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Brian Brehm
The Winchester Star

'This place, these people': Brandan Thomas bids farewell to Winchester Rescue Mission
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WINCHESTER — One of the Northern Shenandoah Valley's leading advocates for the homeless is leaving Winchester and going national.

Brandan Thomas, CEO of the [Winchester Rescue Mission](#) at 435 N. Cameron St., is joining Colorado-based [Citygate Network](#), a nonprofit organization that shares his drive to eradicate homelessness.

"I'm getting to accept really what amounts to a dream job, and this dream job is all because of what I got to do here," Thomas said this week. "I'll begin working with Citygate next week at a CEO summit in Phoenix, Arizona, but I will remain here [in Winchester at least] through October."

Thomas said his day-to-day duties with Citygate for the next few months will be handled remotely. At some point in the near future, though, he, his wife and their three children will move to Colorado Springs, where Citygate Network is headquartered.

Citygate, according to its website, was founded in 1906 and "is North America's oldest and largest community of independent, faith-based crisis shelters and life-transformation centers. In most major cities, a member of Citygate Network is the most comprehensive homeless services provider, and in some cities, it is the only homeless services provider."

The Citygate Network supports more than 300 homeless shelters, rescue missions and related ministries across the country, providing each with networking and educational opportunities, informational materials, guidance on best practices, and services to help people experiencing homelessness overcome the situation. The shelters under the Citygate umbrella include some of the biggest in the country, and the nonprofit is responsible for housing more homeless people per day than any other organization in the United States.

The Winchester Rescue Mission has been a Citygate Network member since 2017, and Thomas hosted one of the organization's leadership conferences in June 2021 at the [George Washington Hotel](#).

Citygate's path to recovery from homelessness, according to the network's website, is mapped out in what it calls eight "S" words:

Saved — making choices that will keep them from chronic illness and physical death

Sober — no longer controlled by stimulants or depressants

Stable — mentally and emotionally balanced and enjoying good health

Schooled — enriched with the fundamental knowledge to be competent and competitive

Skilled — being academically credentialed and on a career path

Secure — able to provide financially for themselves and their loved ones

Settled — having the same safe place of their own to stay every night

Serving — giving back to the community

Those are the same goals that Thomas has, and his vision, drive and ideas to eradicate homelessness are what brought him to the attention of Citygate Network. The nonprofit even created a new job title to bring him on board.

“My position will be director of leadership, education and programs,” Thomas said. “They felt passionate about hiring me in that role.”

Thomas will officially become a Citygate employee next week, but the organization is not rushing him to relocate to Colorado Springs.

“They are going above and beyond to make sure that the Winchester Rescue Mission is in a good spot when I leave, and that me and my family are in a good spot when we leave,” Thomas said.

Knox Singleton, president of the mission’s board of directors, said he’s sad to lose Thomas but knew it was inevitable.

“When you have someone with Brandon’s leadership capabilities, vision, charisma, communication skills and strong faith, someone is going to call him to a position with challenges bigger than what we can offer here,” Singleton said. “He’s in the 1% of the leaders that you interact with, so you just know he has great things ahead in his life. ... He will have an incredible impact on the challenge of homelessness on a national scale, helping thousands and thousands of people who are suffering. God is using him for great things.”

‘I give these people dignity’

Thomas was 30 years old when he came to Virginia in February 2016 to serve as interim executive director of the Winchester Rescue Mission, which at that time had an annual budget of about \$100,000. He was named permanent CEO the following year, but he had to work hard to warrant the promotion.

“I realized I had no idea what I was doing and really needed to learn,” Thomas said about his first few months at the mission. “We signed up to go to an [Association of Gospel Rescue Missions](#) conference.” (In 2018 the association was rebranded as Citygate Network.)

“From that point on,” Thomas continued, “the [Citygate] organization became a very special thing to me. I got to be around and learn from the men and women serving some of the largest shelters in the country. It helped me to learn to do this job and develop a vision for what the Rescue Mission could be and what we could do to impact the lives of people in our community.”

Thomas’ approach has always been to treat the homeless with compassion and understanding, but also with a firm guiding hand to help them address the issues that put them on the streets. His goal for every client is to rebuild their confidence and independence so they can find a decent job and live on their own.

“I give these people dignity,” he said.

Thomas said most of the men and women who seek shelter at the Winchester Rescue Mission are suffering from mental illness. Many times, getting them on a proper regimen of medications is all it takes for them to find employment and live independently.

“The people here are people. They’re human beings who are really struggling with a lot of stuff,” Thomas said. “When they’re seen as human and treated as human, they become people to know rather than people to fear and avoid.”

Thomas wants his clients to feel as comfortable as possible while staying at the shelter. For that reason, he was happy to welcome organizations like [Homeaid National Capital Region](#), [Lowe’s](#) and more when they offered a series of improvements and renovations to the North Cameron Street facility.

