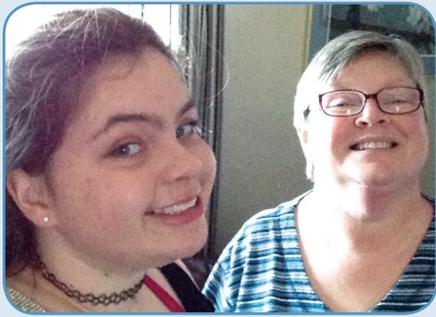


# The Journey Home

## THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD



*Tonya and her daughter*

by Bruce Spangler

I recently saw a cartoon portraying an individual hunched over carrying the world on their bent-over back. To another nearby, an explanation is offered, "It seems a little lighter when I think of it as a metaphor."

- Tonya is a single mother with a teen-age daughter.
- Tonya hurt her back and has not been able to work for the past two years.
- Tonya has exhausted her savings.
- Tonya has pawned many of her personal possessions.
- Tonya struggles to meet her utility and car payment obligations.
- There is always more month than money.
- Tonya knows the weight of the world!

Tonya has worked as a dental assistant most of her professional life.

However, two years ago while on a weekend church trip in the mountains, she seriously injured her back at a popular swimming area. Despite efforts to work through her injury, she had to quit her job. Shortly thereafter, she became a single mother and that is when her world started to get so heavy.

Out of work and with child support that is not enough to get through the month, Tonya quickly exhausted her savings. Then she pawned most of her personal items to "stretch the month," but that was only a short-term fix.

Struggling to pay her utility bill, she was directed by another agency to the Bush Family Refuge. After discussing her need, the Refuge was able to assist with her bill. During the conversation, Tonya revealed that it was her daughter's birthday but could not afford to purchase a gift. The Refuge staff gathered a bracelet and earrings from Sunshine Studio making for a last minute birthday surprise. Tonya was overwhelmed by the kindness. Yet, it also underscored that she was

now relying on total strangers for help to celebrate her daughter's birthday.

"It felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders," Tonya confesses. She adds that she felt worthless and even thought that she was "setting a bad example" for her daughter due to all the struggles.

The feeling of being a "bad example" came from her experience as a child.

At the age of eleven, Tonya was sent to an orphanage. Her mother, struggling with mental illness, lived between the streets and Eastern State, the former name of the now closed state mental hospital, Lakeshore. When the orphanage was closed, Tonya spent some time with family members but eventually struck out on her own as a teenager.

After odd jobs, a family member asked if she was going to "clean toilets" all her life. She decided that she must do something different so she enrolled in school to become a dental assistant. Finishing second in her class, she began her new career.

Thereafter, she was able to buy a modest house enabling her mother to move in until her death. Her happiest time of life, Tonya recalls, was with the birth of her daughter. Given her good career choice, marriage, her mother in a safe place, and now with a newborn, life had changed for the good. "I wanted to do well for my daughter and be a good example for her," Tonya recalls. She wanted her daughter to have a different experience from her own.

On that day in the Refuge, however, she was reminded that the weight of her world was extremely heavy but it was no metaphor; it was reality.



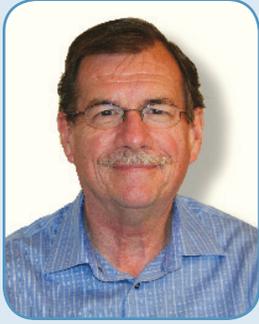
*Adopt a Family Project participants (left to right):  
Stephanie Milani, Terry Smith, Jenny Connatser,  
Rick Byrd, Trunda Brown, Becky Sanders, Susan Redmon,  
Steve Madden, Don Lindsey, Tim Wright, Tim Adams*

The Bush Family Refuge later received a request from a local business that was interested in partnering with a family during the holidays. With Tonya's permission, she was introduced to Stephanie, the representative of her colleagues from a local company.

Accessing the needs and in short order, Stephanie and her group replaced an old non-working oven

*continued on page 2*

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK



**Bruce Spangler,**  
CEO, Interim

The noted 19th century philosopher, psychologist, and physician, William James, says that , “[t]he community stagnates without the impulse of the individual; the impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.”

