

# The Journey Home

## OUT OF THE DARK PLACE

By Ginny Weatherstone

"You won't find my life very interesting," said Leslie Hudson. "I had a pretty happy childhood. There were eight kids and a pretty great home." Still, I knew that people become homeless for a reason – and that there was a story behind Leslie Hudson.

It is true that his early years were good ones. Leslie was born and raised in Houston, Texas. Education was valued in his family and his father, a nurse's assistant at a VA hospital, and his mom were always able to provide for their family. Leslie even started college. And then he fell in love! At the age of 18, he and his wife began their life's journey together. Leslie dropped out of college to drive a truck when the children started coming along. There were four little boys, tumbling over one another in their happy home. Four boys to educate and love. There was only one cloud hanging over their life and that was the chronic health problems of his wife. She had sickle cell anemia in addition to other health challenges over the years. After thirty years of marriage, as the kids were leaving home and the time was nigh for the two of them to enjoy their empty nest, Leanna Hudson sickened from the disease they thought she had beaten – and died within three months. Leslie nursed her until her death – and then he fell apart. "I went to a dark place," he told me. "I couldn't function. I fell apart. Everything reminded me of her." One year later, his beloved mother died.

Leslie's grief became a runaway freight train. He moved to Knoxville, where one of his sons lived with his wife. Two weeks after his arrival, his son's wife passed away unexpectedly. "I couldn't get away from death. It was a horrible, horrible time."

Leslie remained at his son's home for three years, cutting grass and doing odd jobs to contribute to his keep. But his mental health was disintegrating. "There was a lot of damage done during that dark time. I was battling depression and I

didn't get along with anybody. I was arguing with people. I couldn't sleep." There were several hospitalizations. After the final hospital stay, Leslie returned to his son's home and realized that his son had moved on with his life – and he had not. He knew that he needed to make his own arrangements. Now on medication, Leslie moved into a shelter. "I cried the first three or four nights," he remembers. "And then one day, I realized that it was time for me to get up and do something." Leslie became a member of the VMC Resource Center and was assigned to Case Manager Jered Croom. "Jered talked me off a ledge several times as I was working to get things together."



Leslie Hudson

After only three months of homelessness, Leslie signed a lease and moved into an apartment at Lee Williams. "I was embarrassed to be called 'ex-homeless,' but I've met so many ex homeless people who are good folks, who are doing awesome. No one is looking back; we're looking forward. Many of them came through VMC and we've gotten good help."

Leslie has been recognized by his peers as a leader. He has been asked to serve on the Tenant Council for all KCDC facilities and was recently elected Treasurer. He has also organized a Food Swap for folks who receive food pantry provisions which they might not use. Rather than waste the donated food, Leslie has found a way for them to share.

After his descent into the "dark place," Leslie is truly looking forward. It occurs to him that he might be happy again. He remains on his medication and faithfully keeps his mental health appointments. And then he dreams about a return to finish his degree or a way to augment his income. "I am determined to put this behind me," Leslie says.

And I think that, perhaps, he already has.

# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

There is a whole crew working on our parking lot right now, sealing the asphalt and re-stripping the parking places. Across the street at Minvilla Manor, preparations are underway to begin to paint the entire building. Our beautiful Minvilla was brick red when it opened. The paint that we were required to use at that point did not retain color well, and now, four years later, it is – well, pink. But soon it will be back to its historic red color. I can't wait! And soon, our groups of young people will be arriving to work on our landscaping, removing the weeds and freshening the mulch.

It must be paint-up, fix-up week at VMC! I love it.

It reminds me of the thought I had when Minvilla was under renovation. We took the old dilapidated building and gave it new life through the long process of construction. And when that building opened, we began to do the very same thing with the people who choose to live inside of it. New life.

Not too long ago, my husband and I hung a Boston fern outside our side door. A picture window looks out on it, and on the nest that a bird has built in the hanging pot. We saw the eggs and were mesmerized. One day, we heard the chirping of baby birds. More recently, we've seen the adult finches flying back and forth, busily trying to keep their offspring fed. And soon we will see those tiny bits of fluff attempt their first flights from the nest. This is the third year in a row that we've seen this cycle of hatching, growth and flight. And this annual visitation too reminds me of the process of transformation that it is my privilege to witness at VMC.

