



The Center at Central Park

A Ministry of Birmingham Baptist Association Churches

By Sammie Jo Barstow

Eliza*, an 80-year-old homeless woman who had been wandering the streets in west Birmingham for at least two years now has a place to call home. Grace McGraw, director of the Center at Central Park had offered to minister to Eliza several times, but Eliza wouldn't accept Grace's help. Two weeks before Christmas, Eliza came to the center saying she could no longer sleep on the porch of an abandoned building because of the cold.

Myra Patterson, administrative assistant for the Center, helped Eliza locate her brother who is willing for her to live with him. A Sunday School class from a local church provided clothes for Eliza and is furnishing her bedroom. This winter Eliza will not be suffering from the cold or begging for food.

"You know, the Lord always does so much more than you expect!" said Grace. "Every night when I go home my husband John asks: 'Well, what miracle did God do today?'" Grace always has a story to tell him. "It's so much fun to be His servant and watch Him and just be part of His work."

In the fall of 2008, Central Park Baptist Church in west Birmingham offered to provide a building for ministry in the surrounding community. They were especially interested in reaching school children and senior adults. Leaders at Birmingham Baptist Association immediately saw the opportunity to provide a ministry center similar to M-POWER, an established center in the Woodlawn area of eastern Birmingham.

Grace, a North American Mission Board missionary associate, had been instrumental in establishing M-POWER, and she immediately accepted the challenge of beginning the new ministry at Central Park. But much work had to be done before the center opened. The building had to be thoroughly cleaned, painted and furnished.

In January 2009, Alabama WMU Missions and Ministry Consultant Cynthia White led a group of 100 high school students and leaders from Alabama to work at the center as part of Student Missions Weekend. They spent the weekend carrying out trash, cleaning walls and floors, and painting the building.

During the next several months, crews of volunteers transformed the building from an empty, unused space into a beautiful ministry center that serves hundreds of children and adults. Donations of furniture, which Grace describes as "gorgeous," began flowing into the center. Birmingham Baptist Association, through Cooperative Program funds, bought office furniture and two computers. In September 2009, the center opened its doors to the community.

Responding to the church's request to assist children and senior citizens, the center offers afterschool tutoring for students and a variety of opportunities for seniors including monthly fellowship times complete with food, games and Bible study. GED classes are offered for teens and adults. If clients demonstrate problems with reading, literacy tutors are available.

Part of the long-range vision for the center is to provide Christian Women's Job Corps (CWJC) and Christian Men's Job Corps (CMJC). "My dream would be to move our GED students into those programs before they go out looking for jobs," said Grace. "I am a trained site coordinator for CWJC, and

Jim Branum, volunteer mobilization coordinator, has been trained to coordinate CMJC. All we need is volunteers to fill in the other puzzle pieces.”

Grace recently was overwhelmed by the response to one particular request for help. The Center at Central Park was featured in the “Christmas in August” focus in *GA World* and *The Lad* magazines in which Grace asked for donations of school supplies. “I was amazed at the response!” she said. She received packages from hundreds of GAs and RAs, as well as Women on Mission groups in 13 states. “We’ll be able to give our students all the school supplies they need as well as share with students at M-POWER and the Baptist Children’s Home.”

Every group that meets at the center hears the message of Jesus and receives a Bible. “It’s just understood that that’s what we do,” said Grace. She strongly believes reaching school children with educational tutoring and giving them the Gospel is the answer to many of our society’s problems. “If we can educate them, and if we can teach them about Jesus, then we’re going to see poverty and unemployment and crime decrease. If we can just work on those two issues, we’ll make a huge difference.”

Dan* is a young man Grace first met when she worked at M-POWER and is a great example of Grace’s philosophy on helping children. He was in 8th grade but couldn’t read. He worked with a literacy tutor, graduated, got his driver’s license, and became a Christian. Grace hadn’t heard from him in a couple of years. Recently he came to the Center at Central Park to tell her he was in night school to learn to be an automobile mechanic and was looking for a job. Grace immediately hired him as the custodian at the center.

Alabama WMU is coordinating another opportunity for volunteers to participate in the work of the center. Family Missions Weekend, a Mission Alabama opportunity, is coming up April 16-17, 2010. The weekend begins at WorldSong Missions Place with family worship and fun activities. On Saturday, families will work together at the center along with publicizing the center throughout the community by distributing brochures to homes and businesses. Families, including children age 6 and older, are eligible to attend. The cost is \$45 per person, which includes three meals and lodging. The deadline for registration is April 5th. For registration information, visit www.worldsongretreat.org or call Alabama WMU at 800.264.1225 ext 325.

You can be involved in the ministry at the Center at Central Park through prayer:

- Pray for the community to respond to the ministries of the center.
- Pray for volunteers who can donate time and expertise for the various ministries of the center.
- Pray for churches to continue to give through the Cooperative Program to fund this center and other similar ministries.
- Pray for churches and individuals who will help provide resources for Bibles, GED workbooks, tutoring supplies and other expendable materials.
- Pray for the safety of the workers.

*a pseudonym

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