He also improved the building’s exterior in 2019 by asking local artist Sarah Gallahan to design a mural for the shelter built in 1931. Gallahan did most of the painting herself but was assisted by several volunteers, including Thomas.

Thomas also expanded the Rescue Mission’s coed services, setting up two emergency refuges for women experiencing homelessness. Earlier this year, he decided to close those two facilities and move the women into a private section of what was previously an all-male shelter on North Cameron. The buildings once used by the women are being sold.

Additionally, Thomas created the [Rescue Ride](#), a recurring event where he and other local residents ride motorcycles across the country to visit other homeless shelters and learn about their operations. The ride is expected to be the subject of a documentary that has been filmed but not yet produced due to a lack of financing.

“This job will allow us to push that forward,” Thomas said of the Rescue Ride documentary. “Citygate has a lot more connections.”

The Winchester Rescue Mission currently has 52 beds for homeless people and, since it is the only year-round shelter in operation the Winchester area, it is constantly full. Seeing the need for expansion, Thomas launched a project in August 2021 to convert a former restaurant at 2655 Valley Ave. into a second shelter. Work has been delayed due to permit holdups, but

renovations finally got underway in July and the facility is expected to open in April. It is not yet known how many beds it will have.

Thomas said the only reason he could do the many things he did for the Winchester Rescue Mission was because its board of directors had faith and allowed him to think out of the box.

“The support I’ve received has been phenomenal,” he said.

One of the people who benefited from the dedication of Thomas and the board is Leroy Jackson, who has been living at the Rescue Mission for a year and a half.

“I’ve gotten a lot of stuff straightened out in the time I’ve been here,” Jackson said. “When I came here, my credit was terrible and I was on probation — I’ve got both of those problems fixed. The only thing I need to do now is get me some kind of housing, which I’m actively working on.”

When Thomas was asked if there’s one accomplishment that stands out above all others, he paused for a long moment before answering.

“One of the things I would hear about the mission [when he first came to Winchester] was it was a place people were scared to go. People don’t feel that way anymore,” he said, tears welling in his eyes. “Somebody once told me they had friends in town and one of the places they wanted to show them was here. I don’t know anywhere else in this country where what you want to go see is a homeless shelter. I’m proud of that.”

‘We can solve homelessness’

Thomas isn’t a person with a big ego, but he’s a realist and knows his departure will be a loss to both Winchester and the Rescue Mission he has run for seven years.

“I’m trying to navigate this as smoothly as possible,” he said. “I just don’t want anybody to freak out, and that’s what’s been happening. I really want to set the tone that this is going to be just fine.”

To that end, the Winchester Rescue Mission’s board of directors has already taken steps to make the transition as seamless as possible. Lauren Clouse, the mission’s volunteer coordinator who spent five and a half years working with Thomas, has been named interim director while the board conducts a nationwide search for a permanent successor. She’ll be managing an annual budget that, in just seven years, has grown by a million bucks to approximately \$1.1 million.

“To give her the opportunity to step into these shoes and lead us is so exciting to me,” Thomas said. “She’s got the same heart, the same grit, the same desire to take this organization to the next step.”

“I’m the same age that Brandan was when he first started,” Clouse said earlier this week.

Clouse said she had no idea what shelter work entailed when she first came to the mission, but she loves her career and hopes to keep the CEO job permanently.

“I thought I was going to get into a very different work field, but here I am,” she said. “I really wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing — and loving what I’m doing — if it weren’t for Brandan. ... I think this is going to be a very humbling experience but the work that we do here is vital for our community.”

“Everyone I’ve told has been very supportive of Lauren,” Thomas said. “The staff feels exactly the same.”

“It’s a blessing that Lauren is someone that Brandan has grown and developed over the years,” Singleton said. “We don’t expect to miss a beat under her leadership.”

Clouse admitted it’s a bit intimidating to follow in the footsteps of someone with as much talent, personality and public support as Thomas, but Thomas said he has no concerns about the future of the Winchester Rescue Mission.

“I’m so confident about the board we have, I’m so confident about the vision we have, I’m so confident in Lauren’s abilities,” he said. “I truly feel like the Rescue Mission is going to be in a better place and is going to be able to serve the community a whole lot better because of what we’ve put into place.

“This whole thing has never been about me,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “I hope the community sees it wasn’t Brandan they were investing in; it was this place, these people.”

Thomas emphasized that he’s not really done with the Winchester Rescue Mission because the organization is still a part of the Citygate Network, meaning the shelter will become one of the clients he serves.

“I really want this place to succeed and I think we have the building blocks for it,” he said. “This is a moment for the Rescue Mission to really shine and prove what we’re doing here is not about me; it’s about the folks that we serve. It’s going to be good.”

