

Rescue Mission of El Paso Provides Food and Opportunity

By Clarissa G. Rasberry and Denice Ruiz

Looking at the faces of homeless people in El Paso and other cities, one may wonder how these individuals became homeless in the first place. Loss of a job? Divorce? Substance abuse? Domestic violence? Illness? El Paso has many organizations to help those with the problem of homelessness and everything that comes with it. One such place is the Rescue Mission of El Paso, under the direction of Blake W. Barrow and the many staff members who work diligently to assist people in need of a safe place to call home.

For 64 years the Rescue Mission of El Paso has helped everyone who has entered its doors. It provides warm meals, clothing, shelter, spiritual guidance and employment opportunities to people in the community who are often left with nowhere to turn. The mission also addresses the issues that can lead individuals to homelessness by providing faith-based programs to help with addiction. Other programs can help the homeless who come in these doors make better decisions in the future.

More than 50 years ago, President Lyndon Johnson declared the "War on Poverty." The plan was implemented in 1964 to "cure poverty," according to a 2014 *Washington Post* article by Dylan Matthews. While a lot has changed since then, poverty is far from gone. In 2008, Diana Washington Valdez reported in an *El Paso Times* article that El Paso ranked fourth among the nation's poorest cities. In a study released by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010, El Paso still ranked among the poorest cities in the country. And we have homeless people, most of whom are in their position due to joblessness or a bad personal situation.

In the early 1950's, H.W. Wallis felt a calling to move from Carlsbad, N.M. to El Paso. In a 1952 *El Paso Times* article, Wallis said he was previously a furniture dealer and he did not want to come to El Paso. Nonetheless, he could not deny the calling to serve others, so he sold his store and moved here. In a small room on 602 N. Oregon St., Wallis started offering religious services. He cooked meals for anyone who attended, including transients who were hungry and tired, according to an April 1955 *El Paso Herald-Post* article by Kay Maxwell. With \$300 that he collected in past due accounts, he was finally able to establish the Rescue Mission in an eight-room apartment in the same building, offering beds to the needy. With the help of Jean Jones, a missionary worker who cooked meals for the mission, and his wife Edna, H. D. Wallis was able to assist the individuals who needed help and love.

In a 1955 *El Paso Herald-Post* article, Edna Wallis stated they fed those who were hungry physically, but many were "calmed by prayer." According to the *Herald-Post*, several El Paso churches donated money monthly to the mission, and many food stores and packing houses donated supplies to help the mission, in addition to private monetary gifts. According to a typed manuscript from the 1960s highlighting the commencement and early history of the Rescue Mission, it served 9,784 meals and furnished 4,988 beds in its first year.

After only three years in operation, the Rescue Mission was already in need of more space. According to the above mentioned manuscript, Wallis operated the facility until January 1955 and it was run by his wife until May 1955 when Gertrude Henry took over. In February 1956, Glen H. Cuddeford, a man who would lead the mission until his death in 1968, bought the mission property with a plan to make it a community endeavor. By 1957, the mission had



Rescue Mission of El Paso at 1449 W. Paisano Dr. (Photo by Clarissa Rasberry)

grown significantly: more than 45,000 meals were being served per year, according to the manuscript. Additionally, the number of beds furnished had more than doubled to over 11,000.

In May 1958, the mission bought the Green Tree Hotel at 604 San Francisco Avenue. A year later, through volunteer labor and donated fixtures and supplies, the mission had a three-story building with 20 rooms available for staff and families, along with a basement providing beds for up to 100 men, bathroom facilities, a laundry and a lounge. The ground floor provided a lobby, dining room and chapel.

After its bylaws and charter were changed to call it a "Christian Mission" instead of a church, the El Paso Rescue Mission became an agency of the United Fund in November 1958. The United Fund allotment was used only for general expenses; donations from the community went toward debt retirement, building maintenance and new equipment. A board of directors, 25 in number, began overseeing the mission, recognized as a tax-deductible charity by the IRS. In 1959, just seven years after its most modest beginning, the mission provided 118,375 meals and 23,634 beds.

Community support had also increased. A 1964 *El Paso Times* article featured Charlie Tupper, service station operator on North Mesa Street and mission board member, reaching out to the community to donate to the Rescue Mission. In 1961, Tupper "posted a sign urging his customers to donate clothing, bedding, shoes and food for the men and families who come to the Rescue Mission" and repeated his drive annually. In 1964, Tupper arranged 16 pickup stations in El Paso to participate in the drive.

The mission's board decided to expand the facility once again and purchased the Bristol Hotel at 600½ San Francisco Avenue. Although it had grown rapidly the previous 10 years, the mission never closed down its facility and at times had residents assist in its transitions, plastering, painting and more.

Throughout its lengthy and motivating history, the Rescue Mission has always had inspirational leaders including Walter Guthrie and his wife, who succeeded Cuddeford, and the Reverend Vernon M. Tribble and his wife, whom a *Herald-Post* article in 1975 declared the "mother, father and teacher" to people who passed through the mission. Some volunteer workers became leaders, like David Hoyle.

