

Lamb Center Has Reason for Joy

Announces jobs partnership with the City.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Every day, The Lamb Center makes a positive impact on the lives of poor and homeless people in Fairfax. And on Oct. 10, this non-profit held its annual, celebration banquet at the Waterford in Fair Oaks.

This faith-based, daytime, drop-in shelter has much to celebrate. In 2017, it served an average of 102 guests/day with: 46,123 meals, 15,143 showers and more than 10,000 group and individual counseling sessions, plus dental services, AA meetings, clothing, haircuts, Bible studies, relationship-building, and job and housing searches.

The vast majority of its financial support comes from contributions from its more than 100 partner churches, 1,200 individual donors and dozens of local businesses. Carrying out the day-to-day work are the center's volunteers who, last year, gave nearly 26,000 hours of their time.

Now, there's even more to cheer. At the banquet, Lamb Center Board Chairman Tara Ruskowski announced the creation of Jobs for Life, a jobs partnership with the City of Fairfax. "It's a four-month, pilot program to offer part-time, day work to Lamb Center guests," she said. "There's dignity in work; and if you give a homeless person a



From left, The Lamb Center's Tara Ruskowski, Sharon Jones, Patti Brown and Dave Larrabee, Mayor David Meyer, Lamb Center Executive Director John MacPherson and Jobs for Life Coordinator Sharon Hoover.

job, you build them up and make them a part of the community." It'll be managed by Lamb Center staff and Fairfax's Parks and Recreation Department and will run for 16 weeks. Via this innovative initiative, these guests will be employed cleaning and beautifying City parks and doing public-works tasks. Modeled after a successful program in Albuquerque, N.M., this one is funded by a \$15,000 grant from the City to the center.

EIGHT TO 10 PEOPLE will work two

days a week in four-hour shifts. The Lamb Center will register participants, provide transportation, supervise job sites and pay workers in cash (\$10/hour) at the end of each shift. Fairfax City will provide the learning opportunities and a pathway back into the workforce.

"We're extremely proud to offer a program like this in Fairfax City," said Mayor David Meyer. "It's an approach that not only assists those who need help, but also benefits the City and its residents by providing

valuable services that we need every day. It's truly community in action."

Calling this collaboration a "powerful partnership" between The Lamb Center and the City, and a win for both, he added, "Most especially, it's a win for The Lamb Center guests who are transforming their lives for a future that includes the dignity of work. We're proud to be taking this next step to help the homeless in our City."

Thanking him and the City Council, Ruskowski said the pilot will begin the end of this month. "For some, it'll be a stepping stone on to more permanent work with the City's Public Works Department," she said. "And for others, it'll be an entrée into our jobs program."

Furthermore, she said, "We're cautiously exploring the possibility of joining with partners to build housing. And we're asking if we should have a second location to expand our reach. These are bold questions, and we continue to ask for [our supporters'] prayers and guidance."

Sharon Hoover, Missions Director at Centreville Presbyterian Church, is the Jobs for Life coordinator. "I did some research and discovered there's a gap between employment services and potential employers," she explained. My search to bridge the gap brought me to Jobs for Life."

"It focused on strength of character and God's work, so I hosted a class about it at the church," she continued. "But transportation for people to get there was difficult. Then Dave Larrabee [the center's operations

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'I Feel Like I'm Family' Lamb Center guests share their stories.

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During The Lamb Center's Oct. 10 banquet, four guests shared their personal stories. Each had obstacles to overcome, and this daytime shelter helped them do just that. To protect their identities, The Connection isn't revealing their last names.

❖ Corey said he dealt with his anger issues by hitting punching bags at a gym and then using some \$1,500 a month of marijuana. "This put me into a downward spiral, and I ended up in conflict with law enforcement, on the regular," he said. "I kept losing a piece of myself every day."

He was living in his truck; but when he lost it to pay his legal bills, he ended up living in a storage locker – requiring him to climb an 8-foot wall each night to get inside. From there, he went to hypothermia shelters and, finally, to The Lamb Center.

