

# Jesus Lives Here

Over thirty years ago I was hired to be the volunteer coordinator for Southside Ministries, a now defunct coalition of six churches on the south side of Bethlehem that was funded through the profits of the Cathedral's thrift shop. I held that position for nine years. So it is with some amazement, and amusement, that I find myself back coordinating the activities at the Better Buy Thrift Shop once again. Most surprising is that many of those wonderful volunteers are still there! One volunteer will turn 100 this November and works tirelessly in the back room for hours sorting clothing twice a month. She and her team members eat lunch together each week discussing their grandchildren and their activities outside of their thrift shop duties. Other church teams, too, find the social experience of working at the shop one of the rewards of serving in this ministry. Often, customers will enter the shop at lunchtime to find laughter filling the space, fresh picked flowers on the table, food being shared and sometimes, if there is a particular event to celebrate, a bottle of champagne! Then there are times when there are tears instead of laughter when a volunteer has suffered through a heartbreak and they are met with hugs and prayers. As we bless others through this ministry we are blessed.

Our shop has become a safe haven for many of those in our community. It is a dry, warm place on a cold rainy day, it's a place of recognition as they are greeted by name, and welcomed without discrimination or judgement. There is no hierarchy of status for our customers, no preferential treatment based on financial gain. Customers with vouchers for free clothing, those who pay by counting out the pennies in their pocket, and those who regularly spend over \$50 are all treated with respect and a warm smile that says you are valued.

Our customer's stories are varied and often touching. One man with two small children in tow needed clothing for his family because his wife left him and took all their belongings. Women from Turning Point, a shelter for battered women, often have to flee with only the clothes on their backs. We provide them, and their children, with all necessary items. We often assist men from the emergency shelter or New Bethany who are seeking employment and need a suit or sport coat to wear on an interview. Our volunteers love to help these men find the right shirt and tie to accompany the new suit and feel a part of the success when a job is found. Our volunteers are regularly "God blessed" by our customers.

Not all of our customers come from a place of financial need but come to the shop to fill an emotional desire instead. I work at the shop almost every Saturday and have my "regulars". I've begun to learn their stories, share book recommendations, and find common interests and ideas. I've been the recipient of homemade gifts and one Hispanic lady brought me a container of her unbelievably good arroz con pollo. There is currently a "regular" who flies up from Georgia every few weeks to watch her daughter play volleyball for Lehigh University and stays at the Sayre Mansion. She walks over to shop and visit with me. We've become friends, and last month, on my recommendation, she came to the Celtic Spirituality Service at the cathedral. I often engage in conversations of faith with customers and I find we have more in common than we disagree about. Those are the Saturdays I come home blessed.

The thrift shop is much, much more than a place to buy inexpensive clothing and housewares. It is a vital ministry to our community and our parish. Tony spoke about looking through the lens of love to bring blessings to others. It is easy to do this at the thrift shop and in so doing I am blessed!

-- Connie Gilbert