

National Catholic Rural Life Conference

By Kara Storey

When he was released from prison in September 2009, Jason Wildes had no home, no job and no transportation.

In fact, he should have still been behind bars. A condition of his parole was that Wildes had a place to live, but without that, he would need to finish out the last five years of his sentence for convictions of theft, burglary and corruption of a minor.

“I was stuck in there to finish out my time, even though I had a release because I didn’t have a place to go,” he said.

Enter John Graham and Good Samaritan Home, Inc. Established in rural Greenville, Ohio, in 2001, the nonprofit operates a re-entry home for parolees, transitional housing, a homeless shelter and a non-residential parolee re-entry program, called “Citizen Circle,” all using relationships and faith as a basis to change lives and fight poverty.

“All of our programs are about mentoring relationships that offer long-term changes in broken lives,” Graham said, “in many ways modeled on the apostolic catechumenate, which is the basis of the Christian transformation from the old life to the new life.”

Leap of Faith

A Protestant minister for 12 years, Graham was doing doctoral studies in historic worship, when he came across the early apostolic catechumenate model, where catechumens disciplined someone for three years. His discovery ultimately led him and his wife to join the Catholic Church in 2004, as well as to put their faith in action.

“We made a commitment back in 2001 when we left the Protestant church that we were going to use our house as a way to express our faith,” Graham said.

Originally that expression took the form of opening his own home to Christian men leaving prison. Graham would take up to three men at a time and mentor them for a year.

He soon realized that there wasn’t a great need for Christian parolees in his rural area. While Christian parolees existed, the majority had someplace to go.

However, Graham found out that there were others who had no place to go. Area homeless people would approach him, knowing he had a shelter.

So in 2006, he bought and renovated a deteriorating drug house and turned it into a six-bed homeless shelter.

“Rural communities like to think that we don’t have our problems,” Graham said. “We’ve had people tell us that we don’t have any homeless people, but in the four years we’ve had our shelter going, we’ve had 356 people come through our shelter and almost every one of them is local.”

Ohio poverty

According to a U.S Census Bureau report released in September, “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009,” Ohio has a poverty rate of 13.5 percent based on averages from 2008-2009. That’s three-tenths of a percent lower than the national average at 13.8 percent, and an increase of 1 percent from 12.5 percent during 2006-2007.

While Ohio’s poverty level is just slightly below the national average, the state’s unemployment level is higher than national figures. According to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, the state’s unemployment rate for August was 10.1 percent. The national average was 9.6 percent.

The economic pressure has really hit home for Greenville’s 13,000 people in the last year, Graham said.

“This was a strong farming community with manufacturing plants locally, but over the last 10 years we’ve lost 2,500 factory jobs, -- middle class factory jobs,” he said. “So about 25 percent of our work force lost their jobs. So we’ve been slowly losing that middle class working group.”

Graham believes rural areas suffer from the same problems as urban ones do. The biggest difference being rural areas lack resources cities have, such as transportation.

“When the only job you can find is 25 miles away and you don’t have a car, you can’t get there,” Graham said, adding that many of the poor don’t have drivers’ licenses. “Even if it’s only five miles away, you can’t get there.”

Growing dream

Although Graham and his wife opened a homeless shelter, they never gave up on the original dream to help parolees. Around the same time the shelter opened, they started a non-residential parolee mentoring program with the Ohio Department of Corrections, called “Citizen Circle.” The program, which is supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development,

uses about 30 mentors from the community, people Graham calls “grandmas and grandpas,” who share their faith through acts of kindness with the parolees.

“We deal with re-entry issues, like help finding a job, help with housing and help with anything that is a barrier to getting back on your feet after prison,” Graham said.

For parole officer Chris Niekamp, Citizen Circle is a tool he can use for offenders.

“Without it some offenders would struggle with finding employment, housing, and just miss out on having positive peers or mentors in their life,” he said.

The Circle’s success is based largely on the fact that offenders feel that they’re cared for by the mentors, Niekamp said.

Graham agrees.

“None of it works without mentors because programs won’t change people,” he said. “People change people. That’s the biblical model of discipleship.”

Mentors use biblical hospitality, which Graham said means to “love the stranger.”

“Hospitality has been the hallmark of the biblical culture for the past 4,000 years,” he said. “We feel that in our western culture, we’ve lost that. What we want to do is use the biblical model in a practical way to help the least of these in our community, so mentoring is what we do.”

Continued growth

The Grahams didn’t stop there. In 2007 they developed a residential program for parolees, like Wildes, who have no place to go. Graham said that 29,000 people get released from prison in Ohio every year and about 10 percent are homeless.

So they bought and renovated another house with six beds to serve as a re-entry shelter for men. To qualify, men must be homeless and be low risk – not based on crime, but on prison performance. Then Good Samaritan Home reviews their applications. In most cases, Graham said, if the parole department recommends someone, they take him. Parolees, who’ve committed anything from drug offenses, to burglaries, to sex offenses and violent crimes, stay an average of 90 days.

“It was a real life-changing [experience],” said Wildes, who now has his own apartment and works as a chef thanks to Good Samaritan Home. “I never thought people cared that much to help people who were in prison. It really opened my eyes to a lot of people.”

For someone who lost his parents years ago, Wildes said he'd never had people there for him like the mentors were.

"They're willing to sit down and talk to you all the time," he said. "They give you advice, but don't tell you what to do. I could tell them about financial issues or apartment living issues or job hunting issues."

In the past three years, 80 men have been through the Citizen Circle program and another 78 have been through the re-entry shelter. Although Graham receives pressure from community members who are concerned that he's importing crime to their area, he points out that the recidivism rate at Good Samaritan Home is 2 percent, while the national rate is closer to 70 percent.

"When someone is being supported and mentored, he's more safe, not less safe," he said. "But, it's hard to convince people with facts when they're thinking with emotions."

Greater need

Even once someone from the re-entry or homeless shelters finds a job, Graham found that often times it's not enough for him to live independently, or in the case of felons, they don't meet renters' standards. That's why Graham purchased two additional houses to serve as transitional housing for men leaving either of the two programs. The homes are set up in boarding-house style with four men sharing a home at a time. They're fully furnished, including kitchenware, and come with basic cable and garbage pickup.

Mentors are still a part of the transitional housing program.

"They can stay for over a year at an extremely affordable rate, but it's not free," he said. "We want to teach them how to do money management, budgeting and how to be responsible."

Funding

When Graham left the Protestant church back in 2001, that also meant he left his livelihood. He received no salary for the next five years and so Good Samaritan Home relied on donations, and still does.

While the community hasn't always been the most supportive, Graham's parish, St. Mary Catholic Church, has, he said. Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr, Archbishop of Cincinnati, has even visited and interacted with the parolees.

The larger Church has also helped out Citizen Circle. Though the CCHD grant is small, Graham said, it still helps.

“The Church has been the only one to step up and support this Citizen Circle program because they realize that we have an obligation to help the prisoners when they come home,” he said.

Graham said that he couldn’t have imagined that nine years after starting a non profit out of his home, today he’d have five houses.

Graham doesn’t look at it as something he’s doing for the poor and least among him, but rather as something he’s doing for God.

“We use housing as a way to express our faith, and that is why I think God has blessed us with all of this,” he said. “We never saw how it would happen, but the money has always been there because the need has always been there.”