David Hoyle, also known as "Pappy," began volunteering at the mission while still working as a motorcycle sergeant with the El Paso Police Department. He was the senior member of the motorcycle branch in

his 60s, hence the name "Pappy." Hoyle retired in 1981. He became executive director of the Rescue Mission in the late 1980s.

According to *El Paso Times* article, "'Pappy' hangs up his halo" by Ramon Renteria, "He set the standard in El Paso for helping street people and families that have skidded on to hard times." Pappy was a very loving person, continuously "mending wretched lives and souls." A modest and caring individual, Hoyle guided the Rescue Mission when it first opened on West Paisano in 1986, after buying the property from Centro Vida Church. He retired at the end of the year in 1994, continuing to serve as chaplain.

Long-time mission worker Terry Bell succeeded Hoyle and gave credit to him for helping to develop the El Paso Coalition for the Homeless. The mission continued its services and Bell began reaching out to the community for help through newsletters. Regardless of the holiday or its director, the mission continued to help the homeless, the poor and the hungry.

In his book *Stories from the Shelter*, Blake Barrow tells the story of how he was introduced as executive director to the mission's guests on Thanksgiving 1997 at the beginning of one of the religious services that guests attend before eating. Chaplain Pappy Hoyle ended one service and guests entered the dining room. With his Bible in his right hand, Hoyle put his left hand around Barrow and thumped him on the stomach with the Bible and said, "Here, you take the next one." Barrow did, and almost 20 years later, he still is working to make the mission better.

Barrow, originally from Houston, had been a personal injury trial lawyer with four college degrees, including a Master of Theological Studies from Emory and a Juris Doctor degree and two others from Baylor University. Barrow had felt a calling to share the gospel in the past, but it was not until he was practicing law that he felt the calling again. First, he met Myrna Deckert, then CEO of the YWCA, while representing a woman suing the nonprofit. The YWCA agreed to sign off on an agreement in order to avoid court, but Deckert let Barrow know how much several programs for women and children would have to be cut in order to do that. Barrow came to realize that his client had taken advantage of the legal system. He was deeply ashamed and repaid the settlement amount and worked countless hours over the years *pro bono* for women the YWCA was helping.

Then Barrow realized that he fit the list of qualifications that the Rescue Mission had drawn up as

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James Carroll, his landlord and mission board member, enumerated them one day. He took a two-thirds cut in pay and finally began the work he knew he was meant for all along.

Barrow himself admits that he is a “shoot-from-the-hip” kind of guy and some of the most successful activities at the mission have occurred from necessity or an epiphany, such as its furniture factory. When the metal beds at the mission began to break, Barrow began wondering how wooden beds would hold up and used his basic shop skills to draw a prototype. He had workers produce a model bed and even had a heavy Chevrolet Suburban placed on top of it to prove its strength! Beds, chests of drawers, desks, even armoires, beautifully designed and made by mission residents, first replaced those already in the dormitories, and then the mission began selling to churches and other missions around the country.

Rescue Furniture, as it is now called, uses solid wood, producing very durable and economical furniture. The bunk beds are not the size of usual bunk beds for children; they allow the person using the lower bunk to sit up comfortably. The wood shop also makes smaller pieces such as crosses.

It is this consideration for the *quality* of shelter, whether for one night or 30, for children or hospice residents of the mission, that perhaps sets Barrow apart from other directors. When he realized that the food could be better, he set about to make it so — with help from the community. One of the first things he did was begin charging for the meal! Sometimes when everything is free, it means less than when one pays for it, whether with money or labor. Freshly baked muffins made their first appearance. Barbecued turkeys from the mission’s own smoker began to grace the menu.

Meghan Pratt, director of marketing at the Rescue Mission, stated in an interview that residents can eat lunch or dinner for \$1.50 a meal. If unable to pay, they can do chores in exchange for the meal. Guests can help prepare meals, sweep floors and complete other tasks. Children and the infirm eat free, as do those with no money, but they work after they eat. The mission’s website indicated that 162,707 meals were served in 2015.

Christi LeClaire, store director for Albertson’s, believes in the Rescue Mission of El Paso. LeClaire informed Clarissa Rasberry in a personal interview that 12 years ago she decided to make a difference. While working as store director at the Albertson’s on Redd Road, she realized much food was going to waste and contacted the mission which was happy to have fresh produce that perhaps was not “pretty” enough for other customers or other perishables with approaching expiration dates. Instead of so much food ending up in landfills, it is now feeding those in need of nourishment.

Because so many residents have problems with alcohol and other drugs, the Rescue Mission began their faith-based Relapse Prevention Program in 1990, a 13-week program addressing “bio-psycho-social-spiritual concepts in recovery,” as described on their website. The program includes anger management and self-esteem classes, group problem solving, self-help, Bible studies and classes to prevent relapse. Each resident’s problem is dealt with on a case-by-case basis and requires full cooperation and commitment.

