were lost. Then when the friend recovered enough to leave the hospital, he decided to leave Gainesville, too. That left Reichenbach and his son with only the second-hand clunker that had limped into Gainesville as a place to live. He says he went to the Salvation Army and people there told him about IHN.

"It's absolutely a wonder, a godsend," he says.

Michael is nearly as tall as his dad and a few pounds heavier. He has size 13 shoes and is still growing. He's soft-spoken and polite, and dad brags how his son chips in with work around the church and with the other families, including changing diapers of the little ones if called upon.

"I'm the comedian, I make jokes," says the son, glancing over the top of his glasses at his dad.

Only when prodded does the young man offer any complaints. Yes, he says, it can be boring. Sometimes, he adds, the noise can make it difficult to sleep. Unlike his dad, he doesn't have the ability to close his eyes and conk out immediately, no matter what's going on around him. But of the fellow families and the volunteers, he says, "They're pretty nice people."

Just how nice is what has surprised his father. Getting on a list for housing, rebuilding the paperwork lost in the fire, getting a new ID, Reichenbach knew he faced a red-tape nightmare in trying to rebuild his life.

"Everything I have to do, they've showed me how," he says. "I couldn't have done it without them."

"I've learned there are a lot of good people out there willing to help," he says.

### **Another moving day**

Two weeks ago, the families had packed their belongings at United Church of Gainesville. Volunteers moved the beds and bags into a trailer for the trip across town to Highlands. Sunday was another moving day, this time downtown to Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. By Sunday afternoon the move was nearly complete. The fried chicken, mashed potatoes and green bean casserole were warming in the kitchen, and the church youth group had set the table for dinner. Soon a new set of volunteers would be making its introductions to the families who will be their guests during the week of Thanksgiving.

In 1996, Holy Trinity and Westminster Presbyterian Church were the first two to sign up as host congregations in Gainesville. Holy Trinity Rector, the Rev. Gordon Tremaine, was quite familiar with IHN when he arrived in Gainesville in 2002, since the two congregations he'd served in

Essex County, N.J., were also actively involved with the program. In Gainesville, Tremaine also serves as chairman of the Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry. He sees IHN as a creative approach.

"It's a way to take care of people's needs while they are in the process of seeking permanent housing, and that is a pretty big job," he says.

And for those who choose to get involved as volunteers, IHN provides another benefit.

"It puts a face on an abstract issue," Tremaine says. "It allows people to transcend the stereotypes they may hold about those who have become homeless."

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