

# EVERY DAY MEANS *Salvation*

The Washington Street Mission provides  
spiritual strength for those in need



Lorraine Beatty closes the mission for the night.

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The pink-as-a-gladiolus sign in the fussy, century-old gilded frame bellows the word of God so mightily you can almost hear it: "NOW IS THE DAY OF SALVATION." At Washington Street Mission, every day means salvation.

Here, amidst the gritty, northern sprawl of downtown, in a squat red-brick building embellished with wrought-iron grillwork and Biblical admonitions, the poor and the desperate abound: An elderly coal miner, with manila-yellow eyes and trembling hands, huddles in a burgundy coat despite the

90 degrees. He devours day-old doughnuts and coffee with the voracious appetite of a man who hasn't seen a hot meal for days.

A middle age secretary spent a homeless winter with her teenage son after a fire and emergency back surgery left her broke.

"It was the first time in my life I couldn't provide for my child," she says. "I was petrified."

A fundamentalist minister who recently suffered a blood clot in his brain and faces a \$93,000 medical bill, wanders in with his four children. Shyly, he asks for clothes. Does he need anything for himself, a suit, maybe?

The minister sighs and slowly shakes his head, rocking a diapered, shirtless baby in his arms.

"The kids, they come first."

Since 1910, when a group of prominent Christian businessmen opened Washington Street Mission in downtown's rollicking levee district, the mission has offered comfort and the Good Book to Springfield's poor and indigent.

Though a century has wrought change in services and clientele, the basic philosophy remains intact: If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

"In some ways, there is a great deal more competition among social service agencies than there used to be," says Jim Beatty, who, along with his wife Lorraine, has been director of the mission since 1980.

"That's why we feel if we were simply a social service agency, we would be fairly small potatoes. The spiritual emphasis is very important. We center our whole ministry around the gospel. If you're living the right

way as Christians, then you're helping others around you." The mission, a rehabilitated garage at 408 N.

Fourth St. (where it moved in 1974 to make way for the Prairie Capital Convention Center) is an antique-filled relic where turn-of-the-century values are practiced with Victorian vigor.

There is no smoking or drinking. Fighting is taboo. So is swearing. The interior is antiseptic-clean and hushed as a church, a serene sea of powder-blue carpeting, ornate hall trees and wicker pulpits.

There is a chapel, coffee hall and "parlor," brimming with doilies, crystal candy dishes and deliciously plump drawing-room furniture belonging to the late Mary Louise

Miller, who ran the mission from 1931 until her death in 1980.

"We like people to behave as they

would in a church—with respect and dignity," says Lorraine Beatty.

The non-denominational mission is overseen by a 15-member board of directors from various local churches. It still subsists solely on charitable donations and the mercy of volunteers. Among other services, there is a food pantry, a meticulously tended clothing distribution center, morning coffee and fellowship, and free tutoring for children during the school year.

"The word on the streets is that you can come here and get food and clothes if you need them," says Mike Davis, 21, who is unemployed and has visited the mission since he was a teenager. "I usually come in the morning for coffee and rolls. No one bothers you."

On a sticky summer morning, a woman in faded jeans and a pale pink sweatshirt fills a rickety shopping cart with donated sweaters that have been neatly folded and stacked in plastic garbage sacks. She is between jobs and is raising three children alone.

"I usually go to the thrift shops and find as much as I can, but this helps a lot," she says. Today, she has selected a dish rack and a mint-green raincoat. "I'm grateful for the winter clothes," she adds. "They're hard to come by when the weather turns cold."

Another woman, grizzled and toothless, a tired blue bandanna swirled bandage-style around her forehead, says she has worked as a maid, dish



Jim and Lorraine Beatty have been directors of Springfield's Washington Street Mission since 1980.



Young boys take time to pray at the mission.

washer and teacher's aide. Her loose, Madras-plaid house dress gapes open at the waist. She is only 59.

"I got a nice bed here two years ago. It's strong," she says. "My family needed it."

An ageless, fatigued-looking Jamaican woman, who says she has 10 kids, hunts for the family's summer clothes and drapes for her windows.

"I'm not working anymore. But I don't take what I don't need."

On a Thursday night in the mission's chapel, a cluster of gangly, long-limbed children — boys on the right, girls on the left — perch in ruler-back library chairs stamped with gold plaques, gifts from the long-ago Mission Mothers in memory of the Rev. Billy Sunday (whose picture still hangs in the parlor).

Among children and adults, the Beattys are addressed by their formal surnames. Mrs. Beatty plays an old upright piano with elegant gusto as the children sing "Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow" and "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

Mr. Beatty leads the Pledge of Allegiance and a collection of pennies and nickels clinks in small wicker baskets.

On the south wall, a Greek Revival walnut ship's clock, crowned with a schooner that blooms at full mast, tick-ticks in the evening hush.

Four nights a week, nearly 40 children are picked up in the mission's old school bus and dropped off at the front doors. A 10-year-old girl with a head full of tightly coiled black braids grips tightly the hand of any young woman who will hold it: "Don't leave me. Sit with me. Here's another book. I can read."

As directors of the mission, the Beattys can't lower their eyes and walk fast until they forget what they see. "These children are so starved for love and attention," Lorraine says. "That's why I encourage volunteers to come. They can even sit by a child and just talk. Whether we're making a difference, I don't know. Only God really knows the result of our work."

