

Some music, a bed and respect, too

'I'm getting spoiled staying at all these places,' said shelter manager Raney Norwood of the places that are filling in for the downtown shelter and community kitchen while it is being renovated.

By Dave Hart, Staff Writer

Richard McDonald, facilities specialist at the Carrboro Century Center, made the rounds.

He peeked into the various activity rooms, making sure everything was in place. He jiggled doorknobs, checking to see that the proper rooms were accessible and the off-limits ones weren't.

"They're usually pretty prompt," he said. "This is a new endeavor for us. My job is just to make sure the place is secure, and then open it up.

"I'm glad we're doing this. It's a generous thing for the town to do, and it's really gone very well. I hope we can do it again."

Up by the front door, another Century Center staffer glanced out the big glass windows flanking the front door. Nearly two dozen men stepped off a bus and gathered just outside the door, waiting in the evening heat.

"They're here," the staffer called.

McDonald glanced around one more time to make sure everything was in order. Then he walked to the big doors and swung them open.

"Hey, fellas," he said. "Let's rock and roll, guys."

It's been more than a month since the Town of Chapel Hill began doing extensive renovations to the old municipal building on Rosemary Street.

The building is home to two key programs run by the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service: the Community Kitchen, which provides free daily meals to anyone who needs them, and Community House, which provides shelter for homeless men. During the five months the renovations are expected to take, the Rosemary Street facility is uninhabitable. Until the work is done and the IFC can move back in this September, the homeless shelter is itself homeless.

A dozen local churches and the Carrboro Century Center have come to the rescue. They have stepped forward and offered to take turns, on a weekly rotating basis, serving as sleeping quarters for the shelter guests and recruiting two or three volunteers to help out each night of the stay.

The shelter hit the road the week of April 13, setting up operations first at the Chapel Hill Bible Church. The men stayed there for a week, then moved to University United Methodist, and then to Orange United Methodist.

"It's been going great," said longtime shelter manager Raney Norwood. "I'm getting spoiled staying at all these places. The volunteers have done everything we've asked them to, and everybody's been real helpful."

Last week it was the Century Center's turn. IFC staff was concerned about finding enough volunteers to help out there

IFC shelter residents get their makeshift sleeping quarters ready first before anything else they may do before lights out.

Staff photo by Shawn Rocco

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because the Century Center, unlike a church, has no built-in pool of people from which to draw volunteers. But, thanks in large part to the recruiting efforts of Alderman Jacquie Gist, who took the lead in making the Century Center available to the IFC, plenty of people stepped forward.

“We were a little worried about the volunteer pool for the Century Center,” said Chris Moran, IFC’s executive director. “But we’ve had a great turnout of volunteers for that site.”

Tuesday evening, three people — Etta Pisano and her son, 14-year old Jimmy Kylstra, both from the Chapel Hill Friends Meeting, and Emily Wurth, a graduate student at UNC — were on the volunteer list. They gathered at the Century Center shortly before the men were scheduled to arrive.

“I know Jacquie Gist because she was my career counselor at UNC,” Wurth said. “I ran into her on Franklin Street, and she told me about this and asked if I would think about volunteering. I decided, sure, why not? I don’t know exactly what to expect, but I’m here.”

Meanwhile, the guests gathered for dinner, as they do every night during the transition, at St. Joseph CME Church on Rosemary Street. When the IFC’s displacement from the old municipal building became imminent, St. Joseph took on the considerable commitment of making its kitchen and dining hall available to serve as temporary quarters for the Community Kitchen for the duration of the renovations.

Regardless of which site is hosting the shelter, the routine is pretty much the same. The men meet for the evening meal at St. Joseph. Then the ones who have signed up for shelter for the night climb aboard a bus to make the trip to the host site. They check in, prepare their bedding and then pass the time talking, reading, playing checkers or chess, or watching TV, if there’s one available, until lights out at 11 p.m.

They rise at 5:45 a.m., eat breakfast — which, at the Century Center, was cooked up fresh every morning by the owner of Elmo’s Diner — and then straighten up the site. They depart by 7 a.m.

Tuesday, the men arrived at the Century Center on schedule after dinner, at about 8 p.m. They gathered outside and talked while McDonald made his final checks inside and they waited for Norwood to arrive.