"I have them to thank for me accepting help with my anger and getting onto a better path," said Corey. He said the



Corey



Piety

center transformed him from someone who went to jail monthly to a person who no longer uses drugs and lives in an apartment.

Calling the center's Jobs for Life program "eye-opening," he said it helped him obtain the skills he needed for interviewing, conflict resolution and applying for jobs. He said the things he'd done in the past didn't stop people at The Lamb Center from caring about him and trying to help. "I continue to go [there] and they still feed me and give me valuable advice," said Corey. "I can't thank them enough for all they've done for me."

❖ Grace lost her home three years ago after becoming a victim of domestic violence. A single mother, she comes to The

Lamb Center for showers and food. "The volunteers are my friends," she said. "I come in with a broken spirit and leave renewed. They pray with me and support me emotionally when I'm in despair and going through the darkest time. I feel like I'm family."

"They give me encouragement and lift me up when I'm down," continued Grace. "I feel safe here. When I come early in the morning to get ready for work, it blesses me. The Lamb Center helps me face the challenges that lie ahead, and I will be forever grateful."

❖ Chris was incarcerated for six months in 2014 and was directed to The Lamb Center to get something to eat, take a shower, clean his clothes and get help finding a job. "I had not been homeless before and I was scared," he said. "I arrived at The Lamb Center to find smiling faces, friendly staff and volunteers, and the assistance I needed."

Without the services there – including a button-down shirt, tie, shoes and socks – Chris said he wouldn't have been able to prepare himself for job interviews. "The Lamb Center has been a blessing for me,

giving me a place to speak with a case manager, get eyeglasses and help get an ID card," he explained. "I've been able to find work and hold a job and recently got a second job."

"I appreciate all that the staff and volunteers have done for me, as I continue my path to getting my life back on track," said Chris. "The Lamb Center also opened my eyes to religion, and I've accepted God into my life."

❖ Piety, a mother of two, initially came to The Lamb Center for lunch and left with basic, living supplies and bus tokens. She'd lost all her belongings, and the center helped her get her identification and gave her a place to wash her laundry and obtain toiletries, as well as clothing for her baby. Having transportation to work was a huge help to her. "When you have a little income coming in, you can sleep in a motel or buy your own products," said Piety. "It makes you independent and a part of society. The Lamb Center made me feel safe and I'm now a family member. I'm blessed today that God guided me there. If God is in my heart, I am home."

Partnership Provides ‘Dignity of Work’

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director] suggested we hold classes at The Lamb Center.”

Now, volunteers from 20 churches are helping with the 16-session class, teaching Lamb Center guests about various jobs. They also recruit and train mentors for the students. And besides the jobs with Fairfax, they’re seeking additional work opportunities for the

class’s graduates. “We need people willing to consider hiring an at-risk person with an unusual work history,” said Hoover. “Think how much we could reduce poverty in Northern Virginia through this program. And I can tell you, if you get involved in Jobs for Life, it will change you for the better.”

Then four people who’ve been helped by The Lamb Center shared

their stories. Afterward, Board of Directors member Dee Ann Jeremiah said, “God says to love your neighbor, and these people are our neighbors. Before getting involved with The Lamb Center, I had no idea there were homeless people a stone’s throw from my home. But our guests teach me with their passion and faith. As a business owner, helping individu-

als is common sense. It’s a win for businesses, the community and our guests.”

THANKING EVERYONE for attending the banquet, Larrabee said, “Everything we do wouldn’t be possible without your support.” He then prayed, saying, “God, we’re so grateful for the many ways You’ve grown our ministry so

we’re able to help the poor in our community and transform lives. Bless us as we travel home tonight, and especially bless and keep safe those who have no place to lay their heads.” The Lamb Center is at 3160 Campbell Drive in Fairfax. For more information, to contribute or to volunteer, go to www.thelambcenter.org or call 703-691-3178.