

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## A changed community

**After successes at trailer park, ministry helps homeless group**

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They live in the woods off Jefferson Davis Highway.

Five people, two tents. No running water or heat.

They hunt for firewood to keep warm on damp, drizzly days, and they find comfort smoking one cigarette after another.

Their hands are black with soot. Their faces are dirty and tired.

But their Bible is clean.

On a recent afternoon, as the cold rain fell, they held hands and prayed, asking for God's warmth and protection.

"There's nothing wrong with us," one of the women said after the prayer. "We're just homeless."

Cornerstone Assembly of God, a middle-class church about five miles away, can't provide this homeless group of five with permanent shelter, but the church has given them a church family on Sunday mornings.

"They are coming into our house," said Shawn Franco, Cornerstone's community pastor.

Members of the congregation bring hot chocolate and coffee when they visit during the week and shuttle the group to church on the weekends.

"They are making a difference in us," said church member Todd Wilson. "We're making friends."

More than a year ago, Cornerstone began ministering to residents of Shady Hill Trailer Park on Jeff Davis. Recently that ministry has spread throughout this forgotten community.

Members of the congregation said they saw a need -- a place with a reputation for being one of the roughest areas of Chesterfield County -- and a desire to make life better.

In Shady Hill, stray cats run loose, Dumpsters sit a few feet from homes and discarded furniture and children's plastic toys are stacked behind blanket-covered windows. Loud music blares at all hours.

Here, children sometimes go without winter coats, new shoes, coloring books and bikes.

Initially, the church's efforts were met with skepticism. That has changed.

"I think when it first started, a lot of people were thinking they were here for something. Now we know they are just here," said Trisha Reamy, who lives in Trailer 16 at Shady Hill. "They are part of us now."

Inspired to do more, the church decided late last year to establish a trailer at Shady Hill, where they could host after-school programs for children and outreach for adults, including programs for the community's many Spanish-speaking residents.



Roger Loria looks on as Henri Maizels lights a candle during a ceremony that was part of the Holocaust Remembrance Day program -- Yom HaShoah V'HaG'vurah -- at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond.  
DEAN HOFFMEYER/TIMES-DISPATCH

The church trailer opened its doors to the community in December. Next to its official occupancy permit is a homemade sign that reads "This is Holy Ground."

Since then, the ministry has expanded. The residents of Shady Hill are helping others less fortunate, including the homeless group down the road.

"We have been amazed by what God has done," Franco said.

Inside the new trailer in Shady Hill, neighborhood children have hung colorful pictures of butterflies. Games and toys are stacked on the shelves. There's a big, cozy couch, a computer, and tables to sit and eat.

A women's group and a men's group meet at the trailer. Recently, there's been talk of holding country line-dancing lessons there as well as a youth-mentoring program.

The church trailer hasn't changed everything in Shady Hill. Problems still exist.

Reamy, who lives with 10 people in Trailer 16, including her six children and her boyfriend of 10 years, is still dreaming of better things.

"We're getting out," she said.

But so far, she doesn't have another place to go.

On a recent afternoon, Reamy's children barreled through the front door of the church trailer and made a beeline for a plastic picnic table in the game room. They grabbed for puzzles and started coloring.

When asked what he thought of the new trailer, Eric Wells, 8, looked up and said, "It's great. When I come here I get to play with my friends from church."

The comment made Franco and Wilson smile and laugh.

"That's what it's all about," Wilson said. "We're friends."