The work of the Volunteer Ministry Center is about being in relationship with a person (our neighbor) whose “impulse of life” is somewhat diminished by the lack of access to affordable, accessible, and appropriate housing or lives under

the threat of losing housing. Every work day, a staff member, both paid and volunteer, has the opportunity to share with a neighbor, “Will you work with us toward permanent housing? To have your own place – your own place with a door to lock? If you are willing to work with us, we will stick with you until that happens!” Or “Can we work together to help you keep your house or apartment, or find a more suitable and affordable place? We can help.”

Housing, as we know, promotes better health and education stability for children, decreases child separations from parents, reduces psychological distress and food insecurity, among many other positive effects.

Housing is about the impulse of life. And without community support, life impulses can and do wane.

Through your support along with many others, and during the 2015 year, Volunteer Ministry Center focused on its mission of ending and preventing homelessness. Here is the year “by the numbers.”

## Resource Center

91 individuals moved into permanent housing  
931 individuals received transitional support services  
24,348 meals served  
6,740 volunteer hours

## Bush Family Refuge

762 households received utility assistance  
97 households received rent assistance  
4,346 volunteer hours

## Dental Clinic

933 patient visits  
1,429 dental procedures  
1,038 volunteer hours

## Minvilla Manor

66 residents  
7,142 recorded support services  
813 average length of stay in days of those who left  
1,047 average length of stay in days of those who stayed

## Holiday Store

161 households served  
553 individuals served

William James’s quote suggests that it takes a “village” for all to thrive all the while acknowledging that when all thrive, the “village” lives.

So again, thanks for your support of VMC and joining in the impulsive effort in ending and preventing homelessness.

## THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD CONT'D...

with a new one and paid the next month’s utility and car payment obligations. When asked what she would need for Christmas, Tonya replied, “toothpaste, toilet paper and paper towels would be great.” When asked if there was something beyond those items, Tonya said that she always took her daughter to the Olive Garden for her birthday but was no longer able to do so. Due to the generosity of the group, Tonya’s daughter enjoyed an evening at the Olive Garden.

Tonya is a gracious yet reluctant receiver as relying on strangers challenges her self-respect. Yet, she is also a thoughtful giver.

When Tonya shared that her daughter has eczema, Stephanie replied that her son does as well. Upon visiting the home, Stephanie was greeted by Tonya with some coconut oil and a small Star Wars toy for her son. “Try this remedy. It will help,” she lovingly suggested.

Recently, Tonya has been approved for disability and soon with a stable income will be able to take care of her family. When asked how she gets through the hard times, she insists that there is always a sign of hope, and usually a very small one at that: a red bird on a bare tree limb against the pale, gray winter day, or an unsuspecting smiling face, or a kind word that appears innocent on the surface but

refreshes the soul. When things are the most difficult she reminds herself that her number one job is to care for her daughter and be a mother as her mother was not able to do and be for her.

One of the first things that she wants to do with her disability is to fix her leaking roof but more importantly, she plans on giving a donation. She says that she will give in order not to “pay it back,” but to “pay it forward to someone like me.”

Someone, I surmise, who also knows the weight of the world.

(Note: Tonya has granted permission to share these details about her life and family. She wants others like herself to know that they are not alone, insisting that the evidence of hope is always in small signs.)

*“A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”*

Wendell Berry

# A LOOK BACK AT 2015



*Sue Monk Kidd signs a book for a guest at the 2015 Carry the Torch Knoxville event.*



*The Brunswick Boats Meal Group is one of many volunteer groups who prepare and serve meals at VMC.*



*Volunteer Sally Gouffon provides front desk support for the Bush Family Refuge.*



*VMC Dental Clinic patient Darrell is smiling big and showing off his new dentures. He is one of 52 people to receive dentures in 2015.*



*This says it all!*



*Minvilla Manor resident Betty and Volunteer Julie enjoy coffee time.*



*VMC Case Manager Opal King presents Larry with a VMC keychain for his key upon signing a lease to his new apartment.*



