



*Executive director Tillie Burgin hugs an employee after morning devotion Sept. 18 at Mission Arlington. Burgin has been in charge since the inception of the mission in 1986.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños*

**T**ucked away at the corner of Oak Street and Center Street sits a set of buildings positioned to look like a mini neighborhood. Eight small house-like fixtures make up the Mission Arlington complex, a daily reminder to its founders of its exponential growth over the last 37 years.

At its founding in 1986, Mission Arlington was a section of one building, with its iconic red star on the wall facing the street and a single cross on the back wall to represent the employees' love for their savior. Its goal? To help people find success through God's provisions.

Since then, the Mission — behind generous donations and the tireless work of its volunteers — has evolved into a service-centered empire.

Last year, the organization reported serving over 363,000 people. That number spans nearly a dozen services, including child care, emergency assistance, the medical clinic and furniture deliveries. Over the last 20 years, the Mission has helped over six million people, according to its records.



“It’s a life at a time,” executive director Tillie Burgin said. “We don’t bundle up numbers, but numbers represent people.”

Executive director Tillie Burgin sits in her office Sept. 4 at Mission Arlington. Burgin’s day lasts from 3 a.m. until 9 p.m. Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

Through all the expansion and people helped, Mission Arlington has had one leader since its creation. One woman to right the ship and lead the Mission forward. She works 364 days a year (she takes Christmas off) and wears full suits to the office every day, even when it’s 108 degrees outside. She comes in at 3 a.m. and goes home at 9 p.m.

“[God’s] grace is sufficient, and he provides strength,” Burgin, 87, said in regards to what gets her through the long days. “If we believe, we know that He provides for us.”

Burgin has created something she never expected when she first set out to serve the community nearly four decades ago. Hundreds of people come into the Mission’s front room every day for assistance. The 50-seat lobby sits nearly full throughout the day with front desk staff working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays and 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays to help as many people as they can.

As Burgin walks through the Mission’s buildings, she’s often stopped by volunteers and people visiting Mission Arlington for help. Despite her busy schedule, Burgin makes time for everyone.

“It’s just what you do,” Burgin said. “God’s love in us helps us to love others.”

She hugs people and asks about their family. When Terrion Alexander, a volunteer with the Mission since 2014, told Burgin he and his wife were expecting a child, Burgin teared up, reacting “like we told our grandmother,” Alexander said with a smile.

“We’re family,” he said.



*Volunteers help load furniture into a truck Sept. 4 at Mission Arlington. Furniture is delivered at no cost to those who have need.*



*A hand-painted message on a toy donation bin collects items Sept. 4 at Mission Arlington. Families in need can come by and pick out toys, furniture and other material needs.*

*Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños*

Alexander is one of thousands that volunteer their time to the Mission. In 2022, Mission Arlington reported nearly 8,000 people volunteered over 185,000 hours of their time.

These volunteers help run the

medical clinic, community store, dental clinic, counseling center, and the furniture center.

“[Volunteers are] really important to us, because if they didn’t come, we’d be in a heap of trouble,” Burgin said. “But they come, and what happens to them is huge, because in coming they’re giving and blessing others. And when they go home, they’re fulfilled.”

Arlington Mayor Jim Ross said Mission Arlington helps teach the community and gives people an opportunity to get involved. One of the unspoken lessons the Mission has taught the community is the benefits of being gracious with their time, money and services. The amount of people that come out to volunteer is beyond belief, he said.

Whether it’s a guitar-enthused pastor leading the daily devotion at 8 a.m. or local high school students sorting food items, the Mission is always in good hands. Johana

Zambrano serves as a pastor's assistant and said Burgin helped her feel welcome in the U.S. when she moved from Venezuela. The two women met seven years ago on a Sunday as Zambrano looked for a church, and five years later she started volunteering for the Mission.

"The first thing [Tillie] ever did to me was receive me," Zambrano said. "She was the first face that I knew because she tried to make me welcome that day. Even with my borrowed English in that moment, she understood my need and she took my hand and said 'Hey, follow me.'"



