

Facilitator — February/March 2016



Making the Journey Together

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The doors at The Journey Home, an outreach center that serves the homeless and underserved population in Murfreesboro, Tenn., open every day at 6 a.m. Most mornings, there are already people waiting outside to have a hot meal in the Community Cafe, use the shower and restroom facilities and the washers and dryers, pick up clothes and hygiene products from the Clothes Closet, or simply have a warm and safe place to spend the day.

Throughout the week, the dedicated staff and volunteers serve breakfast, lunch and dinner; help clients with job searches and resumes; teach bible study, self-esteem and conflict resolution programs; and provide long-term transitional shelter in the facility's 21 apartment homes. More than 100 people are served each day.

There's also a 2-acre vegetable garden that provides much of the organization's produce. It gives those with limited incomes access to organic whole foods.

The organization is led by the belief that change happens through building relationships and leveraging these practical day-to-day resources to help get people back on their feet.

According to Scott Foster, Executive Director and Chairman of The Journey Home, a common thread that runs through each of the clients is that they have lost their sense of value.

"In many subtle ways, our job is to reinforce that they do have value, a choice and the ability for self-determination," he said.

One of these subtle ways is by providing table service for meals. Instead of sending clients through a cafeteria line for food, they are waited on by a volunteer server, just like in a restaurant.

Foster says this style of service has a positive impact on both the clients and the servers.

"It relates the idea that there is no delineation between us and them," he said. "It creates a sense of community and is a reminder that everyone is valuable."

A Growing Need

Since The Journey Home opened nearly a decade ago, Foster said the staff and volunteers have been increasingly limited with their resources for cooking, cleaning and creating dining experiences for their clients. The 8,000-square-foot facility is 70 years old, and the equipment could not keep up with the demand.

"It's always been a stretch to produce the quality and quantity of food that we wanted to," Foster said. "Cleanliness and sanitation were issues for us, too."

They have a full commercial-grade kitchen, but it had a small chest freezer, a very small and old dishwasher that would constantly break down, and old wooden cabinets that absorbed moisture and posed pest problems.

"The dishwasher slowed them down," said Gordon Bruner, Owner of VMC Facilities. "It could only wash one rack of dishes at a time, and they didn't have dish tables or draining boards either."

Despite the limited space and resources, The Journey Home managed to serve 45,000 meals to clients last year.

When Foster learned about the RFMA Gives opportunity, he said it felt like God was putting a door in front of him. He read about RFMA, the past RFMA Gives projects and its members, and he felt confident this opportunity was something that could greatly benefit the homeless population in the county.

Others also recognized the potential but didn't think they would be lucky enough to be selected.

"I thought there was no way we'd be chosen because we're a relatively new and small organization," said Holly Westlund, a special education teacher who has volunteered with The Journey Home for 10 years and has served on the Board of Directors for six years. "We have a limited budget to promote ourselves and our cause, and there are so many other great organizations in the Nashville area to compete with."

The 2016 RFMA Gives Co-Chairs, Bruner and Jim Roeger, Facilities Manager at Darden Restaurants, along with Jeff Dover,

Facilities Resource Manager at RFMA, toured the facility with Foster and were moved by their work and mission.

"They are providing a lot of services for the community in a small space, and it impressed me," Roeger said.

For all that The Journey Home does and inspires to do, it was chosen as the 2016 RFMA Gives recipient.

"I was stunned to find out we were chosen because it's such a big gift for an organization as small as us," Westlund said.

Getting to Work

When it was time to create the wish list, Foster, Roeger, Bruner and Dover walked through the facility, identifying all the areas RFMA Gives could help improve. They talked about changing the workflow in the kitchen, adding a dish machine, replacing the wooden cabinetry, expanding food storage by installing a walk-in freezer, enlarging the dining area and upgrading the restrooms.

"What they needed fit our wheelhouse," Bruner said. "There were lots of opportunities to help in the kitchen and dining room, and that's where RFMA goes above and beyond the call of duty."

They soon realized the membership could also help with other areas that needed work. The final plan was to renovate the entire facility: the kitchen, dining area, lobby, offices, restrooms, basement and parking lot. Additionally, the facility would receive new lighting, a new roof and a new HVAC system.

