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The *Journey* Home

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## IT ALL BEGAN WITH A TROLLEY RIDE



*Marzena and Rickshaunda*

How do you start a conversation with a total stranger while riding the trolley through downtown Knoxville?

Marzena knows how. Marzena never meets a stranger; as for her, a stranger is just a friend whose name she just doesn't know yet.

This is the story of friendship that began with a trolley ride for Marzena and Rickshaunda, who were both homeless at the time.

Rickshaunda says that she had just been discharged from the hospital and was riding the trolley with no apparent place to go. Marzena sat across from her and was on the way to Wal-Mart. In the eyes of Marzena, Rickshaunda must have looked rather lost though carried about town by the circuitous route of the trolley.

Interrupting the silence between the only two passengers onboard, Marzena opened the conversation with a rather odd yet direct question. "You need anything? I am going to Wal-Mart to get some personal items. You need anything?"

"No," Rickshaunda replied, explaining about her recent hospital stay and that she had nowhere to go because she is homeless. "But, no. I don't need anything."

"Well," replied Marzena. "You are going to stay with me at the mission tonight."

"What?"

"Yeah, you are going to stay at the mission. Do you need anything?" Marzena repeated.

"Do you need anything?" When asked why she would pose such a question to a stranger, Marzena's response is heart-felt simplicity, "I asked her simply out of love, love out of my heart for her."

Friendships have a tendency to form quickly on the streets. Such bonding may be out of desperation, or the desire for companionship, and sometimes out of the need for security. Such "friendships" may end up being less than friendly and more predatory. Other relationships, however and like Rickshaunda and Marzena's, become a forged bond that benefits and supports each in a respectful and healthy way.

Later that night at the mission, Marzena laid a bottle of deodorant, a tube of body wash, a tank top, and a bar of Oil of Olay soap on Rickshaunda's bunk. The gesture touched Rickshaunda, "I never had Olay soap. I won't use any other soap now. But that is just who Marzena is. She is kind and generous."

*continued on inside*

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## IT ALL BEGAN WITH A TROLLEY RIDE CONT.

Both Marzena and Rickshaunda had periods of homelessness due to several reasons, but usually because of poor health and poverty. Rickshaunda usually stayed with family and friends and was not familiar or acquainted with the unwritten rules of street life.

"Yeah, you are going to stay and this is what you do." Marzena recalls giving Rickshaunda advice on how to act, speak, not speak, along with a few "rules" of the street and the ways of the mission.

"In order to get respect, you have to show respect," was the first of Marzena's rules.

"Marzena showed me the ropes [in understanding life on the streets]," Rickshaunda recalls.

At the suggestion of Marzena, both later joined VMC's Resource Center in their desire for permanent housing. As they became members of the Resource Center and as housing became more of a reality, they made a pact together that started with the simple question, "Will we stick together once we get our own apartment?"

Both joined and participated in the supportive services of the Resource Center for several months as they worked with their respective case manager, following their case plan while waiting on a housing opportunity.

Marzena recalls with a sense of humor and excitement about her experience in the Resource Center.

"One night at the mission, I got up and stripped my bunk and put on my clothes," she says grinning as though she has a tale to tell that might seem far-fetched.

"I asked the attendant what time it was and she said 2am. I thought she said 7am and I shouted, 'I am late! I am late for the Resource Center at the VMC!'"

So at 2:00am, she left the mission and walked the block to the Resource Center.

"It was dark. It was real dark. But I did not want to be late!"

Upon arrival, she noticed that the doors to the Resource Center were not opened and no one

was around. She sat in the gazebo for about an hour and then took a glance at her watch. The watch indicated that it was 3am. She finally realized what she had done. "I was in a zone. I was so excited about getting to the Resource Center, I really didn't know what I was doing. I do know that I was excited and I did not want to be late."

In late February of this year, Marzena moved into her own apartment, inviting Rickshaunda over for visits on many occasions.

At some point however, Rickshaunda became quite discouraged that she had not received word about an apartment. When asked what kept Rickshaunda from not giving up, her reply was quick and revealing how powerful affirming words can be. "I'll tell you how I held on. I held onto the words of the staff at the VMC. They kept reminding and encouraging me that my day would come. Don't give up! I believed them. It was their very word that I held on to so tightly. If they said it, then I believed it to be true. And they were right!"