*VMC Resource Center members are presented class completion certificates by case manager Dyril Higdon.*



*The 2015 VMC Dunkin' Donuts Run and Eat 5K.*

# MEET VMC CASE MANAGER DYRL HIGDON!



by Mary Beth Ramey

Dyrll Higdon is one of VMC's hard-working and dedicated case managers who has been with VMC for 10-1/2 years. Dyrll thoroughly enjoys his work. Being able to impact a change in people's lives and to witness the before and after of their life experiences is very rewarding. Dyrll shared that he worked in sales before coming to VMC and

his attitude toward homelessness was quite different then. He thought homeless folks were just lazy and didn't want to work. His thinking changed significantly when he realized there are numerous reasons for falling into homelessness: losing a job, serious illness or injury, mental illness, addiction issues, no family support or substitute means of income. All of these are factors in why Dyrll does what he does.

Like all VMC case managers, Dyrll works with his clients until they reach a level of independence or self-sufficiency. He continues to work with the first person he assisted into housing seven years ago. This particular client suffers from a mental illness and is easily taken advantage of by others, including family members. His client has a big heart and is easily influenced to give his money away. Dyrll continues to work with this gentleman to provide guidance and instruction so this man will not end up back on the streets. Not all of his clients need that intense follow up and many

will reach a level of independence within a year of achieving housing.

What gives him satisfaction? His response as his eyes light up: "Seeing people getting their worth and self-respect back and regaining control of their lives. Choices are taken away when you are at the mercy of others for a bed or a meal. Being homeless makes you feel less than whole and often as an outcast."

When asked about any frustrations with his work, he responded that it was difficult to accept that not everyone was raised the way he was, with love, encouragement, and being taught right from wrong. He realizes that he cannot be angry with a client for not knowing any better. Circumstances are different depending upon a person's upbringing and you cannot judge someone on the same level as you when they may have been taught differently or not at all. He accepts the fact that most of his clients are disadvantaged.

Dyrll shared the story of one of his clients who was homeless for 34 years and is now a resident of Minvilla Manor. This particular gentleman slept in a box on a dock in the Old City. One day, a VMC case manager was in the Old City and her car would not start. This homeless man came to her rescue and got her car started for her. She was not only grateful for getting her car started, but began the conversation about how VMC could help him. He joined the VMC Resource Center and Dyrll was assigned as his case manager. "These are the people we help," Dyrll commented. "These are the lives we change."

## CARRY THE TORCH 2016

Our 2016 Carry the Torch event is set for April 20 at the Knoxville Convention Center. This annual event is VMC's signature fundraiser and this year we are excited to share



that Emmy award winning anchor and author, John Quiñones, will be our featured speaker. He is the sole anchor of the 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.*

Mr. Quiñones 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."

For more information on Carry the Torch Knoxville or to sponsor a table, contact Mary Beth Ramey at 524-3926 x229 or [mramey@vmcinc.org](mailto:mramey@vmcinc.org).



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Compassion • Accountability • Results

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February, 2016

Dear Friends of VMC,

Horace Mann said that a “house without books is like a room without windows.”

Speaking of books, the most popular book sold through Amazon in 2015 is a children’s book intended for 1-3 years old, entitled *First Hundred Words*. I understand why that would be so.

We want our children to get off to a good start in life. This past December was my son’s 40th birthday. For one of his gifts, I gave him the 40th anniversary edition of Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. I gave this book to him early in his life, so I just wanted to remind him that I often think of that little boy. Life has changed a lot in 40 years, but for a moment there is a window of time standing still as I re-read “Early Bird.”

Oh, if you’re a bird, be an early bird  
And catch the worm for your breakfast plate.  
If you’re a bird, be an early early bird--  
But if you’re a worm, sleep late.”

What I find astonishing, maybe Mann would as well, is that three of the top ten books sold through Amazon in 2015 are coloring books, for adults! The Atlantic magazine had an article about the adult coloring book phenomenon where the author admits, “I found the trend mostly baffling and maybe a little dumb.” Her reaction suggests that coloring books are for children! To her surprise though, she found the time of coloring as relaxing, stress reducing, and “there’s something satisfying about seeing your thought and effort create a tangible, pretty thing at a reasonable predictable pace. This rarely happens in life.”

