

Rescue Mission reshapes the meaning of community

By Anita Rao

Staff Writer

Although he now lives only five blocks from the neighborhood where he grew up, 53-year-old Jacob Nelson, a Durham Rescue Mission resident, said that when he runs into his former neighbors they hardly recognize him.

He still shops at the same grocery store and walks by the same street corners as he did in his youth, but Nelson said his time at the mission has really changed his relationship to this community.

"I used to be the kind of person who made this neighborhood bad," Nelson said. "I never felt like anyone wanted me around."

While struggling with alcohol and drug addictions, Nelson first went to the Durham Rescue Mission for five months in 1996. After losing his wife, mother, brother and sister-in-law to cancer in one and a half years and relapsing into addiction, Nelson returned to the mission in 2009 and entered its twelve-month Victory Program.

After living for one week in the main building under strict supervision, men move into houses on the mission's campus with house managers and 9 p.m. curfews. All men must spend 40 hours each week working or in class.

If they choose to enter the Victory Program, like Nelson did, the men have more regimented schedules but greater access to training and opportunities. During the first six months they take classes in subjects like addiction management, Christian discipleship and computer literacy. During the second sixth months they develop

specific job skills.

Co-founder Ernie Mills said the program is an important part of the mission's holistic approach.

"We are a homeless shelter, but we are so much more than a homeless shelter," Mills said. "We also want to help people get stabilized and overcome their addictions."

Nelson officially completed the program in December 2009, and although he received a number of culinary job offers, he opted to stay working at the mission.

"It's not about the money," he said. "It's about staying here so that I can be a resource and testimony to the next person that walks in the door."

The mission has both a men's campus and a women's campus and houses more than 40 percent of Durham's homeless population.

But for both the founders and residents, addressing homelessness is only one part of the mission's work. The mission also hosts four major community events each year to develop a relationship with the wider Durham community.

Through an annual Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas party, Easter celebration and back-to-school backpack drive, Mills said the mission hopes to fulfill the needs of Durham residents living in poverty and address stigma about Northeast Central Durham.

"There are so many people who used to think that Northeast Central Durham was the last place they wanted to be," Mills said. But when hundreds of volunteers come together to work with mission residents and community members, he said people see the poten-



Staff photo by Anita Rao

Jacob Nelson works as the assistant volunteer coordinator in the men's division of the Durham Rescue Mission. He chose to take this position in April 2009.

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tial for positive change.

Currently the mission has to host all events outdoors because of its limited space.

However, on Jan. 18, the mission received an \$800,000 grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta. The grant brings the mission two-thirds of the way toward its fundraising goal to build the Center for Hope, a new facility on the men's campus, which will provide more space for housing, eating and community events.

The expansion is the first part of a multiphase plan to broaden the mission's services, but some tension surrounds the future expansion. Local developers' plans to expand a historic property district near Golden Belt conflict with some of the mission's expansion plans in the same area.

Earl Phillips, assistant director for community engagement with Durham's Neighborhood Improvement Services, said he thinks the outcome of these negotiations will clear up and a compromise will be reached.

"Further developing the Durham Rescue Mission and maintaining it as an integral part of positive new growth enhances everything we are trying to do from a revitalization standpoint," Phillips said.

Despite the precise logistics of expansion, Phillips said most would agree that the mission is satisfying a need unmet by others in this area. Nelson also described the mission as a unique place of refuge in this community.

"This is the first time in years somebody has asked me to stay around," Nelson said.