

■ THIS WEEK | "Effective Compassion" September 01, 2007

On the march again

Special Issue: Last year's Samaritan Award winner branches out | *Allie Cook in Nashville*



CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S JOB CORPS OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE

Two red hands painted on a yellow wall form the likeness of a tulip's bud. Painted below: a simple green stem. Written above in black: "Christian Women's Job Corps." The two hands are those of the mentor and the mentored. Both reach upward to God: They are colored red to represent love, and the flower signifies growth. When women walk off the elevator on the fifth floor of the office building that houses the CWJC of Middle Tennessee, the symbol reminds them of what they want and need.

CWJC-MT, based in downtown Nashville, provides GED preparation, life and job skills classes, mentoring, and Bible study for employed but poor women, with the goal of helping to transform "body, mind, heart and spirit." WORLD readers may recall that CWJC-MT last year won the Acton Institute's Samaritan Award grand prize: It's using some of the \$10,000 award to help open new satellites, and its newest satellite is a finalist for this year's Samaritan Award.

At the downtown headquarters, executive director Becky Sumrall still consults on new sites, raises funds, administers programs, supervises staff members and volunteers, and networks with board members, business leaders, and donors. She continues to emphasize holistic work with the poor: "We want to be able to meet all the needs of women. The reality is that their lives are so complicated, and they have very few resources."

She points out that a woman from a middle-class family has a support system with people to encourage her and teach her life skills, but a woman in poverty often does not—so CWJC nationally, since its founding in 1996 by the Woman's Missionary Union (an affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention) tries to provide an environment that will help women to change their lives. The Nashville corps began in 1997 and initially served 10 women; now it serves about 45 each year and 60 more women from other organizations.

Living up to the familiar motto, "a hand up, not a hand out," Sumrall interviews women and determines whether they are ready to change their lives. To be admitted, women must pass a drug and alcohol test or currently be in recovery, and they can only miss class three times without a legitimate excuse. They must meet with a mentor weekly and attend Bible classes. The program lasts one to two years.

Hands are a motif at CWJC. When Sumrall holds up a framed picture of a woman's outstretched hands she says, "Look how pretty her hands are!" They are the hands of Bennie—a recent graduate of the program—after spa day, an annual event when volunteers take the women to get pampered. Bennie, who joined the program after her mother's death, gave the picture to Sumrall after she graduated. Bennie said that her hands were beautiful because of CWJC's work. The desire to go beyond a hand out is at the heart of CWJC's latest project: establishing new sites for the program throughout the Middle Tennessee region. Sumrall explained that the board first voiced the hope for satellite locations at a 2006 meeting, when it developed a strategic plan for the program's next three years. The board plans to add at least two satellites before 2010, including one in

Madison, a Nashville suburb. Because of this goal, the organization changed its name from CWJC of Nashville to CWJC of Middle Tennessee this year.

Soon after the development of the strategic plan, board member Dawn Ferguson, who attends church in Madison, proposed the town as a location for one of the satellites. Ferguson, a tall, thin woman who drives a white Mustang convertible, began volunteering as a way to relieve her grief after her husband died of cancer in 2003. Introduced to CWJC at a women's missions conference where Sumrall spoke in early 2004, she joined the board later that year: "I had been reading Henry Blackaby's book *Experiencing God*, and he says, 'If you want to experience God, you have to go where He's working.' I was convinced He was working at CWJC."

Ferguson said more than 25 churches from various denominations have joined in the efforts to establish the satellite. The organization will set up its office at First Baptist Church and hold classes at Madison Church of Christ, which stands at a busy intersection, with a bus stop outside its front door and local businesses on either side. The practical location of the church meets another objective in the board's strategic plan: to increase the accessibility of the program.

Inside the red brick building clean, carpeted halls lead to classrooms with white walls, some with Scripture verses on them. Two labs with 30 computers available for the organization's use are down the hall from the brightly painted walls of a youth area. Seventy trained volunteers are ready to go, including three graduates of the downtown center: Ferguson said she was especially thrilled to see them and realize that "they want to give back."

Colorful handprints from last year's volunteers cover a banner behind the receptionist's desk at the downtown site. "Thank you 2006-07 Volunteers," it says across the top. Sumrall said she believes the ministry is growing "because there are women crying out for help in our community. We can grow because volunteers are coming forward. . . . What we're all here for [is] to see women transformed."