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On a Mission

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Volunteers come together to expand agency

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It's 91 degrees and 16-year-old Christina Schwartz is shoveling chunks of smashed concrete. She drops the shovel only to have it eagerly snagged by 13-year-old Joshua Smedley.

Schwartz isn't a quitter, she just noticed someone in need. A couple of men have stopped by Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex hoping for a sandwich and she's eager to oblige.

So Smedley takes up the labor and continues filling the wheelbarrow, which now holds more weight in cement than Smedley's 105 pounds.

"I'm doing whatever I can to help the kids who can't have what I have," Smedley said.

Smedley and Schwartz, along with about 10 other teen-agers from Midland's Wilshore Park youth group, are just a few of the hundreds of volunteers who are donating their time, knowledge, money or resources to help the ongoing expansion of Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex facility in downtown Arlington. The nonprofit organization is hopeful the construction will be completed in about a month's time.

The expansion will give some much needed breathing room to the 14-year-old organization, which provides services for more than 300 families a day.

Tillie Burgin, the director of Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex, walks proudly with a gentle grace through the growing facility. She often pauses to give a pat on the back or flash her warm smile.

She points out the floor of the new office area. It doesn't match, but it doesn't look bad either. The tile material is the same, but while one office is a pale red, another is a light green.

"All this that you see on this floor was donated," she said, "a lot of donated labor, a lot of donated supplies. People have come together to give us this space that we think is going to help more people."

Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex has been helping people since 1986, when Burgin helped found the mission. Since that time she's seen a lot of expansion.

"In 1990, we moved in that building. We thought it was so big that we'd never fill it up," she said.

They have filled it up, though, and the expansion is necessary. It might seem sad that the need is so great that it merits expansion, but Burgin doesn't see it that way.

"Not when you get a chance to work with a life," she said. "So many of the folks you see around here today are people who got help maybe a year ago, two years ago and are back volunteering. So if we can get folks here it gives us a chance to help them spiritually, physically, emotionally, educationally."

The complex includes several buildings used as a food pantry, medical clinic and way station for beds, which by the end of the day will be delivered to those needing a place to lay their heads.

Every day there are people needing the services provided by the mission, so closing during the construction was not an option. Instead the volunteers have gotten creative. A donated bus was renovated and temporarily turned into an office.

The real challenge of the project falls on the shoulders of general contractor Louis Heinze. He has to have the vision to arrange the projects so they can be carried out by the unskilled workers, like the Wilshire Park group.

"It's great being able to coordinate it so it works with the volunteers and seeing the joy they get out of it, the fact that I can coordinate it to where they can do it," Heinze said.

He said the work on the pantry that the Wilshire Park group has done during the week they've spent here not only saves money but time. He said what might have taken four weeks will be turned around in about a week's time.

"It's different, but it's gratifying to see it all fit together," he said. "I enjoy doing it that way. Not only does it help us but it helps them. They'll finish a project and have the gratification of seeing it finished before they leave."

Heinze also points out the indirect contributions people make, saying that his co-workers have taken on extra work so he can spend more time working with the mission.

As Burgin walks through the wooden skeleton amid volunteers with circular saws and jackhammers, she points to a 4-foot square room that was once the only bathroom. She's very excited that soon they will have separate men's and women's restrooms.

She also points out a spot where Lauren Musgrave, the director of food services, will get a pantry.

Musgrave said she's relieved to have the extra space.

"It's critical. We have room now for everybody to wait inside," Musgrave said. "We have room for a food pantry that we can work out of. People have more space to work in, especially the private rooms for counseling, which we haven't had before. So if people come in with a need, they can have a private conversation."

She said electricians are coming in after a full day's work and staying all night offering their trade skills to the facility. She said this type of effort and the compassion of the volunteers are creating a successful expansion process.

"Everyone has worked so hard to keep us up and running so we can provide uninterrupted service," she said. "It's amazing how sensitive the construction guys are at directing people to the food pantry or dental clinic."

Henry Daniel is one of those people in need. His children have just moved in with him from Mississippi and while he's got a home for them, they need groceries.

"This place is very important," Daniel said. "At one point in time we all need help. God put us

here to help each other."

Burgin's day of helping people begins at 3:30 a.m. and ends around 9 or 10 p.m. As she walks out to the front of the mission building, she proudly points up to a red, nine-foot star. When construction is complete the star will illuminate the night.

"What we want that star to do is point the way for the people," she said. "If they are lost out there, they don't know where to go or what to do, they can find their way."

PHOTO(S): Brian Lawdermilk

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