So Minvilla will sport a new coat of paint. And years from now, we will need to paint again. Next year, a new nest will be built and a new family of baby birds will be launched into the world. That is the thing about transformations. It is wonderful when it happens. And then it happens again and again. And every time, it is special indeed. Every time, it changes lives. And every time, we get to be a part of it.

## AN EVENING OF GROWTH AND RENEWAL



*The women of The Episcopal Church of the Good Samaritan*

Five years ago, Barbara Ashdown had an idea to start a series of personal interest programs for women at VMC. After successfully receiving funding from her church, The Episcopal Church of the Good Samaritan, Mrs. Ashdown and a group of about 15 women attended a training orientation at VMC. Two months later they started their first program making holiday crafts for the upcoming season.

Over time, as attendance grew and the participants gave input on what they liked, Women's Night was born. Once a month, the group from Good Sam comes to VMC and meets with female neighbors for a theme night. Activities like

jewelry making, cross painting, and exercising are among the themes, as are beneficial life skills like budgeting and using coupons.

Two of the most popular nights are Game Night and Spa Night. During Game Night, participants play Bingo and have the opportunity to win small prizes. On Spa Night, volunteer hair stylists and nail and skin specialists come to offer their professional services. Both nights encourage the women to leave the stress of their current living situation at the door and take some time for themselves.

Mrs. Ashdown says that "working with our women neighbors at the VMC has been a transformational experience for our group as well as the women who attend. This has provided spiritual growth and renewal for all of us. We are women who come together to share and help one another."

For volunteer opportunities, please contact Lisa Hutton at 865-524-3926 ext. 230 or [lhutton@vmcinc.org](mailto:lhutton@vmcinc.org).



*Spa Night*

# CARRY THE TORCH 2014/2015

## 2014 Pat Conroy / 2015 Sue Monk Kidd



*Peter Keese, Neill Townsend, Pat Conroy, Betsey Bush, and Ginny Weatherstone at the Carry the Torch Knoxville 2014 Sponsor Reception*

On April 23, VMC welcomed *New York Times* best-selling author Pat Conroy to the Knoxville Convention Center for its annual Carry the Torch Knoxville event. The day began with a Mission Fair that showcased services provided through local agencies to the area's homeless. Attendees had the chance to learn more about volunteer opportunities with the organizations as well.

The Mission Fair was followed by a luncheon at which Mr. Conroy spoke to a crowd of nearly 1100 about his personal experiences with mental illness and its devastating effects when left untreated. Some of Mr. Conroy's family members suffer from psychiatric disorders, one of whom took his own life. Should his brother have had a place like VMC,

Mr. Conroy expressed, he would have had a much better chance at healing. Repeatedly, Mr. Conroy emphasized the importance of VMC programs while humoring the audience with colorful life stories.

The luncheon concluded with a response from Honorary Chair and longtime friend of VMC, Betsey Bush, and VMC CEO Ginny Weatherstone, who spoke of the organization's commitment to offering quality, clinically-based programs to end and prevent homelessness as we know it in our community.

The Seventh Annual Carry the Torch Knoxville event is scheduled for March 25, 2015 and will feature award-winning author Sue Monk Kidd. One of Ms. Kidd's novels, *The Secret Life of Bees*, has been made into a major motion picture and was also produced on stage in New York by The American Place Theater. Ms. Kidd's latest novel, *The Invention of Wings*, was inspired by actual historical figures in Charleston, S.C. and speaks with wisdom about the nature of evil and injustice, the courage to dare what seems unattainable, and the hope inside of us that the worst darkness can't extinguish.



*Sue Monk Kidd*

For more information on Carry the Torch Knoxville, contact Mary Beth Ramey at 865-524-3926 ext. 229 or [mramey@vmcinc.org](mailto:mramey@vmcinc.org).