Mission Arlington employees gather and sing during morning devotion Sept. 18 at Mission Arlington. The members have morning devotion everyday at 8 a.m.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

Before Mission Arlington was helping hundreds a day through its ecosystem, it was a single Bible study in an apartment building when Burgin made a personal visit to a woman with a physical need. One building quickly turned into six, then 12, then 36, Burgin said. Today, the Mission offers Bible studies in 364 locations, every Sunday at 11 a.m. since 1986.

"They don't have to dress up. They don't have to have suits and ties. They don't have to have transportation and it's sort of built into loving folks right where they are," Jim Burgin, Tillie's son, said about the Bible studies.

Jim Burgin said one of Tillie's favorite tasks is being the dumpster manager. It gives her a chance to personally guarantee that nothing that could potentially help someone is thrown

away. She sifts through boxes on a ladder to make sure the Mission is helping as many people as possible.

“She’s always here, so I think it’s a ministry of presence and being consistent over time,” Jim Burgin said. “So many folks don’t have consistency in their lives. We’re always open 364 days a year. Her heart, her spirit, her passion for God and for people impacts this place.”



Paintings lean against a storage container Sept. 4 at Mission Arlington. Last year, the organization reported serving over 363,000 people in need.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

Tillie Burgin’s roots in service started long before the Mission. In the late 1960’s, she worked in Korea as a coordinator for youth activities for over 365 churches. She also tutored English to Korean women and was an elementary supervisor at Korean Christian Academy. She said the 4 a.m. daily church bells in Korea helped inspire her vision for Mission Arlington.

**“There’s very few people on this earth that you meet that are as pure of character as somebody like Tillie Burgin.”**

### **Jim Ross Arlington Mayor**

When she came back to her hometown in Arlington, she wanted to continue helping people through the Mission. She remembered needing help when she was a child, so she wanted to pay it forward to those in the community she lived in.



“If you can do missions in Korea, why can’t you do missions in Arlington?” Tillie Burgin recalled thinking to herself.

She said it’s a blessing to stay in one community and watch it grow like she has with Arlington. Now an elder, as she puts it, she gets to look back at how far the city has come and how much more it can grow.

“We champion today,” Tillie Burgin said. “We don’t waste time in thinking about yesterday but we build on yesterday, what it is today and what it will be tomorrow.”



Community members sit outside the main building Sept. 4 at Mission Arlington. People can fill out an “application of assistance,” where applicants can list their needs.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

When patrons walk into Mission Arlington, they’re handed an “application for assistance” - available in English and Spanish. It asks for a person’s name, address, household size, income and if this is their first visit or a return visit.

From there, there’s a space at the bottom of the form titled “How can we help you?” where applicants list what they need assistance with. Whether it’s medical care, food, clothes or anything in between, the Mission is there to help as many people as it can.

Mission Arlington’s purpose may be to help those in need, but their volunteers have grown as people in their time at the Mission as well. Heather Young, who’s worked there since 2006, said she’s a different person now than she was 17 years ago.

She said being a believer and wanting to share Christ with people has shown her what it looks like to be loved by her savior. Sharing that unconditional love with people is huge and makes the Mission feel like a family, Young said.

Doctors volunteer at the Mission's medical clinic for free, performing over 10,000 visits a year to people who can't give anything in return, Andrea Wilson said. Wilson has been the clinic's director since 1998.

"When you're working, you're working because the patient pays you and that doesn't always satisfy that altruistic need to get to help a patient who can't return anything to you," Wilson said.

Ross said the care and support Mission Arlington provides is "critically important" to the city, saving Arlington millions of dollars a year. The city pairs its mental health and social worker resources with Mission Arlington to assist homeless people and citizens struggling with their mental health.



Moving trucks park outside Sept. 4 at Mission Arlington. The trucks are used to pick up and drop off donations.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

But not all volunteers are there by choice. The Mission accepts people on parole or people who have been sentenced to community service. Alexander, who now works as a supervisor for Mission Arlington, said he's worked alongside people who don't want to be there, but find the Mission's separation from the justice system helpful.