By early April, Rickshaunda moved into her own apartment, which is in the same apartment building as Marzena's but just one floor below. "She is afraid of heights," Marzena says of Rickshaunda, jokingly. "So now, I have to go down to her apartment to see her. She won't come to my place anymore."

Thinking about their apartments, they each said that the "silence of one's own place is great and the bed – you just can't get out of it. It feels so good it won't let you go!"

Marzena adds, "No one can put you out when you got your own key!"

The friendship between Marzena and Rickshaunda continues to grow. "We compliment each other. We can argue, but afterwards, it is all out the window."

Housing has made a difference for both, but their friendship will be the emotional mortar that will help them maintain housing and flourish even more. Faithful to their commitment to each other to stick together, they now have many windows for the arguments to float away.

The downtown trolley can take you many places, including a place of your own and a friend with it.

By Bruce W. Spangler

## WE HAVE A HOME NOW!



*Barbara and Connie receive VMC Keychains from case managers Nancy Douglas and Jamie Brown.*

*Robert and Dennis show off their new key chains with case managers Daryl Higdon and Jered Croom.*

*Charles is all smiles holding his keychain to his new apartment.*

*Wayne is excited to get a key to his new apartment from case manager Opal King*

## FROM THE CEO... WHAT IS IN A TITLE?



*Bruce W. Spangler, CEO*

Our signature and annual fundraising event, Carry the Torch, was just held in late April with John Quiñones as our keynote speaker. For those in attendance, you now know of and about him. For those who don't know Mr. Quiñones, here is a little background.

John is an Emmy Award-winning anchor, author, and sole anchor of the ABC Primetime series *What Would You Do?*, one of the highest rated newsmagazine franchises in recent years; and he has authored two books, *What Would You Do? Words of Wisdom About Doing the Right Thing*, and *Heroes Among Us: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Choices*. In addition, he has won seven national Emmy Awards for his "Primetime Live," "Burning Questions" and "20/20" work. He was honored with a World Hunger Media Award and a Citation from the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards for "To Save the Children," his 1990 report on the homeless children of Bogota. Among his other prestigious awards are the First Prize in International Reporting and Robert F. Kennedy Prize for his piece on "Modern Slavery -- Children Sugar Cane Cutters in the Dominican Republic."

In other words, many awards, honors, and titles have been bestowed upon John Quiñones. I am inclined to bestow another, but from what I experienced from him, titles don't mean that much. His status as "celebrity" does not keep him from mingling with the rest of us. I am sure that he does not mind being recognized for his work and craft. What I mean is that he does not let titles get in the way of being present, available, and engaging with whomever may be his company.

John toured our buildings, spending time with those served by the Volunteer Ministry Center prior to his speaking engagement. He greeted everyone with a smile, handshake, a hug, or all three, if requested. He was eager to pose and fulfill the numerous requests for "selfies" as well.

During his visit to our permanent supportive housing opportunity, Minvilla Manor, a resident

recognized him from television. At first, shocked that this celebrity would be standing before her, she exclaimed, "I know you! I know you! I watch you on television!" With that she appeared to look around for hidden cameras thinking his presence must be about his show. Finding none, she ran and embraced him. He returned the embrace with a warm smile and genuine "And your name? It is such a pleasure to meet you."

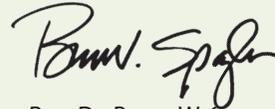
John's agenda seems to be a rather simple yet profound one that he records in one of his books, *"If we knew that someone else might be watching... It would be a powerful reminder that all of us can afford to be a little more understanding, caring, and compassionate."* That is John Quiñones. It also sums up the staff and volunteers of the Volunteer Ministry Center. Understanding, care, and compassion are offered on the corner of Broadway and Fifth Avenue every day, every week.

Each dollar YOU contribute to the Volunteer Ministry Center is to afford a caring understanding of our neighbor's needs and plight in the midst of compassionate accountability that truly makes a difference. I am grateful for your support and I trust that you will continue to be committed and invested in the work of ending and preventing homelessness.

Back to the issue of titles with a brief note.

I am privileged and honored to share with you that I will no longer be the interim CEO. Effective June 1st, I have been selected by the Board of Directors to be the CEO. Titles are and can be important. However, John Quiñones and the staff and volunteers of VMC model something quite different. I am grateful to work with people who make up and support the organization called Volunteer Ministry Center, a place where titles are secondary to understanding, caring and being compassionate.