From 6:30 to 7:45 p.m., four nights a week, the Beattys offer a Bible service and supervised recreation for needy children. There are extracurricular picnics and field trips to Henson Robinson Zoo, the Illinois

State Museum and Christian camps.

"Our main work is with children," says Jim. "They consider this a home away from home. Even though they're only with us a small amount of time, we try to make it mean a lot."

A cavernous, fluorescent-lit playroom is cluttered with knee-high wooden chairs and low rectangular tables where children scour Dr. Seuss books and ponder jigsaw puzzles. At the room's far end, a band of nimble, energetic boys hurls basketballs into a hoop, while several preteen girls engage in a frenetic round of double-Dutch jump rope.

The Beattys dream of someday building a gymnasium, but more basic needs take precedence. Some of the children come from homes so poverty-stricken that lunch is considered a luxury. During the day, Lorraine fields calls from kids offering to fold and sort clothes or serve coffee.

"Very often what they really want is a sandwich," she says. "I always try to keep things around so they can eat."

In the 1970s, the Beattys ran a Christian school in New Berlin. Though the school is now closed, the Beattys' devotion to children has held strong.

Jim is the son of Disciples of Christ missionaries. And Lorraine, a Springfield native, grew up volunteering at the mission.

"Children have always been really, really important to me," she says. "I love children and I loved being a mother. To me, a child who is not loved or cared for is missing out on any moral teaching or spiritual training. I hate to see a life wasted."

So did Robert Brown.

In an early photograph, the grim and bespectacled Brown, who was director of the mission until his death in 1940, gazes serenely over a light-flooded mess hall where hundreds of smiling children eat from tin plates. Brown's daughter, Mary Louise Miller, recalled in a 1974 oral history that the mission was always a clean, well-oiled operation run with the help of the clientele.

"It used to be what people called a rescue mission," says Bessie Perry, an 83-year old volunteer who folds and sacks clothing three days a week. "Men who were down and out could always get a place to sleep for the night."

This is how it started: After the 1908 race riots, former Chicago White Stockings-player-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday spent six weeks preaching in Springfield. According to early newspaper accounts, 461,000 people attended the Sunday revivals in a sprawling, temporary wooden "tabernacle" on First Street one block from the armory.

Brown and a group of fellow businessmen were so moved by the soul-smoldering proselytizing (and egged on by a \$500 challenge) that they opened a mission.

Before World War II, the mission was equipped to house up to 100 men a night: out of work miners, hobos, and the old and forgotten. They slept in metal bunks and wore uniform cotton nightshirts stenciled with the name of the mission on the back.

But they also earned their keep.

"We didn't charge for beds or food; there was no obligation financially, but they (the men) worked," Miller recalled in 1974. "... they had to cut an hour of wood or they had to scrub a floor or they had to sweep a walk; they had to do something. They were given meal tickets and given lodging. We felt that people of Springfield were supporting this work."

An undated mission flyer from the 1930s — probably the shelter's peak decade — reports 40,604 people attended evening services that year. It says mission workers sheltered 8,770

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**Lorraine Beatty**

men, converted another 263, and provided baths to another 2,417.

Somehow, the mission managed to cover all bases. There was a tidy, well-kept home for delinquent women at 3045 Clear Lake Avenue where the Chesapeake Seafood House stands today. Weekly Bible services were conducted in Italian for out-of-work immigrant coal miners and their families.

In an early photograph, taken at the mission's third downtown location, 111 S. Eighth St., bold and unapologetic signs beckoned the weary: "Come To-Night. Gospel Services. Come 7:15. God is Love. Jesus Saves.

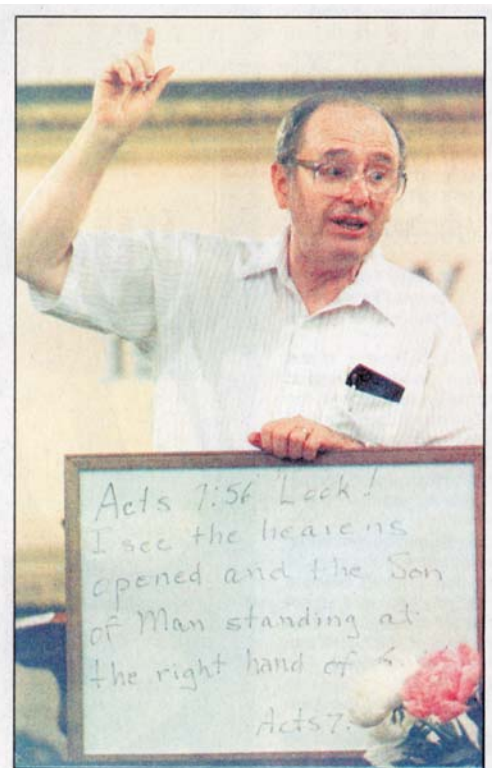
All are Welcome!"

Brown, who was hailed in advertisements for "Preaching with a Punch" dubbed his nightly radio sermons "Good News Meetings."

These days, Brown's nightly sermons have given way to the quieter, less confrontational ministry. Beds and baths are no longer provided, and clothing fumigation is a relic.

But help is here for those who ask.

"There's a metaphor Christ used about sowing the seed," says Jim. "Some sow, others water. God gives the increase. This is not a reaping ministry. We're happy sowing."



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