

# GIVING

"GOD GAVE EVERY ONE OF US A GIFT.  
WE CAN ALWAYS USE WHAT YOU HAVE."

# THE GIFT

## OF TIME AT WESLEY HOUSE



Carol Parnell of St. Mark United Methodist Church helps Elijah (in the white shirt) and Hunter (in red) with reading at Wesley House Community Center.

Photo by Sarah Martin, The Call

BY SARAH HERRON

**It's 4:05 on a warm Thursday afternoon, and I'm walking down the hallway of a cinder-blocked basement, reminiscent of a church built in the 1950s. It is the kind of place that old crayons go to die.**

HOWEVER, THIS IS NOT A CHURCH, and I don't see a crayon graveyard. Instead, there are busy pencils with children's faces huddled closely to their worksheets. In a bright pink classroom, at a table of eight children, sits Rick Isbell, from Church Street United Methodist Church. When asked what he is doing, he replies, "Just a little homework."

Across the hall is a one-on-one reading session between a 4<sup>th</sup> grader from Lonsdale Elementary and Anthony, a University of Tennessee student. The college junior listens intently as the young boy reads his book aloud, pronouncing each word with conviction.

In another room, Sue Biggerstaff and Carol Parnell, both from St. Mark UMC in Knoxville District, sit with several girls on old couches, reading books and talking about their days. In the background, a little boy plays the piano. Tucked away in another corner is Mary Ruth Carter, also from St. Mark, sitting at a desk with a boy who is working on his homework.

### ■ STEPPING IN TO HELP

This is an afternoon at the Wesley House Community Center where – after 100 years in Knoxville's inner city – children are being served yet another day.

According to Executive Director Richard Gibson, 89 percent of Wesley House students are from single-parent homes, and almost all of the 65 children in the summer program come from a household where the annual income is at or below the poverty level.

"We step in to help these parents in any way we can," Gibson said.

Staff and volunteers teach the children manners and Bible stories. They help with homework and make sure the children eat a nutritious afternoon snack. They also care for the children when school is out for summer break, holidays, and teacher in-service days.

More than just a child-care facility, Wesley House also provides an after-school educational ministry. "We've seen 77 percent of our kids make the honor rolls," Gibson said. "Teachers say their behavior also improves."

Biggerstaff, a retired teacher and weekly volunteer for the past three years, said, "We see great strides in academics and in attitudes toward their studies."

Raquan, a third-grader from Lonsdale Elementary, said that since he has been coming to the Wesley House, "I actually get my homework done. My grades are better."

While the Wesley House has five full-time staff members, as well as four part-time college students, the ministry is dependent on weekly volunteers. In addition to several after-school tutors, who mostly serve once a week, Wesley House enlists the help of many youth groups and United Methodist Women (UMW) chapters within Holston Conference.

"We would love to have more youth groups join us for summer fun," said Sharon Earl, volunteer coordinator and administrative assistant.

Youth groups are needed to – not only play with the children – but also to help with mowing, cleaning the parking lot, sweeping porches, picking up trash, washing vans, and trimming shrubbery.

When the children are out of school, the Wesley House needs help providing breakfast, lunch, and snacks for the children. In March, ten different UMW groups provided meals during spring break.

"God gave every one of us a gift," said Earl. "We can always use what you have."

When speaking at churches and civic clubs, Gibson said he first asks for prayer.

"I ask first that people pray for the mission of the Wesley House. We simply cannot do what we do without God's help." His second request? "For people to volunteer."

Once, a man approached Gibson, saying he would like to help, but didn't feel qualified to tutor kids. Gibson responded by asking the man what he did for a living. The man said he was a mechanic.

"I looked at him and said, 'Wow! I sure could use your help. I have five vans that I have to keep running all the time, and I don't know a sparkplug from a wrench.'"

Many people hesitate to volunteer as tutors because they believe an educational background is necessary, said Earl. That's not the case.

"The kids are reading to you," she said. "All you have to do is listen."

Besides tutoring, Earl also needs help with clerical duties such as answering the phones. According to Pro-



Mary Beth Carter of St. Mark UMC, Knoxville District, volunteers regularly to help Keri with her homework.

Photo by Sarah Martin, The Call

gram Director Kara Mayo, the community center also needs people with gifts in sports and the arts. Since the children at Wesley House are not frequently exposed to extracurricular activities, the staff offers a program called P.A.C.E. (Performing Arts and Cultural Education). PACE provides free instruction in violin, piano, African drumming, dance, voice, chess, and Spanish.

"We are always looking for new things to expose our children to," Earl said. Wesley House would welcome volunteers with skills in sewing, cooking, fishing, woodworking, or any other hobby or activity that would engage children.

### ■ OTHER NEEDS

The Wesley House requires an army of volunteers, but of course, it also needs funding. Wesley House is a mission of the General Board of Global Ministry (GBGM) and is also funded by the Knoxville District, the United Way, and private grants. About 60 percent of the budget comes from fundraising with local churches and individuals. Parents who use the ministry as a child care also pay tuition for their children – approximately \$2 per day.

"That doesn't even cover the gas to pick them up, but it makes the parent responsible," Gibson said.

Each year Wesley House has to reapply to the United Way and GBGM since those organizations only make 12-month commitments. Even with that support, over half of the Wesley House's annual budget is provided through fundraising by local United Methodist Churches.

"They've been our biggest supporters, financially, but especially with hands-on projects," said Gibson, referring to Holston congregations.

Churches that provide meals, snacks, paper products, and cleaning supplies as well as financial support literally keep the ministry running, Gibson said. For example, twice each

year, several UMW chapters donate napkins, plates, toilet paper, and other paper products – a value of \$5,000 per year.

The United Methodist Women have been the major artery of the Wesley House for the last century. The Methodist Women created the ministry in 1907 as a child-care center for mothers employed at Brookside Mills. The mill provided a child-care building that soon expanded to include programs for health, nutrition, homemaking, and recreation. In 1952, the Methodist Women collected a special offering to relocate the ministry from the original two-story building to its current location at 923 Dameron Avenue.

Over the years, the UMW have helped the Wesley House evolve as needs in the inner city have changed. Not only does the ministry offer an active program for school-age children, it also offers care for the community's elderly.

While the after-school program provides comprehensive services to children from eight urban elementary schools, Wesley House has to turn away many others because the current facility cannot accommodate them. This summer alone, 75 families were turned away when they called to register for the summer program.

"It gets very crowded at times," Gibson said. "Right now we teach violin in one of the administrative offices because we have no other space."

A private donor and a gift from the city have provided land next to the current facility, allowing for possible expansion.

"Our hopes and dreams are to add an additional facility next door that would be connected by a covered walkway," Gibson said. "It would contain eight additional classrooms, a gym, a conference room, a full-size kitchen, a stage and a check-in lobby." About \$1 million would make this dream a reality, he said.

For information, visit [www.wesleyhouse.com](http://www.wesleyhouse.com). To volunteer at Wesley House, contact Sharon Earl at (865) 524-5494 or [sharon@wesleyhouse.com](mailto:sharon@wesleyhouse.com). ■

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