

**WHERE
YOU'RE
ALWAYS**

WELCOME





on

come

In an increasingly expensive city, downtown day shelter The Haven is a model of community and 'radical hospitality'

Words by Laura Longhine ♦ Photos by Zack Wajsgas

January, The Haven will celebrate 10 years of serving homeless and extremely low-income people in the heart of Charlottesville.

As the Downtown Mall has been revitalized, the area has become increasingly expensive, home to luxury residences like C&O Row and the 550. The Haven, in a 19th-century church at First and Market streets, is both a stark reminder of those left behind by Charlottesville's growing wealth and lack of affordable housing, and a beautiful example of community and kindness.

The Haven is a low-barrier shelter, meaning it accepts everyone who walks in, even if they're drunk or high. It serves a free hot breakfast 365 days a year, and offers guests (the preferred term for people who access its services) a place to shower, do laundry, store their possessions, get mail, and use the internet. Staff connect people to services for mental health, substance abuse, job training, and medical care. And they administer several housing programs to help guests get and keep a permanent place to live.

"This is a community in which our first goal is to care for each other, to treat each other with respect," says operations director Owen Brennan. "So beyond the services, at base this is a place where we want folks to feel like they belong, where they feel at home, and where they're always welcome."

At 6:30 on a cold December morning, it's still dark, and Charlottesville's streets are quiet. In the basement of The Haven, light shines through the windows like a beacon.

Inside, David Slezak, a retired Latin teacher who wears purple Converse sneakers and a slender gold chain over his T-shirt and jeans, has been in the kitchen since 5. Coffee is brewing and the team of four volunteers, all women, are busy washing dishes, shredding turkey, and toasting bread on the griddle. Slezak, who goes by Dee Dee, is surveying the latest pile of food donations heaped on one of the kitchen's metal work tables.

"Now, I don't know what I'm going to do with two gallons of molasses," he muses.

Slezak, 72, has been volunteering with The Haven since it opened, and became kitchen manager in 2016. He makes what one staffer refers to as "magical breakfasts" out of the sometimes odd assortment of donations from local restaurants, caterers, and church dinners that supplement the staples. "We've been known to have salmon, scallops," he says. "Once we got two bushels of crabs donated from a local restaurant. I reheated them and we got out the hammers and the newspapers and had Maryland crabs."

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This morning, there's turkey in gravy, cheesy asparagus, and buttered cabbage, along with the usual eggs, toast, and grits. "I try to serve two proteins every day, and two vegetables," Slezak says. There are strawberries and whipped cream, yogurt and granola.

After the front doors open, at 6:45, guests start filing in, filling mugs with coffee and taking seats at the big round tables. Breakfast is served starting at 7:30, but there's already cereal out, and trays of donated Christmas cookies. Several guests pause by the kitchen to say hello and good morning.

Mark Malawa, a slender man in a baseball cap and glasses, sticks his head through the door.

"What do you need?" Slezak asks.

"A milk and an Ensure?" Malawa asks. "If you can help me; I'm going to be gone all day."

"You want food to go? I can put a little plate together for you," Slezak says.

"Whatever you can do, I'm grateful."

Malawa used to work for PACEM, the nonprofit group that provides overnight shelter at local churches from October through March, but recently he's become a guest himself.

Slezak grabs a takeout container and fills it with turkey, cabbage, toast, and a fried egg. He doesn't forget the fork.

"This is more than breakfast to a lot of people," he says later, noting that many pack extra food to take to work.

At 7:15, everything is ready, and Slezak lifts up the metal shutter between the kitchen and the dining room. "This is our dinner bell," he says, smiling, as the metal clanks loudly into place. "I wish it was a little more romantic."

For the next hour or so, the volunteers are busy filling plates, taking requests, replenishing mugs.

"White or wheat?"

"Do you want the turkey on top, or on the side?"

"We don't have oats, but we have Cream of Wheat, is that okay?"

When you're living on the street, Slezak says, "you have so few choices." So he cooks eggs to order. "You need a scrambled egg, you need an over easy, you need a sunny side up, we're going to do that for you."

Cleveland Michie, 62, used to buy breakfast at McDonald's, until a homeless friend told him about The Haven. Michie is "housed," but lives alone and is battling lung cancer. "I can't afford good, nutritious food," he says. He's been eating breakfast at The Haven every day for the last two years, and says his appetite has increased and he's gained "at least 10 pounds."

