



By Jonathan Pitts, The Baltimore Sun
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Glen Burnie's homeless share what they have for holiday

At Emmaus Center's third annual Thanksgiving dinner, community members help each other



He has frequent lapses of memory, the result of a brain aneurysm he suffered as a teen in 1972. He struggled for years to keep jobs at BWI, at a discount store and in an industrial park.

And finally, after his mother died in a Baltimore County nursing home, Fred Schae fle of Glen Burnie lost the condo in which he'd been living and ended up in a tent.

"There's so much you don't appreciate until you don't have it," says the rangy, bearded 58-year-old with a shake of the head. "For example, indoor plumbing or a place to warm your food."

Four years later, Schae fle feels he has many things to be thankful for, foremost among them the community that he says has restored him: the Emmaus Center, a small Glen Burnie nonprofit that offers food, shelter and fellowship to homeless people.



On Thursday, he'll help a dozen or so fellow patrons of that center, many of them homeless or formerly homeless, serve Thanksgiving dinner for other homeless people — and anyone else who wants to come and be "fed, welcomed and loved," in the words of Barb Hudgens, the center's operations manager.

"I've always made a huge Thanksgiving dinner for my own family, and when you cook and your family comes, it's wonderful," says Hudgens, who has volunteered at Emmaus since 2009. "But you know they already have food, love and other people in their lives. These people don't. On Thanksgiving, we'll feed them and show them all the love we have."

It will be the third straight year the center has offered the celebration, which has attracted 60 or more people the past two years.



By all accounts, it's a joyous occasion.

"The appreciation is like nothing you've ever seen," Hudgens says.

To Schaeffle, the feast is an outgrowth of the general philosophy at Emmaus, an organization that he says reaches out in a way others won't or can't.

"You go to other [homeless outreach centers], like churches or government-sponsored facilities, and they offer the bare necessities," he says. "Don't get me wrong — that's a great thing. But this community has a heart. It has become my family. And this time of year, families get together and give thanks."

Coming home

The Gospel of Luke includes a tale in which two of Jesus' disciples express despair that their master has been killed — and doubt over reports his body had left its tomb.

On their way to the town of Emmaus, they run into a stranger who upbraids them for lacking faith. When they arrive, they realize that stranger is actually Jesus.

"Their eyes were opened, and they recognized him," the biblical passage reads.

If the Emmaus Center on South Crain Highway helps people like Schaeffle, it's because its founders, the Rev. Ed Jansen and his wife, Trish Gaffney, believe anyone can see things anew, especially if they take a simple step: deciding to place others ahead of themselves.

Four years ago, the couple, both ordained ministers in the Apostolic Catholic Church, were living in Stuart, Fla., where Jansen had worked as a pastoral counselor for more than 20 years, and Gaffney as a social worker.

One day, for no reason he can remember, Jansen asked his wife, a Severna Park native, what she would do if he were to die.

"I'd move back home," she said, meaning to Anne Arundel County.

"If that's what you consider home, what are we waiting for?" he said.

They closed up their affairs, left the state they loved and headed north.



Their original plan was to set up a private counseling service with a sideline: helping those who lived on the streets. But when they opened their doors in May 2008, so many homeless people showed up for help that "it just overwhelmed us," says Jansen, who is known at Emmaus as Father Ed.

They decided to devote the center to "raising up" that population, then numbering about 400 in the county, mostly in or near Glen Burnie, according to Arundel House of Hope, a social services agency.

"We're not just a place that gives handouts," says Jansen in his office at the center, on the third floor of the Steffey office building. "There are two kinds of people in our community. First are those who are in severe need. They can come and be welcomed, and we ask nothing in return. Second are those who have been in that condition but who keep coming back, who want to be part of the community. Of those people, we do have expectations. They soon realize they have something to give back."

That theme animates the place. Operating on an annual budget of \$50,000, the center and its unpaid staff of seven offers what they consider everybody's most basic needs: sustenance (the center distributes bagels and other donated foods), shelter (guests can gather between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m. seven days a week), companionship and something useful to do.



Between 25 and 50 people stop by most days.

One recent morning, Schaeffe was one of a dozen or so homeless or recently homeless on hand vacuuming the floors, washing bathrooms, replacing light bulbs and even cleaning the other offices in the building.

Members of the community provide all the labor at Emmaus.

"When you have a little sweat equity in something, you treasure it even more," Schaeffe says.

The center also provides classes in anger management, training in job skills such as computer repair, and individual counseling, all free of charge; and through its pantry service, it distributes two tons of canned food per month.

It also offers something Jansen calls even more crucial to the homeless: a routine.

He leads a prayer service every weekday at 8 a.m., a Bible study at 11. "We start on time, whether you're here or not," he says with a grin.