"I was not involved with RFMA Gives until this year," Roeger said. "When my boss asked if I would be interested in helping with RFMA Gives, I said, 'Sure,' thinking I can put a paintbrush in my hands and paint. I had no idea he wanted me to Co-Chair it. It felt daunting. But after seeing what the RFMA Gives members did for ECTLC in San Diego last year, I felt like with a team like that behind me, I couldn't fail."

Bruner, who is based in Knoxville, Tenn., is deeply involved with RFMA Gives and was excited to have a project in his home state.

From RFMA's home office in Plano, Texas, Dover coordinated the donations from RFMA members, who once again opened their hearts to another deserving organization.

"Within a month of posting our needs, 90 percent of the projects were spoken for," he said. "We received so many offers that I had to turn people away. Our membership is so generous every year. It's amazing."

Starting Small

Before the major renovations began, the Volunteer Day, scheduled for September 12, 2015, would address the smaller projects. As the day neared, the reality of all the work weighed on Foster's mind.

"We were very excited but also anxious and nervous," he said.

"You don't know what you're getting into. There was going to be tremendous amount of work going on and a large number of people flying in to be onsite, so you don't know how its all going to work in such a small space."

To complicate matters, it had rained heavily the day before, and everyone was hoping for a dry workday since much of the work was exterior.

Not only did the rain hold off on Saturday, it was a perfect 70-degree day.

"I was confident God was going to provide us with a good day to work," Foster said.

Coordinating the efforts of more than 100 volunteers in a small facility for one busy workday was a challenge. To ensure a high level of efficiency, Roeger and Bruner identified nine major tasks and secured a project leader to manage each one:

- ◆ Keith Moore, US Exterior: Exterior painting
- ◆ Brian Foster, The Paint Folks: First floor interior painting
- ◆ Jack McNertney, CCRPF, Red Lobster: Office remodel
- ◆ Tommy Guerra, Water Heater Man: Various repair projects
- ◆ John Getha, Wendy's: Second floor office expansions and painting

- ◆ Patrick Hentzen, KFC: Landscaping
- ◆ Brianne Rechy, Dwyer Service Group: Organization of the Clothes Closet
- ◆ Tim Corcoran, Jack in the 'Box: Dining room furniture installation and painting
- ◆ Craig Buck, Chipotle: Rebuilding of the back staircase

All day, the volunteers worked hard. When one task was finished or if a task was not ready to begin, they would find another area they could help with in the meantime.

"Some of our volunteers had extra time, so they took it upon themselves to clean the refrigeration coils," Roeger said. "That wasn't even on the list. Seeing the volunteers doing things like that all day blew me away."

The exterior painters started their day at 4 a.m., completing the work before the official start time of 8 a.m. The second floor offices were completely remodeled with new carpet, new paint and new partitions, all in one day.

A team from Chipotle rebuilt the back stairs to make them ADA compliant. They worked from 8 a.m. until midnight and then came back Sunday morning for another four hours to complete the work.

"The project leaders were rock stars," Roeger said. "They made my job easier because of the advanced planning. I spent a lot of time walking up to each project leader, asking them if they needed anything and answering questions about scope, but they fielded a lot of those questions themselves."

Roeger is quick to credit others, but he also treated this project as a labor of love. He and his wife drove five hours to pick up dining tables from a closed Darden restaurant in St. Louis, Mo., and dining chairs from Chattanooga, Tenn.

Shortly after 5 p.m. when the workday ended, it started to rain.

"God has a sense of humor," Roeger said. "It didn't rain until literally 10 minutes after we put the last paintbrush down."

Then, a double rainbow appeared over the building.

"It was like He was saying to everyone, 'I got your back. Thank you for what you did,'" Roeger said.

It All Comes Together

With the smaller projects completed, the major renovations began and continued through January 2016.

RFMA members provided and installed a commercial dish machine, a walk-in freezer and stainless-steel prep tables for the kitchen. Bruner's team cut a new pass-through window from the dining area to the kitchen. New LED lighting, a new roof and a new HVAC unit were installed. The waiting and dining areas were expanded. The restrooms were remodeled. The parking lot was repaired, sealed and striped.

As the work progressed, Foster's anxieties disappeared.

"They bent over backward so we would not miss a lick," he said. "We didn't miss serving one meal due to the construction or renovation. The shower/hygiene program and the office were never shut down. Volunteers worked nights and weekends and were as committed as we were not to interrupt services while work was going on. I was overwhelmed by their flexibility and willingness to put our needs first."