"Dee Dee and Ellen [Hickman, a kitchen volunteer], they serve deeply, with honesty and love," he says. "They have smiles, they don't make you feel bad or look down on you. And they know the kitchen."

Slim and neatly dressed, with glasses and graying hair, Michie says he gives back by offering free haircuts to other guests, as well as to residents at area nursing homes.

"If I ran across a lot of money," he says, "I'd build a building just like this."

"This is a community in which our first goal is to care for each other, to treat each other with respect." OWEN BRENNAN, DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS



Kitchen manager Dee Dee Slezak arrives at 5am to lead a team of volunteers, who make "magical breakfasts" out of food donations from Trader Joe's, Market Street Market, and various local restaurants and caterers. Staples come from the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank (5 cents a pound, and produce is free) and through a grant from the Emergency Food Network.

By 8:30, breakfast is winding down. Riley Goodwin and Lizzie Weschler, high school students from St. Anne's, make their way to the front desk. They're in the midst of a three-week "intensive" on reimagining community service, so they're staffing the front desk every morning, while two other students help out in the kitchen, on the prep shift for tomorrow's breakfast.

Guests stop by to sign in and ask for towels, shampoo, razors, and soap, so they can take a shower. They use the hand sanitizer on the corner of the desk, ask for socks and ibuprofen.

"Can I get a shirt?" one man asks. Goodwin disappears into the long, narrow room behind

the desk, which is stocked with supplies from underwear to hats. She emerges a couple minutes later with a hooded sweatshirt.

"No shirts, but we have a hoodie," she says. "Awesome, that'll work."

The girls field a call from someone looking for dental care (they connect the caller with the Charlottesville Free Clinic) and refer someone else with a housing question to Herb Dickerson, the shift supervisor, who's been working at The Haven almost as long as it's been open.

"I'm pretty much like a walking resource manual, if you will," he says. "I direct

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Volunteers Lizzie Weschler (left) and Riley Goodwin help out at the front desk. Throughout the morning, guests stop by to check their mail, make appointments, ask for toiletries and towels to take a shower, or get clean socks, underwear, hats, gloves, and other clothes.

Food for the soul

The Haven closes from noon to 1pm, and on Wednesdays, the dining room becomes a lunch café, open to the public for a \$10 donation. It's not a moneymaker, but it's a chance for guests to get some paid food service experience, setting up, doing dishes, and serving the downtown lunch crowd. And it's an opportunity for the public to see "a different side of what homelessness looks like," says Evie Safran, who runs the program.

Like many Haven staff, Safran is a former teacher (she taught public preschool in Charlottesville), but she also had a 30-year catering career. She recruits weekly guest chefs, ranging from local restaurant and corporate chefs to caterers and dedicated home cooks, and the food "runs the gamut from down-home Southern to South Indian vegetarian," she says.

Lunches also include a salad, sides, delicious homemade limeade, coffee, and dessert.

Like the church rentals, and an annual 8K run in the spring (which features a homemade breakfast in the sanctuary afterwards), it's a way to bring the broader community into The Haven.

Guest book



Virginia Lypps



Mark Malawa



Tammy Edwards



Harold Tucker



Joe Bostock



Justin Watkins



Sharon Shelton



Tim Ferguson



Tevin Rogers

When you see somebody sitting on the street, before you sit there and judge them, know their story.

A HAVEN GUEST

people to whatever services they need, keep trouble down.”

Guests ask for their mail (they can use The Haven as their mailing address) or for a cup of detergent to do laundry. There are three washers and dryers, and people like Dickerson make sure guests move their loads through promptly.

Monday through Wednesday, Dickerson works the floor, and on Thursdays and Fridays he does community outreach, working with ex-offenders, substance abusers, and people with HIV/AIDS. An ex-offender himself, Dickerson says “I’ve lived on the streets. I understand being homeless.” When people come in, he says, “The first thing they need is rest.”

Later, a guest who introduces himself as Tim lingers by the desk, serenading the students with a couple Christmas songs. “This is a place where you can chill,” he says. “It’s a blessing to have a place like this.”

