

24 Hours in Toledo

Cherry Street Mission [6 to 7 a.m.]

It's time to wake up

Sunday, February 25, 2007

This is the seventh in The Blade's series of 24 weekly stories that will chronicle people and places in Toledo, hour by hour. Today we are at the Cherry Street Mission.

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Morning comes like a white ghost at Cherry Street Mission Ministries.

It glides across the floor of a darkened room, past the sprawling bodies of homeless men still sleeping on floor mats.

Then it heads to the hall, where a pool of soft orange light from the street lamps outside reveals that it's not a ghost at all, but one of the guests walking around in a smelly white sweatsuit. And one shoe.

It's 6 a.m. at the largest homeless shelter in northwest Ohio. Inside, most of the 143 men who spent the night here are still asleep. Outside, a cold dipping down to 2 degrees is waiting to slap them awake.

But not yet.

For now, they slumber in warmth, either on bunk beds packed into a big room or scattered around other places on the floor. A few men are up already, but the lights are off and the sound of snores — some of them thunderous — dominates the main dormitory room. A small portable heater rattles in the hall.

There's no limit on how long someone may stay at Cherry Street, and many of the guests are regulars who know the morning routine: wake up before 6:30, out by 7:30 a.m., then have breakfast at a nearby food service and community center run by Cherry Street.

"They probably know our rules better than we do," says Larry Robinson, director of men's ministry.

MULTIMEDIA

[See and here more at the Cherry Street Mission between 6 and 7 a.m.](#)

In some ways, the amenities are similar to a hotel. Men staying here are referred to as "guests." They are given any toiletries they need, as well as linens and even a wake-up call.

David Smith is up before most of the others. He's standing in front of a mirror and sink, an empty row of shower stalls behind him. The 43-year-old has been staying here for the last year, after he lost his factory job.

"I'm going to eat breakfast and go look for work," he says. "Just something to, you know, basically just get me out of here."

He walks over to the "Tub Room" and asks Jesse Percival, who is helping there, to retrieve his stuff that's been stored overnight in a big plastic container, No. 59. Another tub near the entrance holds baggies full of cigarettes and other items guests can't use while they're here.

Jesse, 25, has been here at the corner of Monroe and 17th streets for about a month.

"I didn't have anywhere else to go," said the North Toledo native, who still has family in the area. "I had a good job and I was living in South Carolina and I just lost it."

He's battled with depression and is part of a program here called "Ready for Life" that prepares guests to get a



Men sleep on the floor of the Cherry Street Mission Ministries on a night when the temperature dipped to 2 degrees. (BLADE PHOTOS/ALLAN DETRICH)

job, get over their addictions or other hurdles, and return to a normal life.

“I came back here to get some things straight in my life,” said Jesse, who is working on his GED. “I just want to get my life on track with God again.”

Back in the bunk room, it isn’t long before lights flip on and the sound of case manager Christopher Rayford fills the room.

“Good morning, fellas,” he booms. “Rise and shine.”

He’s a happy, smiling boulder of a man.

“We ain’t gotta go home, but we gotta get outta here,” cracks James Brunner, 31, who said he’s been at Cherry Street almost a week after being robbed and unable to make his way home to Lima.

“I’ve never been homeless before,” he said. “It’s a humbling experience.”

Life is different here. First, he’ll drop off his sheets and blanket around the corner, where they will join one of 300 loads of laundry done daily here. Later, he’ll try and scrounge up the means for a bus ticket home, and if that fails, head to the downtown library to communicate with family on the Internet.

The other men getting up, coughing and shaking off the night’s cobwebs, are all types. There are scraggly beards and thin, spindly legs, but there are also well-trimmed goatees and neat button-down shirts. Some guests wake up bare-chested, while others have slept fully clothed, still wearing their coats and shoes.



The Cherry Street Mission as dawn approaches and the men inside start to wake up.

They talk politely and good-naturedly as they slowly wend their way around the narrow passageways through the grid of beds. One man praises the mattresses on the way to the locker room. “Egg crates!” he says enthusiastically, encouraging a touch.

As 7 a.m. nears and the building empties of its guests, a real morning glow starts to perk up behind neighboring buildings and a few figures still remain in the bunk room. One is Nathaniel Smith, 52, who’s been here off and on for the last year or so.

He’s a convicted felon and a recovering drug addict. There’s a gap in his mouth where some teeth used to be. He’s blessed to be here, and he says as much.

“This place is a godsend,” he says. “It’s here for you to fall back on. ... I ain’t gotta worry about getting nothing to eat. I ain’t gotta worry about finding somewhere to sleep.”

Or where to get clothes. He’s dressed in several layers this cold morning — T-shirt, pullover sweatshirt, denim shirt, and Carhart vest — all thanks to donations made to Cherry Street.

He used to do demolition work; more recently, he’s worked a little at a furniture stripping shop. There’s a hopeful gleam in his eye that says ... that says ...

“I’m gonna do better things,” he says.

And then he’s gone, slipping away into the cold.

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