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Years of help

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Arlington mission observes anniversary of its founding

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When Tillie Burgin arrived at Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex at 3:30 a.m. earlier this week, a line had already formed for the free dental clinic. But it wasn't unusual for the mission's executive director to see about 10 people waiting that early for one of the center's services.

For more than a decade, thousands of residents have come to the mission for medical attention, food for family dinners and closer relationships with God.

Friday night, about 80 people celebrated the mission's 15th anniversary at its downtown office. As part of a weekend event, participants toured the facility and visited Bible study locations. Several former volunteers, Bible study leaders and staff members attend the program. Conferences will be held today, and there will be a worship service Sunday.

James Brown, a volunteer and pastor of Victory Church in Fort Worth, attended the program because he believes the center plays an important role in the community.

"It's not that Arlington is poorer than others, but there is a need that many people don't see," Brown said.

The nonprofit organization evolved from a weekly Bible study. As more people attended the group, Burgin became more aware of the problems in the community. Shortly after, the mission was formed to meet people's physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

"I want everybody to have a chance to be OK," Burgin said.

About 33,000 people a year visit the center for doctor appointments, financial assistance and other services.

A central feature of the mission is Bible study, and each week about 3,500 people attend sessions at one of the 247 locations in the Metroplex. Morning devotion is also held in the center's front room.

During the week, about 1,000 volunteers perform various tasks at the center, such as sorting donated furniture, clothes and other items and delivering them to clients.

Twenty-year-old Cindy Bassegy has been a volunteer since moving from Houston at age 10. She teaches Bible study weekly and runs an after-school program in the Huntington Chase Apartments.

Bassegy said she has seen the Bible lessons change children's behavior and improve their performance in school.

"I don't feel like I'm talking to the wall," said Bassegy with tears in her eyes. "They're actually doing what I'm teaching."

Although the economy has steadily changed over the past 15 years, Burgin said the worries of residents remain the same. People continue to struggle to pay monthly bills and buy groceries, she said.

To help ease the hardship, clients can receive financial assistance for rent, utilities, gasoline and prescriptions. In 2000, the mission distributed \$300,000 to nearly 42,000 people. There is also a food pantry that serves about 5,000 people monthly.

Recently, staff member Jim Burgin, Tillie Burgin's son, helped a single father get clothes and school supplies for his three young children. The man's wife walked out on the family, leaving him to raise the children on his \$1,000 monthly paycheck.

Now the man receives assistance from the mission and attends Grace Street Fellowship church, where Jim Burgin is pastor.

Tillie Burgin said although the mission has expanded its services and increased its client base, the focus of the center remains the same.

"It's just people helping people," Burgin said. "It's kind of like heaven on Earth."

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