The Haven was born when Hollywood director and UVA alum Tom Shadyac returned to Charlottesville to film *Evan Almighty* in 2005, and decided he wanted to do something to help local people experiencing homelessness. He purchased the First Christian Church, and The Haven opened in 2010, part of the Thomas Jefferson Coalition for the Homeless.

At the time, says current executive director Stephen Hitchcock, the public library was the de facto low barrier day shelter in town, as it is in many cities. All along, the intention was to not only provide basic services to the homeless, but to incorporate housing programs that would help get them out of it, to “see homelessness as a circumstance, not a condition,” Hitchcock says.

The Haven became an independent non-profit in 2014, and it now administers two federal housing grants: the Rapid Rehousing Program, which provides temporary subsidies for people exiting homelessness, and Homelessness Prevention, which is meant to help people at imminent risk of losing their current housing.

“The public perception is we’re a day shelter, but half our operations are helping to get folks into housing and helping to stabilize them once they’re there,” says operations manager Owen Brennan.

The Haven follows a “housing first” philosophy, a nationwide trend toward connecting people with housing as soon as possible, rather than waiting until they’re “housing ready” and all their other issues have been resolved.

Staff meet with guests one-on-one to determine what their housing needs are and what resources may be available to help. “Some people only need a little bit of help,” Hitchcock says. Some people make enough income to pay rent, but don’t have the money to put down first month’s rent plus a security deposit. Others are dealing with acute mental health crises or substance abuse. “We’re trying to provide the right amount of help at the right time,” Hitchcock says. And that help can be more than just material.

“A colleague of mine likes to say that people don’t become homeless because they run out of money; people become homeless because



Volunteers Anne Crescent (left) and John Rogers (who also provides free counseling) sort through mail for guests. Many use The Haven as their mailing address. Along the left wall, more than 70 bins provide personal storage for guests (there’s a waiting list).

they run out of relationships,” says Hitchcock. “I think there’s a lot of truth in that.” He recalls the epigraph to Howard’s End—“only connect.”

“I’m reminded of that all the time,” he says. “What we’re talking about is creating connection. So many folks are disconnected.” That can come from aging out of foster care, or aging alone; it could be because of divorce, or loss of a job, or incarceration. Whatever the reason, “we want to be a place where people can start, or start again.”

On Mondays at 10am, Day Shelter Coordinator Rob White hosts a writing group in the former sanctuary. The space is large, and beautiful, with beamed ceilings and stained glass windows.



Guests at a weekly writing group run by Day Shelter Coordinator Rob White (center) in the sanctuary. The space is an extra place for guests to sleep or find quiet during the day, and is also frequently rented out for weddings and community events.

The Haven hosts groups and events here throughout the day, like a weekly class on mindful breathing, and monthly touch therapy sessions from Zero Balancing. But it also rents out the space for weddings and community events, like concerts and film screenings. The Village School, a private all-girls middle school down the street, uses it for recitals. “It’s such a cool thing, to hold these things proximate,” says Ocean Aiello, the community outreach director. “Screaming seventh grade girls and a homeless shelter; those things are not usually next to each other.”

Guests here for the writing group gather around a large table, and share their work. A woman named Marie reads a poem, and

says she wrote it after getting a cardiovascular stress test. “The doctors told me, ‘You have a fragile heart,’” she says. “Doesn’t everyone have a fragile heart?”

One man reads from an ongoing story he’s writing, and a woman shares a short passage on camping, showing the meticulously drawn rocks she’s sketched in her small notebook.

There’s a new visitor today, Harold Tucker. He’s a large man in a ski cap, with a ruddy face and a mustache that’s turning white. He sits down and immediately starts writing.

He lost his wife three years ago, he tells the group. They were married for 41 years. “Life has gone downward since.” He writes about a dream he had, in which his wife urged him to move on. “I don’t know how to do that,” he says.

Marie tells him he is in the right place. White offers him a journal, and suggests he try writing directly to his wife, in the present tense.

The group has been talking about mindfulness, and today White has a poem for them to read, “The Fish,” by Elizabeth Bishop. It’s a fairly long piece, about catching a fish, one that’s been hooked many times before.

“He’s tired,” Tucker says of the fish. “Like a lot of us are.”

“Every day, you keep hoping things are going to get better,” he says. “But sometimes they don’t.”