The experience of homelessness, if a book, would be a rather unpleasant and disturbing read. Living without a home negatively impacts the health and emotional well-being of individuals and families. The work of VMC attempts to add a chapter that is infused with hope, possibility, and the reality of securing permanent housing and an introduction to a caring community.

The impact on those who achieve housing is dramatic and noticeable. As a recent Minvilla Manor resident described his experience of being on the streets for years and now in his own place, “I just don’t have an apartment, I now have a home.”

I am sure that as a youngster, this resident may have been introduced to the likes of Shel Silverstein or Dr. Seuss with dreams common to all children. The nightmare of the streets is behind him now. This is made possible by your thoughtful and generous support.

I will not be surprised if one day that resident is found in his home with an adult coloring book as well.

So, I ask for your continued financial support that empowers individuals and families to secure and maintain housing. For there, early birds, worms, and coloring books are signs of hope and life.

As always, I would love to hear from you.

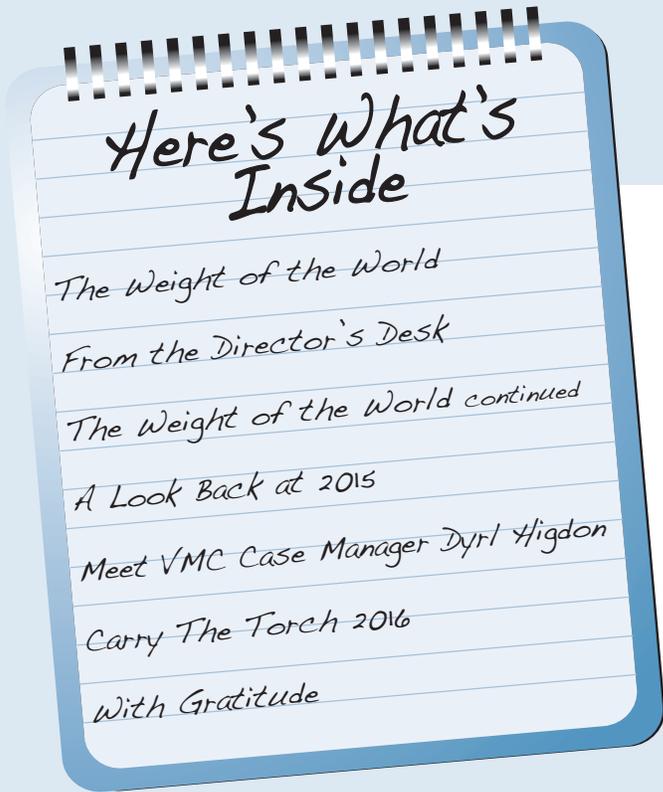
I write sincerely, and in Peace,

Bruce Spangler  
Chief Executive Officer - Interim



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## WITH GRATITUDE

It is with sincere gratitude that we express an immense Thank You to VMC donors, volunteers, and supporters for your generosity with your time and financial resources. Each one of you has shared your treasures to help the desperate, lonely, and cast out homeless and poor of our community. Your support of our programs means a home for the homeless, rent or utilities to remain in housing, dental care for those in poverty, and hope for a better life. The many enhanced services VMC provides are a direct result of your continued support, and for that we are grateful. Kindness, consideration, compassion, love, and encouragement, coupled with accountability, are the characteristics of the work VMC performs on a daily basis. And that work is fruitful. Our success is measured by many factors: the hundreds of formerly homeless individuals who are now in homes

and continue to maintain their housing; the hundreds of families who receive rent or utility assistance and are able to stay in their homes and not fall into homelessness; the many new smiles on the faces of those who receive free dental services through the VMC Dental Clinic; and the 57 formerly chronically homeless individuals who have a home at Minvilla Manor. Without your generosity and continued support of VMC we would not be able to continue the superior and much needed service we provide to our community. Thank you, thank you, thank you, and may each of you be richly blessed throughout the coming year!

Mary Beth Ramey  
VMC Chief Development Officer