Tillie Burgin said she values the people who come to the Mission through those channels, stating they become good friends of Mission Arlington. With what's happened to them, they often look to help others, she said.

People who go to Mission Arlington for their community service learn life lessons they'd never expect to receive, Ross said. Many people choose to continue voluntarily working with the Mission after their community service requirements have been met, he said.

They come in to do their hours and, rather than condemning them, the Mission welcomes them with open arms. Alexander never asks what got these people in trouble, but rather asks who they are and what they do for a living. He said he's learned a lot from Burgin on how to be a Christian, and walking the walk instead of talking the talk.

"This is her everything," Alexander said. "She's devoted everything to this and it's amazing."

Tillie Burgin's lifelong drive to help others is motivation for the volunteers, Alexander said. Her passion and energy changed his mindset on working. Before, he looked forward to retiring after a career of work. After seeing Burgin, Alexander knows there will always be something more to give.

"She's real big on not just pointing and telling people what to do but jumping in the mix," he said. "Say we have a truck that pulls in, they have 100 boxes. She could easily just point and tell everybody what to do. But she's gonna get in the truck and go through them with the people."





Volunteers sort through donations at the collection center Aug. 30 at Mission Arlington. The mission reported that over 8,000 people volunteered 185,000 hours in 2022.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

Burgin's on her feet all day. From meetings with local businesses to helping the volunteers lift trash into the dumpsters, she's not afraid to do whatever's needed to keep the Mission on track. She loves working with people and never wants to be too far away from them.

Ross said she has more energy than any 10 people he knows. He's convinced her drive and heart came straight from God. Burgin knows what she was called to do, and she's doing just that, Ross said.

"There's very few people on this earth that you meet that are as pure of character as somebody like Tillie Burgin," he said.

Her work has inspired many, and some, like Cassie Hart, have stayed with her throughout the Mission's history. Hart joined the Mission when it was created and her 17-year-old son, Jack, volunteers alongside her when he's not in school.

Cassie Hart said Tillie Burgin's an excellent leader and she's ready to lead people to God. God built the Mission up under her leadership and she points the people they help right back to Him.

Jack Hart, who's been around Mission Arlington his whole life, said working at Mission Arlington has fulfilled him.

"It's been great," he said. "That's why I keep coming back. I keep having other jobs and I'm just here to stay now. This system that we have really built me up [and] made me who I am today. I rely on it a lot."



Executive director Tillie Burgin answers a call on a walkie-talkie Aug. 30. Burgin is in constant communication with multiple departments throughout the day.  
Photo by Ronaldo Bolaños

Tillie Burgin is showing no signs of slowing down. She doesn't believe it's in scripture to retire, so Burgin will keep using the lessons she's learned — specifically, being patient — to lead the Mission.

She said her favorite moments at Mission Arlington are talking to children and listening to what's going on in school. She loves to pray with the kids and take pictures with them. She has a saying, 'the children tell the story' and she wants to hear them.

As she's grown older, her passion remains the same as it was in 1986: leading people to Jesus. She's received recognition throughout her time as Mission Arlington director. Then-Governor George W. Bush lauded her work in his 1999 State of the State address at the Texas Capitol and inducted her into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame in 2000.

"One drill sergeant in the army of compassion is Tillie Burgin – or as she's better known, the Mother Theresa of Arlington, Texas," Bush said at the 1999 address, which was captured in an Arlington Morning News article that now hangs framed on the walls of Mission Arlington.

Yet, Tillie Burgin never makes the conversation about herself. When asked about the legacy she wants to leave behind, she deferred to the Lord and the Mission she's built over the last 37 years.

"I never thought about a legacy. I just pray that people will multiply so they can tell other people about Jesus. That's what you want," Tillie Burgin said.

“This isn’t an organization. It’s a way of life.”

@isaacappelt