Tucker was a truck driver for decades, but after his wife died, he got cancer, and had to get off the road. He’s estranged from his kids, and was sleeping in the park before he got connected with The Haven and PACEM.

White asks him to think of one thing he does, or could do, that would bring him



PACEM guests board a JAUNT bus, headed to a local church where they will sleep for the night. Through PACEM, a rotating group of congregations and community groups provide dinner and shelter for roughly 45 men and 20 women each night. In the morning, they are bused back to The Haven for breakfast.

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purpose, and Tucker starts talking about kindness, about how he makes an effort to greet people and say good morning.

“That would make a nice poem,” White says. “It does matter.”

The group turns back to the Bishop poem, talking about how she focuses on the moment.

“The whole point of the poem is, don’t give up,” Tucker says.

Marie turns to him with a smile. “See how you get what you need in this class?”

Revin Mellette, a wiry man who seems to be constantly in motion, ducks outside for a smoke break in the rain. His official title is facilities manager, but his role seems to encompass a bit of everything: “I do shift supervision, I do security, make sure the building runs properly.”

A certified peer recovery specialist, he provides support for people who are using or suffering from mental health issues. “I’m also a recovering addict, so I kind of know my way around, if you will,” he says. “A great deal of our population—maybe more than 50 percent—suffer from something that is related to some form of trauma. And being homeless, that’s trauma in itself.”

The Haven doesn’t have any official security guards, but Mellette and others, like Dickerson, are in charge of keeping the building safe. “Mr. Dickerson and myself, we’re both from the street, so we have a tendency to be able to come across to people,” Mellette says. If there’s a conflict, he’ll do his best to de-escalate it, and will call the police when needed to escort someone off the property.



Shift supervisor Herb Dickerson sings as volunteers prepare for the Wednesday lunch café.

Mellette first showed up at The Haven for mandatory community service, through the circuit drug court. He’d been in a worsening cycle of substance abuse and criminal charges. “On this last go round, I decided to do something different,” he says. He’s been clean since September 28, 2015. “The Haven gave me that opportunity, that continuing of care for me. The way I pay it back is by helping others.” He’s been working here for four years now. About The Haven, he says, “I think what it does is, it offers those who are homeless a place in which they can gather themselves. A haven, a place where people can feel safe and deal with whatever trauma they’re going through, without having to be inundated with more trauma.”

At 5pm, the Haven staff turns things over to PACEM, whose offices are also in the building. Every night, roughly 45 men and 20 women gather to board JAUNT buses that take them to area churches, which provide dinner and beds for the night. The number of women seeking shelter has gone up sharply in the last couple years, says caseworker Heather Kellams. She’s is working to extend PACEM’s season to provide year-round beds for them, while also looking for private funding to create

for a permanent women’s shelter. “These women...are extremely vulnerable,” she says. “They need a lot of care.”

Like The Haven (and unlike the year-round shelter at The Salvation Army), PACEM is low-barrier. So before loading the buses, Brian Henderson, a seasonal staff member who is simultaneously warm and commanding, asks guests to give him any drugs, alcohol, or other “paraphernalia” they may have in their bags, and to stay in the designated sleeping areas in the churches where they’ll be staying.

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Tucker shows up looking for a spot, but the rules have changed and guests are supposed to register earlier in the day. The staff know Tucker, though, and it’s almost Thanksgiving, and there’s an open bed. They let him join.

One phrase Haven staff use to describe their work is “radical hospitality.” “We try to cultivate a culture of accompaniment,” says Hitchcock. “We work to be the kind of community we hope Charlottesville is—to hold out, this is how folks can be with one another across different backgrounds, different ages, races, genders, sexual orientations—you name it, it’s all here.”

It’s a feeling that comes across to many guests, too. “They’re good people,” Tucker says of The Haven staff. Yes, there’s the food and shelter. But he also talks about how they’ve given him bus fare, helped him get his license when his wallet was stolen. “They give me clothes, they give me gloves, let me take a shower, so I feel like I’m human.” He pauses. “So I feel like I’m human. Not just somebody sleeping on the street.”

“It offers those who are homeless a place in which they can gather themselves. A haven, a place where people can feel safe and deal with whatever trauma they’re going through.” KEVIN MELLETTE, FACILITIES MANAGER