“It’s been great,” shelter guest Charles Edwards said. “Each place is a little different. People have been good to us, and we appreciate it. We’ve been treated with respect, and we’ve treated the people at the churches with respect. One thing about this place, the breakfasts have been the best: eggs, sausage, biscuits and gravy, coffee. You can’t beat that.”

Norwood strode up with a clipboard in his hand. McDonald threw open the doors, and the men filed in. This was their third night at the Century Center, and they knew the drill.

They walked into Activity Room 5, the largest of the ground-floor activity rooms. The men picked up their bedrolls, sheets, blankets and pillows and fanned out throughout the room, making their way to the floor spaces they’d staked out the previous two nights. While Norwood called the roll, they blew up inflatable sleeping pads and made their beds.

Shelter guest Willie Hicklin quickly set up his bedroll and went to snag a couple of magazines from a box the Century Center had provided. He sat on his pad with his back against the wall, reading Time magazine.

“It’s a rule that only 24 guys can stay, because some of the churches don’t have room for more than that,” he said. “If you go up and look, you’ll find some guys still sleeping on the ground. It’s too bad they couldn’t get more of them in here, but there’s not enough space.”

“You have to be on the list to stay here. If you miss three times, you’re off the list, unless you have a good reason. I work two nights a week, and on those nights I can’t get to the bus before it leaves St. Joseph. But because I have proof of employment, I can come in later, when I get off work.”

A few men set up their sleeping spaces in two smaller adjoining activity rooms. One young man, Jae Hawkins, looked for someone to play chess with.

“You want to play?” he said. “Chess is like riding a bike; you don’t ever forget how to play.”

Finding no takers, he borrowed a pen from Norwood and sat down at a table. He began writing a long letter to a friend

back home.

"I'm from Henderson," he said. "I'm an electrician, but Henderson has the highest unemployment rate in the state, and I couldn't find work there. I came here looking for work. This is just my second week in Chapel Hill, but I already have a job, doing electrical work at Kenan Stadium. I'm staying here while I get myself settled."

Gist lined up live entertainment on several of the nights last week. Tuesday night, pianist Adrian Duke took a seat — on an armchair, no piano stool being available — at the piano in the smaller activity room.

"Music eases the soul," one man said.

Duke began to play: blues, jazz, standards. Several men drifted over from the larger activity room, pulling chairs from a stack and settling in to listen.

"In a Sentimental Mood," one man said when Duke finished a number with a flourish. "Is that Count Basie?"

"Duke Ellington," Duke said. "Same royalty, different member. Any requests?"

"Chopin?"

"Oh, man, you caught me with the wrong music book," Duke said. He flipped through sheets of music and launched into a sprightly melody, his fingers leaping across the keys.

"That was nice," the man said, applauding softly. "If I could play like you, they'd never get me away from the piano."

More join the ranks of homeless in Orange County

Precise data on homelessness in Orange County is difficult to come by, but the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service estimates that some 1,500 to 3,000 people in the county are homeless for at least some part of each year.

During IFC's last full program year, which runs from July to July, 1,100 people stayed at the Community House shelter for homeless men.

During the first nine months of the current program year, from July 2003 through March of this year, 1,039 men — 97 percent of the entire total for last year — stayed at Community House.

Because the Community House's operations have been disrupted due to renovations to the old municipal building in which it is normally housed, figures for the remainder of the program year will be inexact. Absent that disruption, IFC Executive Director Chris Moran said, the count for this year would certainly exceed that from last year.

During the 10 months of the program year from July 2003 through April, 194 women and children have lived at IFC's Project Homestart residential facility for single women and women with children. That, too, is a significant increase from last year's totals, Moran said.

A head count conducted by IFC during a single 24-hour period, on Dec. 15, 2003, came up with a total of 253 sheltered and non-sheltered homeless people in and around Chapel Hill.

A recent survey revealed a 216 percent increase over the past year in "doubling up" — two or more families living in a single home. Doubling up, Moran said, is a strong indicator of future homelessness.

"What all of this means is that homelessness is not going away," he said. "The primary cause is a combination of a decrease in affordable rental housing and a decrease in wages. As long as those two trends continue, more individuals and families are going to wind up homeless."

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