

"Here's a house that's full of grace everyday"

By Susan Cosio

Enterprise correspondent

Cindy Burger sits in her corner office feeling blessed. It isn't exactly a seventh-story suite, but what used to be a bedroom in a house that is now called "Grace House." It's a place where homeless men and women can get a hot meal and hang out for the afternoon.

The small but tidy house at the corner of Fourth and D streets offers "rest and respite" for those who are struggling with homelessness. Three afternoons a week, Burger and her volunteer staff open the doors of Grace House, and open their hearts to their visitors.

Burger refers to her homeless clients as "guests."

"We provide a loving, encouraging presence," Burger explains. "Grace means meeting people where they are. It's about respecting people and welcoming them as people."

Burger's own life has changed a lot in the past five years. A former junior high school teacher, Burger says God used dreams and circumstances to redirect her.

"As a junior high teacher, I worked with kids who struggled," Burger explains. "But then I began to feel drawn to the stories and struggles of the homeless, and the blessings they brought to me when I encountered them."

Five years ago, Burger started Grace-in-Action, a nonprofit faith-based ministry that serves the unsheltered homeless in Yolo County. The opening of Grace House in June 2004 complemented the local overnight shelter by giving people a place to go in the afternoon.

"Grace House offers an alternative to hanging out downtown or in the parks," explains Jane Mc Laughlin, volunteer office administrator. "Opportunities to rest during the day help people cope with the enormous stress of life without shelter."

Like Burger, McLaughlin is motivated by compassion and faith.

"These are people who are valued by God and deserving of his love," McLaughlin says. "Volunteering at Grace-in-Action is an effective way to love our neighbors as ourselves."

Those who visit Grace House sense the attitude in which they are received. Steve Wyatt is a former guest who warmly refers to Grace House as "Cindy's Place."

"Each of the people who visits is the same in Cindy's eyes," Wyatt says. "Each of them is an individual who deserves to be treated with compassion and dignity and respect. No matter what their life circumstances may be, every single one of them is loved by God."

Another guest says, "I feel I have a place to go when I am frustrated and scared. We all need listening ears and support."

Burger admits her job isn't always easy. Grace-in-Action receives no city or government grant support, so it relies on individual donations and volunteers. Yet Burger says she continually experiences God's provision.

"I started with nothing," Burger explains, "working out of the trunk of my car. But God has totally led, provided for, and worked through this ministry."

Monetary and material donations from the community often come just in time.

"People walk in the door with specific needs," Burger says. "A rain poncho, socks, a sleeping bag ... And then someone from the community walks in offering exactly what is needed. To see the jaws of the people drop when God provides in the moment, that is grace."

Grace-in-Action has received some pretty significant donations.

"Once, I prayed when I couldn't pay the rent," Burger recalls. "Then a woman in the community wrote a check for \$10,000!"

Even the building in which the ministry is housed was made available free of charge by Davis Community Church.

"Our five years of ministry has been a process of growing and outgrowing," Burger explains. "I used to walk past this house and hear the words, 'Write a proposal.' Finally, I approached the church leaders at DCC, and by the grace of God they said yes!"

In addition to food, shelter and clothing, Grace House provides referrals to other community services, individualized goal planning, literacy tutoring and spiritual direction for those who request it.

Jane McLaughlin says the most important things Grace House offers are not material.

"Individuals struggling with homelessness find supportive relationships and receive human dignity and respect at Grace House," she says. "They also find hope and encouragement to make positive changes."

"Being present with people, hearing their stories, witnessing their lives and knowing their names are the most significant aspects of our ministry," Burger adds. "When you really greet them and meet them ... what an unfolding of humanity. Maybe the best of humanity."

Grace-in-Action collaborates with nine community agencies and ten local churches to provide basic needs and services for unsheltered homeless individuals in Yolo County.

Burger smiles as she thinks about diverse denominations partnering together.

"There's just not that big a difference when it comes to loving," she says.

Grace-in-Action continues to be in need of financial support and volunteers. For more information, contact Burger or McLaughlin at 792-1053, or see www.Grace-in-Action.org.

— Reach Susan **Cosio** at religionnews@sbcglobal.net

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