Foster also was offered a new state-of-the art LED sign from US-1 Sign Service.

"When our volunteers came home, they shared with us what a great organization The Journey Home was," said Bill Ackerman, National Sales Executive at US-1 Sign Service. "I saw the pictures of all the wonderful improvements, and I thought they needed a nice, new, shiny sign for all the community to see."

"We never even thought about having a new sign, but they said they could take care of it for us," Foster said.

"The energy cost will be almost nothing to operate; we'll also give him a five-year warranty, but even after that, Scott won't have to worry about it because it'll last 20 years without maintenance," Ackerman added.

The renovated facility allows the staff and volunteers to focus more on the clients. It is cleaner and more spacious, and the staff and volunteers can work more efficiently in the space.

“We can now serve more clients, and our volunteers can focus more on delivering personal service,” Foster said. “The walk-in freezer allows us to accept more bulk food donations; the dish machine works like it’s supposed to and not breaking down every other week; and we no longer have to spend valuable time dealing with roof leaks—mopping, putting buckets under drips, emptying the buckets, replacing ceiling tiles and cleaning. This allows us to focus on what we came here to do: provide resources to clients. It makes our life easier.”

“We were totally shocked and overwhelmed with the generosity of all the volunteers who came from different states,” added Geneva Poss, Outreach Director of The Journey Home. “It was very heartwarming. Tears came to people’s eyes when they saw how much work was being done. It is now a beautiful place for our clients.”

RFMA Gives didn’t just renovate a facility. Its members showed The Journey Home’s clients that people, even strangers, care about them, they are important and they matter.

“This project allows us to show the dignity we have for our clients,” Poss said. “We can see that it has changed their attitude, which is what we seek to accomplish. A man told me it made him feel special. Another lady asked, ‘Why would you want to do all this for us?’ ‘Because we care; everyone is deserving of this,’ I told her. These comments made us feel proud.”

During the renovations, the clients’ excitement and gratefulness were apparent.

“When I was on site, I saw the joy the clients had for what RFMA—not me, but RFMA—is doing for them,” Bruner said. “Every time I was there, people would thank me.”

Foster has big plans for The Journey Home’s future, and RFMA Gives has provided a strong foundation for him to build on.

“Our organization has always been about our community coming together to help itself,” he said. “We will continue to recruit additional services, such as health, mental health, counseling, employment, housing and emergency shelter. We are constantly trying to increase our capacity to help. Our hope is to grow The Journey Home and partner with other community agencies to take services to a whole new level.”

Giving Back

Anyone who has served RFMA Gives knows that they get back as much as they give. They get involved not only because it’s a worthy cause but also because they feel so fortunate in life and are compelled to give back.

“The Journey Home is doing yeoman’s work,” said Danny Koontz, Vice President/ Director of Operations at VMC Facilities Service and Construction, who secured the ThermalKool walk-in freezer. “All we’re doing is helping with equipment and labor so that they can continue doing their good work.”

“I’ve always had a heart for those in need,” Roeger said. “I get my satisfaction from being able to give back because I am so blessed.”

Bruner identifies with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous quote about success: “To leave the world a bit better...To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

“RFMA Gives has given people the opportunity to truly succeed by making people’s lives better and making a difference in the community,” he said. “What kind hearts have been able to accomplish has been phenomenal. It’s heartwarming to see how many people want to be a part of something that makes the world better.”

He said being involved in RFMA Gives has changed him.

“There’s no way something like this can’t change you,” he said. “When you become part of the process and you’re there making a difference, it changes you on the inside. You become more aware of the struggles of a lot of people in this country, and it opens your heart and makes you want to do more to help. I’ll stay involved with RFMA Gives as long as they let me.”

In its sixth year, RFMA Gives continues to leave its mark across the country. As the program progresses, more food-related charitable organizations will be empowered to better serve its communities, which will improve the lives of thousands of people.

“The generosity and dedication of our member volunteers and donors through RFMA Gives continues to touch my heart every year,” said Tracy Tomson, RFMA Executive Director. “It was our belief when we started RFMA Gives in 2010 that most people make an effort to give back and serve their own communities in their private lives. So, we wanted to create a way for them to give back through RFMA that would enhance their member experience and help them build relationships through their shared commitment of serving others. And with six successful projects now under our belt, it is clear that is exactly what is happening.”