## WHAT VMC MEANS TO ME

A little more than a year ago I was fortunate enough to be offered a position on staff at Volunteer Ministry Center. I had no professional background with non-profits but did possess a deep-rooted sense of justice instilled in me by my mother, a career-long champion in the non-profit world. While my previous career experience provided me with the necessary skill set for the position, I was unprepared for the emotional requirements. It quickly became apparent that compassion and empathy are essential, as are patience and kindness. What was so impressive was to see how everyone here exemplified them. When someone comes to VMC for help they may be disagreeable, angry, or sometimes even aggressive. But underneath those behaviors they are just people that need help and are afraid. The entire VMC team, from volunteers to staff alike understands this and treats each client with dignity and respect.

This was very impactful on me. As I began answering phone calls from people in need, seeing families in crisis every day waiting in line for the Refuge to open, hearing the stories of our neighbors downstairs in the Resource Center, I began to experience something I never had with a job before, humility. I realized just how fortunate

I truly am and felt almost silly for worrying about what I thought were "life problems." I saw what real struggles were. From then, as my heart opened, I came to work each morning excited; excited to help, excited to learn, excited to grow. Throughout the next couple of months I developed something else I never had before, pride. It extended beyond me and to everyone at VMC and our mission. I was in awe of the amazing work tirelessly performed here and was honored to be a part of it.

In the past, I worked hard for money. At VMC, we work hard for people. My jobs had always filled my wallet but never my soul. It is with a heavy heart that the next chapter of my life begins on the West Coast but it is a heart filled with joy. Thank you from the bottom of it for the opportunity to be a part of something so much bigger than myself and so undeniably wonderful.

Lee Turner  
Administrative Office Manager



*Lee Turner*



# THE VMC RESOURCE CENTER

## Community Meetings



*Community Meeting in the VMC Resource Center*

Every Friday at 11:30am a special event takes place in the VMC Resource Center, the weekly Community Meeting. It is the time when neighbors and staff come together for announcements, to discuss current and future events, and most importantly, to acknowledge the week's accomplishments.

The meeting is led by a VMC staff member who first asks other staff members around the room to introduce themselves to the group. After

introductions, applause fills the room as neighbors attending their first Meeting are recognized. The applause celebrates that first step in the journey from homelessness to housing, a personal commitment to a better life. But, it doesn't stop there. Every accomplishment is recognized with more applause; obtaining an I.D., applying for a job, applying for housing, winning an appeal. Of course, the ultimate victory that everyone works for is a lease signing. When a neighbor signs a lease they are presented with a silver VMC keychain. This keychain is symbolic of the fact that in the past our neighbors didn't have keys, they had no home. Now, they have a bed of their own and a door to lock. The keychain will always serve as a reminder of their success.



*Jane and Steve with Case Managers Jered and Dyril after signing their lease*

## VMC Classes – New Beginnings

When an individual is interested in joining the VMC Resource Center, the first step is to meet with Provisional Case Manager Jamie Brown. Typically a two week process, "Provisional" is a time for the individual to decide, with a simultaneous evaluation by VMC staff, whether they are a proper match for the program. Following the provisional status, new members are assigned a regular housing case manager who will proceed with the member's housing plan. New members (neighbors) now have access to a multitude of services offered through VMC. Group classes are one of the services offered and are designed to provide neighbors with the necessary tools to achieve and retain housing.

Upon entering case management, Resource Center Director Gabe Cline leads an educational class that focuses on community resources and the housing application process. The goal is to give clients information so that they can empower themselves. Neighbors then have accurate knowledge about what resources are out there and what they need to do to access them.

Case Manager Nancy Douglas, who leads an Anger Management class says, "The class is a safe place to share experiences and feelings. We learn that you can't eliminate anger, but how you react to anger can be controlled. Techniques and skills to take control and express anger appropriately are learned. In anger management class, we learn to acknowledge our anger, and to choose how to express it in a way that is peaceful, redemptive and character building. In our last session, it was said best. 'I didn't realize I



*Gabe Cline teaches a class in the VMC Resource Center*

was an angry person. The class made me think about being accountable for my actions. I will do things differently now."

Some classes focus on the spiritual aspect of life's journey. Spirituality and the Twelve Steps- Class is based on the book, "Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps", by Richard Rohr. The class focuses on releasing life obstacles via application of the spirituality aspect of the twelve step program. The atmosphere during the session is often

introspective, reflective and fun.

