

The Power of One Room In The Inn

West End UMC Opportunity

“What can I do? I’m only one person!” In the face of a daunting social problem like homelessness, many people feel overwhelmed and turn away in despair. But here in Nashville in 1985 one person took peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches to a cluster of homeless people seeking shelter against the cold in a church parking lot and invited them in. That one-person act of kindness was the start of Room In The Inn.

From the first of November through the end of March each year, West End United Methodist Church hosts 12 homeless men every Wednesday night, providing them safe overnight shelter, warm meals, and a grace-filled welcome. Across Nashville and some of the neighboring communities, 200 congregations step up and provide over 31,000 warm beds a year seven nights every week during the coldest months.

Kay Gray, past coordinator of West End’s part in the RITI program and frequent host, describes a typical Wednesday. A volunteer drives the church van to pick up “our” guys at Room In The Inn’s downtown Campus where they have received their host congregation

assignment. Meanwhile back at the church in the lower-level kitchen, other volunteers are bringing in a nutritious hot meal and preparing to serve it. Still other volunteers are nearby making the beds (mattresses on the floor) and laying out towels, so those who choose can take showers.

When the men arrive, they are tired. These guys are working, yet they are not making enough money to afford housing at this point. Supper begins with a prayer, sometimes offered by a guest. After they have been served, the volunteers get food too and sit with the guests

in fellowship. After dinner, as volunteers clean up, sometimes with help from guests who have offered, the men may take showers, visit West End’s clothes closet, do laundry, read, watch TV, or simply fall asleep. Two volunteers stay overnight.

Morning comes early: 4:45 a.m. Volunteers have previously prepared the fixin’s for breakfast so that the final preparation doesn’t take long. The men need to be back the next day at the downtown Campus so they can get to their jobs.

Being a volunteer doesn’t require training. Usually the group will include both persons who are experienced as well as newbies. Anyone who has ever hosted any occasion will quickly feel comfortable. The only caution



A children’s Sunday School class volunteers to serve dinner for our RITI guests.



WE Serve is an effort to help our congregation get to know one another, become acquainted with organizations West End UMC supports in Nashville, and be encouraged to volunteer. We hope you’ll listen to the interviews (hosted at westendumc.org/WEServe), and be inspired to pray for, give to, and volunteer at these ministries that are also spreading God’s love.

is to be sensitive to the guests’ perspectives, especially in conversation. No one wants to feel interrogated, and no one wants to be reminded of what you have that he doesn’t. Still, conversation flows easily, and volunteers regularly report that they are the ones blessed by the experience.

Room In The Inn’s downtown Campus grew out of the initial winter shelter efforts, opened in 1995, and in 2010 moved to 45,000 square foot facility, where they support the whole person through programs that emphasize health, education, self-help, employment, recuperative care, and long-term housing, in addition to providing shelter from the cold through the hospitality of area faith groups.

Room In The Inn’s core values are familiar to Christ-followers: “Through the power of spirituality and the practice of love, we provide hospitality with a respect that offers hope in a community of non-violence.”

What started when one person gave in to God’s call rather than to despair has now become an effective means of God’s grace for both persons experiencing homelessness and for volunteers extending hospitality. Having grown from one congregation to nearly 200 in Nashville alone, Room In The Inn has also been the model for similar programs in 37 other cities. When one person steps out in faith—with the power of The One—lives are transformed.

For more information about Room In The Inn and additional volunteer opportunities

- ♦ Talk with Rev. Kay Gray or listen to Ed Zinkiewicz’s 18-minute interview with her at westendumc.org/WEServe.
- ♦ Talk with Rev. Stacey Harwell-Dye, who coordinates volunteers, or with Susan Brown, who coordinates the clothes closet.
- ♦ Visit Room In The Inn’s website to see the wide array of opportunities for volunteers and corporate partners - roomintheinn.org.