Thomas said his wife and children are excited about the next chapter in their lives.

“We got to take the kids out there last weekend and they got to see all that Colorado Springs and Denver have to offer,” he said. “My oldest son is not quite as excited, though, because he’s got really good friends here.”

As eager as Thomas is to be in a position where he can work to eliminate homelessness on a national scale, he still gets emotional when he thinks about leaving Winchester and the Rescue Mission that he has helmed for more than seven years.

“I love this place. I love this community. It’s been so good to me,” he said through tears. “But Citygate is providing me the opportunity to take the lessons we learned here, the innovations

that we did here, and do that on a national scale. There's definitely hope that we can solve homelessness."

'I love this place': Lauren Clouse takes charge at Winchester Rescue Mission **Nov. 7**

WINCHESTER — Despite losing a tireless and dynamic executive director, the [Winchester Rescue Mission](#) is more committed than ever to helping the Northern Shenandoah Valley's homeless residents.

Brandan Thomas, who in February 2016 became the fourth person to lead the mission in its 50-year history, announced in August he was leaving the nonprofit at 435 N. Cameron St. to join Colorado-based [Citygate Network](#), a national organization that shares his goal of eradicating homelessness.

"He was an incredible leader, very charismatic and very passionate about what he did," said Lauren Clouse, who on Sept. 1 was named interim director of the Winchester Rescue Mission by its board of directors. "Our staff and volunteers are equally dedicated and passionate, so honestly we haven't skipped a beat. We've continued to meet the needs but there's still a much larger need out there."

During Thomas' time in Winchester, he was at the forefront of several initiatives to not just help the homeless, but to try to eliminate homelessness. Some of his efforts included the 2019 launch of an annual long-distance motorcycle run, the [Rescue Ride](#), which was designed to raise public awareness about homelessness and its root causes, and the announcement in 2021 that a second homeless shelter would be built in a former restaurant at 2655 Valley Ave.

Thomas' departure left some big shoes to fill. He tirelessly advocated for the homeless while stressing the need to address the mental health issues that too often lead people to becoming homeless. When he announced in August that he was leaving and moving with his family to Colorado, some were concerned that public support for the mission he had led for nearly seven years might fade.

Fortunately, Clouse said that has not been the case.

"I've had great support from many people in the community, and the Rescue Mission itself has had tremendous support," said Clouse, who was hired by Thomas in 2018 as the mission's volunteer coordinator and is now the agency's longest-tenured employee. "It's been good."

Clouse, 30, would like to keep serving as the mission's director. The nonprofit's board of directors is conducting a national search for Thomas' replacement and Clouse has submitted her name for consideration.

"But I'm coming at it from the perspective that I want whoever will best lead this organization and love and serve our residents and our community at large," Clouse said, noting that she

plans to stay on at the mission if someone else is hired as director. “I love this organization and I love this area.”

Meanwhile, Clouse has a lot of work to do, not the least of which is getting started on the new shelter planned for Valley Avenue.

Clouse said construction of the facility has been held up due to permitting hiccups, but she hopes to finish the new shelter by January 2025.

“Our board has been incredibly supportive. We have a committee just for that project,” Clouse said. “And Brandan is not here but this is something he’s still heavily involved with. He helped to create the vision for this and put a lot of things in place in terms of building relationships with people to make this happen. He, our board chair (Knox Singleton) and I are in contact multiple times a week about building updates, permits, site plans and all of these things.

“It has been a very fast learning process but I’m incredibly appreciative of it because it helps me better understand what needs are ahead of us,” she said. “We’re going to make sure it gets done in the way it needs to get done.”

When completed, Clouse said the new shelter will have up to 50 beds, nearly doubling the number of available spaces for homeless people in Winchester.

The existing shelter on North Cameron Street, which has 52 beds, will most likely become a women-only facility, Clouse said. Currently, only 10 beds are available there for women, and they’re squeezed into a small chapel at the front of the building.

The new shelter will house both men and women, as well as the mission’s transitional programs to help homeless people get treatment for mental illness, overcome addiction, find jobs and return to independent living.

“If we’re in the business of warehousing people, we’re not actually doing anything,” Clouse said. “We’re saving their life for that day or night, but we’re not making a change. ... We try to see the immediate needs, create an environment that builds trust and relationship building, and then build upon that.”

Building and operating a new shelter while maintaining the existing one, and offering programs that seek to provide permanent solutions to homelessness even as the number of homeless people locally continues to climb, takes money. Now more than ever, Clouse said, the Winchester Rescue Mission needs financial support from the community.

“We want to create an environment that allows people to live the life that they can only dream of,” she said. “Man, I love this place.”

To learn more about the Winchester Rescue Mission and support its efforts to help homeless people, visit winrescue.org.

