



By Stephanie Doyle
Photos by Cheryl Van Stockum

A place for everyone

It's 11:30 on a steamy Wednesday morning and as cars whiz by and shoppers duck into shops, something remarkable is happening in a fairly unremarkable stone building on the 700 block of Main Street.

"How do you feel when your electric is cut off?" Rhonda Gillman asks.

Promptly the answers come.

"Empty."
"Depressed."
"Lost."

"Imagine trying to cook a meal in the dark, or trying to fix your hair in the dark, it would be hard, huh?" Gillman says. "When the light comes on, the job is easier. Well, living day to day in this world is hard, but when we read the words of scripture it becomes easier, because Jesus tells us how to handle any prob-

Mission Director Rhonda Gillman leads the God's Kitchen midday prayer. Right, lunch is served each weekday at God's Kitchen.



lem we have. He gives us direction in our lives, Jesus does not want us in the dark, he loves us too much. He is the light!"

Every day, five days a week – same time, same place – Gillman, the decade-long director of God's Kitchen, the outreach mission of Victory Baptist Church, creates a spiritual dialogue among a group of men, women and children.

Then, they pray.

Then, they eat.

Big Joe Reister

It all began with an older man known to many as Big Joe Reister, who lived in the junkyard on Snow Hill, Gillman said. "It was a shell of an old trailer with no running water and no electricity," she said. "He would walk downtown every day and stop in ... usually at lunch time."

Often, Gillman gave him her lunch. If she hadn't brought one, "we would fix him a bowl of soup or anything we could find." Gillman shared this with Daisy Baxter, the wife of Rev. Jesse Baxter, who was pastor of Victory Baptist at the time.

Daisy told Gillman, "We could cook some soup beans and cornbread." Soon, they were feeding one, and then two, then three, four and five.

"Big Joe has passed away but a wreath hangs in his honor at God's Kitchen because really the ministry was begun for him," Gillman said.

Everyone needs to eat

Some of the approximately 25 here on a recent Wednesday have lost their jobs. Some can afford to pay rent but have no money remaining for groceries. And others choose to spend what little money they have on cigarettes, or alcohol or drugs.

To Gillman, it does not matter. Everyone needs to eat. Today, it's baked beans with hot dogs and pasta salad. "It's the first time we've made pasta salad," kitchen director Stacy Beckham says proudly.

Beckham, who has no formal chef training but said she always enjoyed cooking at home, prepares lunch each weekday at God's Kitchen. The meal she is most proud of so far: chicken Alfredo.

Beckham does not get paid. She says she simply enjoys helping people. "Besides, we could all end up in here in here tomorrow," she said.



Isaac celebrates his second birthday at God's Kitchen. Gillman led everyone in signing, "Happy birthday and God bless you."



The ingredients for the ongoing lunches are supplied by 13 area churches: Victory Baptist, First Christian, First Baptist, Church of the Annunciation, St. James Episcopal, Shelby Christian, First Presbyterian, Serenity Center, Centenary Methodist, Highland Baptist, Bethlehem Baptist, Beechridge Baptist and Ralph and Kate.

"They're so faithful, they've been serving for years," Gillman said.

Meeting other necessities

When men and women find themselves walking up the stairs to God's Kitchen, it's often for more than a plate of lunch. The building opens at 9 each weekday morning – for coffee and donuts. "It's an especially good time in the extreme heat and the extreme cold," Gillman said. "And a lot of folks just need conversation," she added.

In fact, she insists that be a priority among volunteer staff. "Just setting down and talking to them," Gillman said. "They are desperately needing human touch."

Debra Gonzalez, who is unemployed and looking for factory work or a cleaning job, said God's Kitchen has fed her when she is hungry and provided her with

clothes.

"It gives you some faith," she said. Two years ago Gonzalez was living on the street. Today, with the help of God's Kitchen, she has her own apartment and is caring for her granddaughter. Julie Van, who is pregnant and works part-time at a gas station, said she enjoys visiting with people at God's Kitchen. Soon, she plans to donate her spare time to the place that has helped her. "They will help you with everything here," she said. "They don't turn anyone away."

After eating a slice of pound cake, Van headed upstairs to "shop." There are rooms filled with racks of men's, women's and children's clothes and shelves of shoes and handbags. Posted signs request the "shoppers" shop just one time per month and take a maximum of 10 items. "I'm looking for pants for big babies," said Van, pointing to her belly. "None of my clothes are fitting."

Across the upstairs hallway, volunteer Mickie Booth organized cans of pasta sauce and sliced pineapple, and boxes of Tuna Helper and spaghetti. From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays, the "grocery store" is open. Bags are pre-packaged and free to those who need them. Families of three or more

receive a larger bag. "We've had quite a few this morning already," Booth said.

The store has been closed at times because of lack of donations. Among the greatest needs, Booth said, are peanut butter, soups, toilet paper, paper towels, and shampoo.

And the giving doesn't stop with sandwiches and shoes. An elderly man with an eye injury visited God's Kitchen six consecutive days, and during each visit Gillman changed his eye bandages. "Someone asked me, 'Why do you do this?'"

She said the answer was simple. "That's what Jesus would do."

And as the men and women themselves validated, Gillman, like Jesus, does not turn anyone away.

"We're a little diverse," she said. "It's not unusual to have a drug addict or a prostitute walk in our (worship) service – and we're good with that."

Editor's Note: Four days later, we ran into Debra Gonzalez during her first visit (and ours) to Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Read about the experience on page 14.



"Shopper" Julie Van browses through a stack of pants in the clothing area above God's Kitchen.



Volunteer Mickie Booth prepares food bags for visitors of the "grocery store" above God's Kitchen.