

Realtor reaches out to help homeless

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Linda Brown talks to people Feb. 13 at the Gathering Tree, which offers a place for homeless people to go in the evenings. / Bruce E. Stidham/For the News-Leader

Want to help?

The Gathering Tree, 215 S. Campbell Ave., is a nonprofit charitable organization that provides shelter, meals, coffee and conversation in a safe space to Springfield's homeless population. Hours are 5-8 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; and 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday. Donations may be mailed to The Gathering Tree, PO Box 2364, Springfield, MO, 65801 or made online at thegatheringtree.net.

The thread of helping people is wound throughout the story of Linda Brown's life.

First, she helped people heal as a registered nurse. After retirement, she launched a second career in real estate, helping people find new homes.

"I love it," she says of her seven-year career as an agent at Carol Jones Realtors. "I think partly my nursing helped because I love people, I love taking care of people and that's how I've enjoyed my business. I've made a lot of new friends. It's just been a good transition for me."

Still, Brown felt she had more to offer. Now she's turned her efforts to the homeless, providing them a safe place to spend their evenings and get a nourishing meal.

"About four years ago (a small group of friends from church) decided that we were tired of sitting around talking about our ailments and our own problems and needed to get out and do something," Brown recalls.

Brown and her husband live in a downtown loft and thought it would be great to create a space nearby where people who are homeless could grab a cup of coffee and have a place to hang out in the evenings.

The result is The Gathering Tree, a place that offers shelter and meals to the homeless. "We started out one night a week and our dream, our vision, was to have this place open every evening of the week so they know they have a place to go every evening. We're now up to five evenings a week," Brown says.

"We hang out with them and build relationships. Now we offer them a meal and just a safe place. What we found was they have a place to go usually during the day and they have a place to go at night, whether that's a shelter or a campsite or whatever, but they don't have a place to go in the evening," she says.

The Gathering Tree, rooted in faith but affiliated with no specific denomination, provides such a place.

Brown recently was recognized for her efforts when the Missouri Realtors named her the recipient of the Realtors 2013 Good Neighbor Award. The award brought with it a \$2,500 grant for The Gathering Tree.

“I was shocked when they called and said, ‘You are the winner,’” Brown says. She was further touched when, at the award ceremony, envelopes for The Gathering Tree were given out to the audience.

“We had an additional \$3,500 from these Realtors,” Brown says. “We walked away with about \$6,000. We’re still getting envelopes.”

While the Browns started The Gathering Tree with their own money, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit hopes to be self-sustainable in the near future.

Brown and the other volunteers are driven to make it work because they see the good it does.

“We started out thinking we were going to serve these people, but it’s been reversed because they wound up serving us. It’s been a wonderful journey,” she says.

The building has been leased for a year and Brown is hopeful other groups, businesses and individuals in Springfield will step up to help with volunteer time and donations.

Community support has been tremendous, Brown says. Different groups sponsor different days. “We cannot cook in the building. We have to bring our food in, and so we get people to bring food. Tomorrow night is Carol Jones night and we call it meatloaf mania. They make meatloaves. Supreme Bakery gives goods they don’t sell that day. We get sheet cakes from June’s Cakery. We get bread that wasn’t sold from Artisan’s Oven,” Brown says, naming just a few of the groups and businesses that support The Gathering Tree.

“We want (the homeless) to have the finest because they don’t get it anywhere. People snub them and don’t even acknowledge they exist,” she says.

Those who ignore the homeless are missing out, Brown says.

“I think a lot of people have a fear of doing that because they are fearful of not knowing what these people are like or whatever and it’s just so totally different ... These people are awesome people. Once you get to know their stories, you understand where they’re coming from. There are some mental issues, addictions, but we have some good stories,” Brown says. “One veteran will graduate from Missouri State University this next semester with a degree in journalism. He lived in a camp for two and a half years.”

Brown says the diversity of the people who volunteer and find fellowship there is reflected in the organization’s name.

“Our symbol is a tree because we feel like God is the roots and the trunk of the tree and all of us

are the branches. Some are different shapes, some have different leaves ... together we make a beautiful tree," she says.