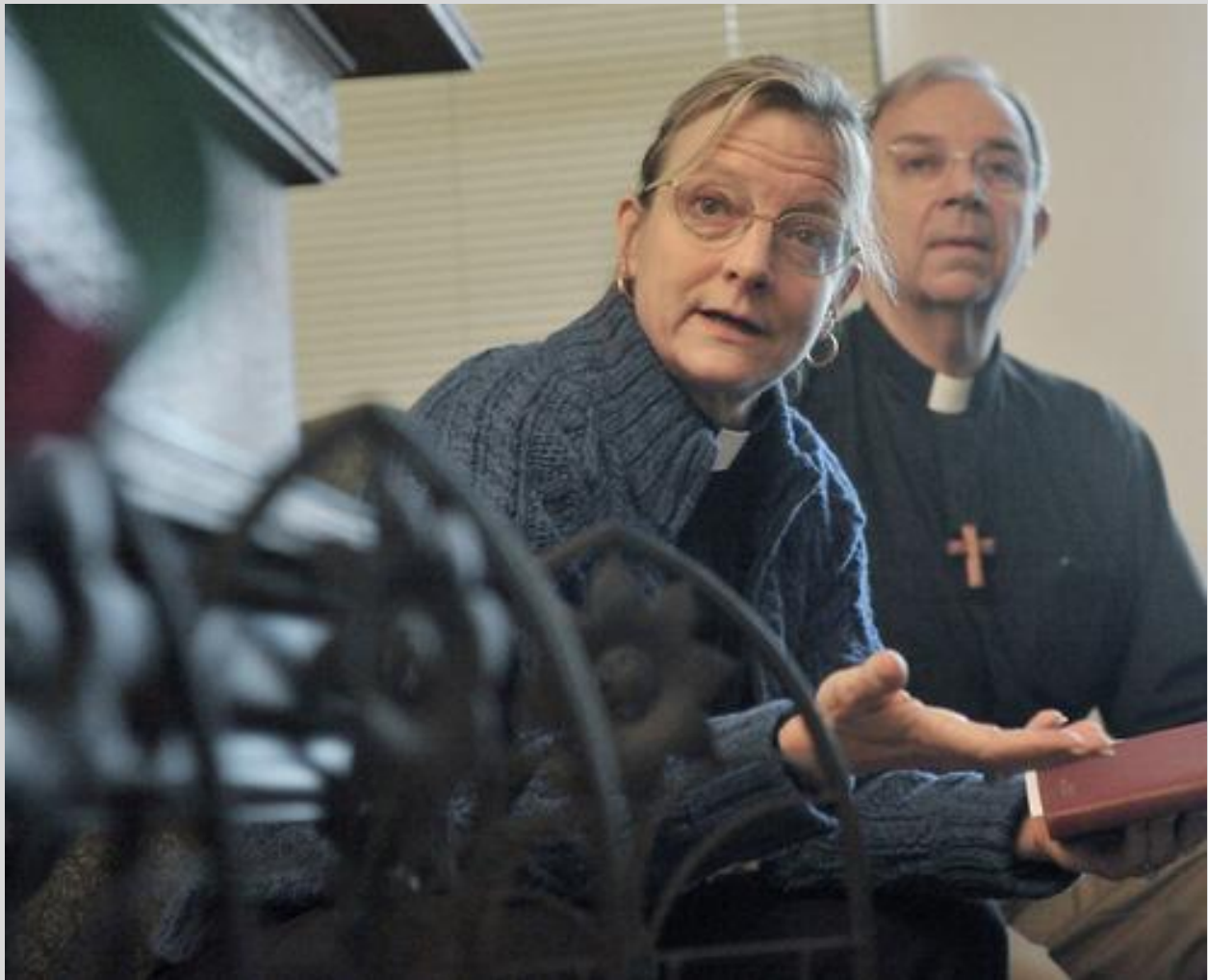
The sessions usually draw between 10 and 25 people. Based in Scripture but accessible to anyone interested in what matters in life, they include plenty of time for attendees to share ideas.

One morning, somebody came up with a good one.

Several churches, shelters and social-service centers in Anne Arundel County offer Thanksgiving Day meals for the homeless, including a handful in Glen Burnie.

At the Emmaus Center, it's the homeless who serve others. Someone first suggested the idea during a prayer meeting in 2008.

"I can't remember who came up with it, but everyone there responded right away. It flows out of a question people are always asking around here: 'How can I help?'" says Gaffney, 56, known to the congregation as Amma Trish. ("Amma" is Aramaic for "mother.")



"We live in a world that says, 'You'd better be rich, strong, talented, good-looking and powerful,'" Jansen adds. "An ethic of 'me-me-me' seems to have taken the place of [Jesus' teachings]. But we become ourselves when we put other people first. Everyone in the world can do that. You don't need a thing."