Social Services Manager Darlene Domingue in an interview with Denice Ruiz stated that six out of every eight participants in the relapse program go on to graduate. Graduates of the program are given priority for employment and training opportunities, such as with the Rescue Furniture program.

Substance abuse and mental illness often occur together. According to Pratt, it is difficult to treat the



New Rescue Mission of El Paso at 221 Lee St. to open fall 2016 (Photo by Isabel Hernandez)

homeless who are mentally ill, for sometimes they come and go rather quickly. Others self-medicate with alcohol and drugs. The Relapse Prevention Program treats the whole individual. The Rescue Mission works with nonprofit doctors who help treat residents with mental illness. Counselors can schedule appointments for residents, or they can confer with the mission’s full-time nurse. The mission also helps with transportation, medication and regular follow-ups. Barrow has created an environment at the mission where everyone who walks in has opportunities and the resources to get their life back on track.

A visit to the Rescue Mission at its current location on 1949 W. Paisano Dr. resulted in an immediate welcome. A small school bus had arrived to take the children in the mission to school. A Sun City Metro van shuttled residents to and from downtown. The very large kitchen was fully stocked and the food smelled delicious. The cozy dining room provided plenty of room for sharing meals and conversation. The chapel had a small altar and lovely stained glass and art. The Rescue Mission also has a children’s area filled with books and activities. The room used for the relapse program also serves as a gym.

Skye Schultz, Volunteer Coordinator of the Mission and UTEP alumna, provided a short tour of their facility which included one of the old grain silos used as a storage and office area. Schultz felt the call to work with the homeless while in college and served for two months in Mexico as a medical missionary. Her pastor helped her obtain a job at the mission in the kitchen. “One thing I like about the mission is that we don’t force anyone to do anything,” says Schultz.

Because of the expansion of the Border Highway and Spur 1666, the Rescue Mission has had to relocate to central El Paso. The news came just as Barrow and staff were completing a \$2.6 million three-year renovation and expansion. The state agreed to pay \$13.5 million for the mission’s property. The opening date for the new facility at 221 Lee St. has been pushed back to this fall. Construction will result in a 50 percent increase of current bed capacity, a food storage area, a computer room for children to do their homework, expanded laundry facilities and more.

Schultz emphasized that because of the transition, the mission is currently not accepting clothing donations since they will be moving out soon. However, the mission is always looking for volunteers and donations, especially because of the big change.

Along with location changes, Schultz states the residency policy will also be changing in the future. The mission will place more focus on women and children with needs whereas the emphasis has been on men since they comprise the majority of the residents. A recent *El Paso Inc.* article said that of the 190 beds

that will be available, 66 will be for single men, 32 for women and 32 for families. An additional 24 will be provided for semi-permanent residents, 20 for drug relapse prevention residents and 16 for hospice or respite care. But Barrow has future plans to build a separate building on Cotton Street with the capacity for 100 beds for single parents with children and older children who have aged out of the foster care program.

Many know Barrow as a barbecue master, and the mission will open the Hallelujah BBQ Restaurant on the Cotton Street property once used to house El Paso’s trolleys. Barrow will use the restaurant as a mission training and employment center. He told Jeff Brumley in *Baylor Proud*, the University’s blog, that his in-laws asked what he wanted as a wedding gift and he requested an offset solid-steel smoker he had once seen in the 1970s.

The catering part of the restaurant is already functional and has a website. Although the restaurant will not be ready until next year, customers can place orders for “brisket cooked so long and hot it doesn’t need sauce” and much more. The barbecue website tells readers on its main page, “Hallelujah BBQ was created to provide jobs to people who find themselves at the Rescue Mission of El Paso.”

The Rescue Mission of El Paso is a vital part of the El Paso community and has helped many see the importance of empathy, family and love. In a newsletter, Barrow wrote how the Rescue Mission helped him understand the homeless:

I have achieved a greater understanding of what the El Paso Rescue Mission really stands for. It is the home for the homeless, the friend to the friendless. The Rescue Mission is the place where those who are truly alone can rest their heads and know, without a doubt, they are loved.

Research has revealed that the homeless in El Paso are not only the men we see at downtown intersections asking for change but single women and mothers with children of all ages. Some have family, others do not. The Rescue Mission is not for everyone experiencing problems of homelessness. It does not tolerate drugs or alcohol and it is definitely a place where God and Jesus are not just words. Blake Barrow and his staff believe in the power of prayer.

The Rescue Mission of El Paso will be the only shelter in the city with a barbecue restaurant staffed by mission residents. The homeless who are not only hungry for food but for honest work and another chance to get their lives together will have that with the new Rescue Mission and restaurant. And the El Paso community will have a chance to savor Texas barbecue by Blake Barrow. †