Peace,



Rev. Dr. Bruce W. Spangler

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



*Kay Bradley*

Volunteers are the heartbeat of all nonprofits and VMC is no exception. Without the dedicated volunteers who daily bless us with their time and talents, we could not accomplish the work we do.

Kay Bradley is one of those volunteers.

So, how did Kay get connected with VMC? Back in early 2009, Kay had an opportunity to participate in a Day of Service with fellow employees of B&W Y-12 in Oak Ridge. That was her first time to come to VMC, but it was enough to pique her interest in doing more. Right after that, she attended a volunteer orientation to see how she could get plugged in on a regular basis. Working full time limited her availability to be directly involved in our programs, but she knew she could at least bring items our neighbors (clients) needed. She started bringing blankets and various items that were on the VMC "Wish List" printed in the quarterly newsletter. She

also asked the case managers what specific items were needed so she could get those too. Kay refers to her volunteering as "scrounging for the needy." She goes to yard sales, thrift stores, and church and estate sales collecting basic household items for our neighbors to have when they move into housing. She also purchases some items new, particularly pillows. These items are all on the "Move-In Basket" list.

Kay mentioned that she does this for two reasons: First, she wants to support the folks who have moved into housing, and having these items will give them confidence that they can be successful to maintain their homes. Secondly, it helps the case managers to know that their clients will have the things they need to maintain housing. It takes the burden of looking for household items off of the case managers.

"The case managers are the real heroes" says Kay. When a program member moves into housing, it is the case manager who locates furniture, loads it onto the truck, and moves it into the apartment. She loves the stories they tell such as the time when one client was so excited to get a shower curtain which meant she could now take a shower in privacy. The little things we all take for granted are tremendous blessings to those who, for so long, have carried their few belongings on their backs.

In addition to collecting items for VMC, Kay and her husband, Rob Tannert, come regularly to organize the room where these household items are stored. She sweetly refers to that room as "The Hope Chest." It reminds her of many years ago when mothers would collect household items for their daughters to give them when they got married and started their own home. What a beautiful way to describe a room full of used pots and pans, dishes, cups, mops and brooms. And the name is quite fitting, as the items in that room provide hope for a new life in a new home.

Kay's final comment: "Pillows are important. Everyone needs a brand new pillow to start their brand new life." VMC extends a heartfelt Thank You to Kay and Rob and all of the VMC volunteers.

By Mary Beth Ramey

## CARRY THE TORCH 2016



*John Quiñones spent time with VMC program members and staff before his presentation at the Carry the Torch luncheon.*

On April 20th, VMC had the distinct pleasure of featuring Emmy Award-winning anchor and author, John Quiñones, as the featured speaker for its annual Carry the Torch event. John's presentation of "What Would You Do?" made a significant and lasting impact on the audience. Before the luncheon, John took time to tour the VMC campus and meet the neighbors in our programs and the staff who work so hard to help them overcome homelessness. John was so cordial, taking time to answer questions and have his picture made. Although he is a national celebrity, he holds true to his roots and humble beginnings.

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## MEAL GROUP SPOTLIGHT



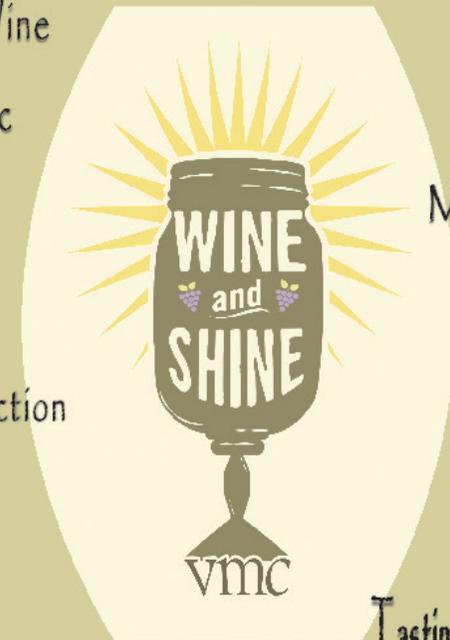
*Laurel Church of Christ has provided meals to program members for over 25 years. Thank You Laurel Church of Christ!*

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