On a recent morning, the pair lead a dozen mostly homeless or ex-homeless through a call-and-response reading. The group includes Hudgens, Schaeffe, a woman struggling with alcoholism, a man battling paranoid schizophrenia and an ex-penitentiary inmate, his head shaved and his arms scored with tattoos.

All listened intently.

"'No one has ever seen God,'" Jansen says, reading a passage from the New Testament. "Yet if we love one another, [he] remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.' Can anyone say what that means?"

"Well, yes, God is invisible," the ex-convict, Glen Day, chimes in. "But if we're loving to others, and they're loving in return, you can see [the divine] in action."

If anybody exemplifies that kind of teaching, it's Day. Thirty-nine years ago, he was a drug addict living in Harford County, and one day he decided to rob his next-door neighbor's house.

It went tragically wrong. Day's gun went off — inadvertently, he says — killing the man. He was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 30 years in prison.

Released on parole in 2003 after serving 21 years, Day moved to northern Anne Arundel County, where he held a few jobs in fast-food service, met a woman named Sue, married her on impulse, then fell out with her, ending up on the streets.

He slept most nights in a stairwell in the Empire Building in downtown Glen Burnie.

"At least it was warm, and a little more safe," says Day, 50, adding that passers-by often strike homeless people, throw things at them or set off firecrackers nearby.

One day in 2008, he heard that the Emmaus Center, then just opened, was holding a barbecue Mass. He showed up to help cook. "I felt like I was home," he says.

He became a regular at the center. He reconciled with Sue last year — they renewed their wedding vows at Emmaus in 2010 — and became a deacon this year.

The pair live in an apartment around the corner and are now on the full-time staff.

"He's not the same person he was," says Sue Day, who becomes emotional at the mention of the coming feast.

"I have family, and I love them, but I'd rather spend Thanksgiving with [the homeless] than anyone else," she says. "Yes, there are a few who are drug addicts, bums who are working the system, but 75 percent of them are just ordinary people who had a bad break and can't get up."

At the service's end, Glen Day approaches Father Ed to talk Thanksgiving. He served at the earlier dinners and he's planning a pickup of vegetables and side dishes at the Anne Arundel Food Bank in a few days.

"We'll be doing turkey, stuffing, corn, green beans, gravy — the whole nine yards," he says.

The center hopes to be prepared to serve 120, though it's likely only about 60 will attend.

"We'll be ready for lots of people, and if we have leftovers, we'll give them away," Glen Day says. "We try not to keep a thing."

On the menu

Jansen says many social-service agencies — including the nearby House of Hope, a close partner — provide the homeless with logistical essentials: getting ID cards and numbers, helping them navigate social service bureaucracy and more.

But because demand is so great these days, they have no chance to provide a personal connection to the homeless.

That leaves Emmaus with a niche.

"We'd rather raise up 10 people than reach out to a thousand," Jansen says.

That doesn't work with everyone, of course. Jansen says there's always the occasional disruptive influence — someone who insists on arriving at the center intoxicated or in some other uncooperative state.

He insists that they leave — but invites them to return when they're feeling better.

"God bless 'em, they usually do," he says.

It seems to have worked with Schaefle. He first learned of Emmaus when a volunteer found him sleeping on a sidewalk across the street and invited him in. Today he lives with four other men in a house in Severna Park, collects the disability he's due and has become such a beloved figure that he's often the butt of good-natured ribbing.

"He's our poster boy," says Jansen, joking that with his full beard and long hair, Fred makes for a striking symbol of homelessness in publicity photos.

Schaefle isn't sure how he'll serve on Thanksgiving yet, but he'll do whatever's asked: heat up food, clean up afterward or simply chat up guests, many of whom will have come straight from encampments in the woods. (A longtime pianist, he'll also play background music, likely heavy on Rolling Stones classics.)



The feast will be held not at Emmaus but at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Linthicum Heights, which has more dining space.

Hudgens says the staff still needs donations — a couple of turkeys, several canned side dishes, perhaps some powdered drinks, bread, pies and cakes — to fill out the full menu.

Whatever the menu consists of, though, she looks forward to serving more than food.

"Everyone and anyone is welcome," she says. "All we ask is that you let us know you're coming [by the day before] so we can plan. That, and be ready to get a lot of hugs."

jonathan.pitts@baltsun.com

If you go

Emmaus Center Thanksgiving Mass and Dinner

Where: St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, 116 Marydell Road, Linthicum Heights

When: Mass at 10 a.m (instead of a homily, guests will be invited to share what they're thankful for); dinner noon to 2 p.m.

Admission: Free, but reservations are requested. Call the Emmaus Center by Wednesday, Nov. 23, to notify the staff.

Rides from the Emmaus Center, 407 S. Crain Highway, Glen Burnie, to St. Christopher's Church will be provided between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m.

Information: 410-766-7729