One of the newer classes is Roots and Leaves which explores concepts that explain family development and functioning. Neighbors discover, cry/laugh and display great respect for the unique journeys they have all traveled. Often, attendees arrive at their first class apprehensive of the topic and process. Yet, the hope for changing one's trajectory compels neighbors to come back and complete the 6 session course.

Personal Responsibility, Alcohol & Drug Awareness, and Computer Training round out the classes available to all neighbors and can even play a role in helping to obtain housing. Occasionally, an addiction may have resulted in a negative mark against a neighbor's file. A certificate of completion for one of these classes weighs favorably in an appeals case by demonstrating a positive change in behavioral patterns. Neighbors sign up for classes for many reasons but the outcome is always the same; knowledge is gained, and knowledge is power.



*Graduates of the Anger Management class with Chaplain Jeff Perkins*



Volunteer Ministry Center

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[www.vmcinc.org](http://www.vmcinc.org)

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Ginny Weatherstone  
*Chief Executive Officer*



Participating Agency

June, 2014

Dear Friends of VMC,

When I started working at VMC seventeen years ago, it was explained to me that I would be writing the quarterly newsletter. "Pay particular attention," I was told, "to the letter at the end. That's where you ask for contributions." To the horror of the person providing direction to me, I began to call it the Begging Letter. "No! No!" I was told. "You have to be far more subtle than that!"

One of the things that I've lost over the years is some of the subtlety. This has happened gradually and in response to the front-row seat I have into the varied needs of our community. I remember the woman who came to see us who lived in high-rise housing who acknowledged that she had not seen an eye doctor for 20 years and she was afraid she was going blind. Could we help? I recall the gentleman who wandered in one day, wearing a hospital gown and a colonoscopy bag. He didn't know where he was or how he got here. Could we help? I remember the bedraggled young man who came to us one early morning after his young wife had just given birth in a cheap motel. This overwhelmed young couple was traveling to Florida in search of work, but the baby didn't wait. Someone sent him to us. Could we help?

Mostly I recall that there are almost 700 people who came to us in the deplorable state of homelessness who we have assisted with their move into housing and off the streets. Many of them have disabilities; many are mentally ill. They came to us with one question: can we help?

And always the answer is "Yes." It is an affirmative and life-changing "yes," the kind of answer that inspires hope and renewed effort. The answer is "yes" because you make it possible. Your gift means that our doors are open for people to enter and our programs are staffed by gifted professionals and trained volunteers. We need your donations. There is nothing subtle about that, I know. But there is something urgent. So once again, with very little subtlety, I ask you to be generous. Your gift means the world to us; it means a new lease on life for someone in need.



I thank you.

Ginny Weatherstone  
Chief Executive Officer



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## WISH LIST

- Deodorant
- Sunblock
- Insect Repellant
- Washcloths
- Razors
- Mulch
- Six hanging flower baskets

### **Move-In Basket Items:**

**pots and pans, utensils, dish washing liquid, sponges, towels, cleaners, toilet paper, paper towels.**

For a complete list of items please visit the HELP US section at [www.vmcinc.org](http://www.vmcinc.org).

## ANGELS IN THE GARDEN LUNCHEON



**Anne Neilson**

On August 21, VMC will host Angels in the Garden, a fundraising event at the home of Mrs. Lucy Schaad, showcasing internationally-renown artist Anne Neilson. Ms. Neilson began her artistic career with a successful pottery business, Herring Designs, Inc. (1989 to 1997). After a brief interlude spent focused on her growing family, she rekindled her lifelong passion for art in 2003 when she began painting in oils. Neilson quickly became nationally known for her ethereal Angel Series paintings which are inspiring reflections of her faith and flair for color and light.

Angels In Our Midst is a beautiful 9 x 12 coffee table book about Anne H. Neilson's Angel Series and the stories behind the paintings. Sprinkled throughout the book are devotions, inspirational stories about the many charities she has supported, and quotes from art dealers and collectors. The book sold 10,000 copies in the first year and is currently in its fifth printing. Attendees of the event will receive a copy of Angels In Our Midst and Ms. Neilson will be available for a signing. Tickets are \$150.00. For more information, please contact Lisa Hutton at 865-524-3926 ext. 230 or at [lhutton@vmcinc.org](mailto:lhutton@vmcinc.org).

