
Faith & Values

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Turning lives around

Isaiah House gets to heart of matter

By Carlos Dawson

GUEST COLUMNIST

If you think miracles can happen on 34th street at this time of year, take a trip to 2415 Mount Salem Road in Hustonville, 20 minutes from Danville.

There you will find the Isaiah House, a faith-based, non-profit drug- and alcohol-recovery center that currently houses 13 men. The story of the home's creation and survival is one of inspiration, proof that God never gives up on us and that He takes the bad of our lives and uses it for good.

In the summer of 1999, Mark LaPalme and his wife, Tammy, started the mission -- with absolutely no financial backing -- in their three-bedroom home in Danville. LaPalme was inspired by reading Isaiah 58:1-14, which offers hope for the "oppressed" or marginalized -- the poor, the homeless and the hungry. Mark quit his job cleaning windows to open what the couple thought would be just a homeless shelter. Plans soon changed, and the center evolved into a drug rehabilitation program.

Mark knew about drug addiction firsthand. He had abused cocaine, marijuana, pills, and alcohol for more than 24 years. He's now been sober for more than eight years.

And so he took his vision and his faith and put them into action.

The couple began by helping 15 guys, driving them to work, doctor visits, court appointments, church and anywhere else they needed to go. Mark would often wake up at 4 a.m. and go to bed at 1 a.m.

But the commitment didn't stop there.

With Tammy suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, the couple survived on her disability income -- \$900 a month. At one point, they were broke seven days after the check arrived.

So they prayed. They trusted God. And they prayed some more.

And out of nowhere a man called and offered to take Mark and his family out to dinner. LaPalme told the man about his new, extended family of 19. The man took all 19 residents out to eat, and then gave them \$1,000 to help the mission. When they returned home, the LaPalmes discovered a local pastor had lined the stairs outside their home with grocery bags and had left a \$170 check in their van.

"God knows what we need, and he provides," Mark said.

The provision has continued over the years.

The program now features six full-time paid staff members, one full-time resident trustee, three paid part-time staff members, one full-time volunteer and several part-time volunteers.

The new facility will be an addition to the 4,500-square-foot mansion donated by Ed and Alice Isaacs of Maryland that the group moved into in 2001.

In five years, the center has assisted more than 300 men.

Nine churches and 23 individual sponsors support the program. Many of the men cannot afford to pay the recovery program fees -- \$8,900 a year for each man. In addition, the program does not allow the men to be employed for about three months, and they rely on the center for their basic needs during that time, Mark says.

With financial support, the Isaiah House provides men with testing for drugs, alcohol and tobacco; a faith-based 12-step program; individual counseling; support groups; General Educational Development test training; job placement; financial training; discipleship; structured Bible study and prayer; transportation; meals; anger-management classes; medical checkups and practical skills training.

The program has transformed the lives of many of the men who complete the one-year program. To date, 92 percent of the graduates are drug- and alcohol-free and 77 percent have never had a relapse, according to a survey by the program. The program includes a five-year after-care system that requires graduates to maintain contact with the center for 90 days, then once a month thereafter.

Jim Fletcher, the center's director of continuum care and relations, makes sure each graduate has a church membership, attends a support group, maintains a job and has a safe place to live.

The center's efforts have brought it national attention. The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids, Mich., named the Isaiah House the best program in Kentucky for three consecutive years, and one of the top 20 programs in

the United States in 2006.

The success stories are plentiful.

Take Fletcher, a New Orleans native. He says the program helped him identify the issues that led to his drug use. He lost his mother as a teenager. Ironically, she was hit by a drunken driver. In order to deal with the pain, he turned to drugs. For 32 years, cocaine was Fletcher's drug of choice. When he couldn't afford it, he found his high with alcohol and speed. The addiction destroyed his relationships with his friends and family. He didn't even speak to his family for eight years, and his own father wrote "him off as dead."

Now, his life is completely different.

He's been clean for 61/2 years. He recently joined Cornerstone Assemblies of God Church in Danville and married Trina Taylor on Sept. 8. He's now financially stable, and fulfilling his passion for helping others by sharing his testimony with the men in the program.

In June, Scott Goldy enrolled in the program after his mother's friend found a pamphlet on the ground at Ichthus. He was hooked on OxyContin and prescription drugs and even turned to stealing money and pawning items from his family to maintain his habit.

"God, counseling and brotherhood" are the three words he uses to describe his time in the center. The Waynesville native said the program is more of a "spiritual rehab."

B.J. Moore agrees. He abused methadone, pain pills, alcohol and "downers" or depressants to alleviate emotional and physical anxiety.

He says he was "on the road to hell," and like many trapped in addiction, his torment affected his family.

"I kept breaking their hearts," he said.

During his first five months in the Isaiah House, he said he has developed a "new hunger" for reading the Bible. Through the center's curriculum, he's also learning cooking, budgeting and other skills.

He believes that God has "a special work for me."

One of Moore's instructors, Mike Mullins, volunteers 20 to 30 hours a week at the center, holding Bible studies, financial workshops and carpentry and construction classes. Mullins, now the Isaiah House administrative board president, said his life has been touched witnessing the restoration and reconciling of families.

"It's evidence of what Christ can do," he said.

Dr. Larry Thompson, the staff's pastoral counselor and a retired pastor, who used to have a street ministry in Connecticut, said men who graduate from the program become new people.

"I see men come from the world are strung out and see the Lord change the mind, heart and behavior," he said.

But Mark LaPalme says the success has not come easy. For one thing, he's had to battle public and church perception of the ministry. At one point, LaPalme was arrested, fined \$8,500 and placed on probation for two years for running an unlicensed halfway house. He said he was unaware that he needed a license.

At times, he didn't get any support from local churches.

"Religion can be poison," he said. "We still have churches that we are not welcomed at. They preach grace (but) they expect the blind, bound man to pick himself up by the bootstraps."

Still, LaPalme has remained encouraged and positive.

"Whenever the going gets hard, and it does often, that's when I realize that I have to let God be God," he said. "When I let him be that and control things in my life and this ministry, it all works out."

He looks forward to the upcoming expansion.

In the future, he hopes to be able to include residents' wives in the center's programs for men. Eventually, he hopes to run a separate housing program for addicted women and their children.

With more miracles and answered prayers to come, Mark and his staff desire the best program to help those oppressed by addiction.

"We want to run the most excellent recovery centers in the country."

For more information, contact Mark LaPalme at (606) 346-9868, mark@isaiah-house.org or voiceinthewilderness@msn.com.

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Residents and staff members of Isaiah House prayed before having dinner of spaghetti, meat sauce and rolls last month. The Isaiah House in Hustonville is a drug- and alcohol-rehabilitation treatment center that has 13 residents in the program. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait



Residents arrived recently to Isaiah House for a day of work and counseling at the drug- and alcohol-rehabilitation center. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait



Mark LaPalme is founder and director of the Isaiah House and is trying to establish another drug rehab center. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait



From left, Zach Lowe, 22, of Winchester, Scott Goldy, 26, of Owingsville, and Nathan Grace, 27, of Bardstown, listened to Barry Blackburn, 39, of Ashland play a song before dinner. Blackburn said he came to the center to get direction after becoming addicted to pain medication. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait



The Isaiah House operates out of a 4,500-square-foot home that was donated by Ed and Alice Isaac of Maryland. It has a full-time paid staff of six. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait



Resident Kyle Oliver, 20, flipped through his billfold, which included letters and a picture of his daughter. Photo by Gabriel B. Tait