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FOCUS

Community service has become Lee Faye Mack's reason for being

By ROBIN BARKSDALE
Community News Editor

Years ago when the woman from the Experiment in Self-Reliance knocked at Lee Faye Mack's door, peddling hope for a better life and self-improvement, Mrs. Mack issued a firm "no, thank you" and dismissed the visitor.

But the woman wasn't about to take no for an answer and boldly returned to Mrs. Mack's home. Today, Mrs. Mack is grateful that the woman from ESR was Louise Wilson, whom she said truly cared about helping community people.

"Louise Wilson started me working in the community and I didn't want to get involved at first," Mrs. Mack recalled, lowering her voice as she mentions the late Mrs. Wilson. "I was like these women that come to the Back to Life Center. I was at that low point when Louise came to my house. I always respected her for knocking on my door and everybody else's that was like me. She got turned away from my door at first. I saw her as a middle class doctor's wife who wasn't about dealing with real life.

"People have been sitting in positions for years doing nothing. There are people sitting in big jobs in the name of helping the poor and they're nothing but poor people's pimps. They don't like me for saying those things but that's all right. It doesn't bother me, because I feel I'm speaking the truth. What bothers me is when people hear the truth and won't take heed."

-- Evangelist Lee Faye Mack

I was always miserable and I saw her as a person that wasn't aware of that misery. But one of the things I respected about her was that she came back. She could have gone away and not come back but she did come back."

Those initial encounters with Mrs. Wilson helped to turn Mrs. Mack's life toward community service work, and she has stayed on that course ever since.

Although she won't elaborate, she said that she "going through a trying time" when ESR sent Mrs. Wilson into the city's low-income neighborhoods to see what programs were needed.

A native of Bishopville, S.C., Mrs. Mack came to Winston-Salem with her husband in 1957. She was not working when she met Mrs. Wilson, and she was so impressed by her persistence and sincerity that she began to feel the need to do something in the community. Mrs. Mack's work in community service began at ESR after she got to know Mrs. Wilson. She later worked for the city and spent 11 years at the Urban League. Her work in each position allowed her to develop community service programs.

"This is my life. This has been my life. I was chosen, not by Lee Faye or anybody else, but by the Supreme Being," she said. "Even when I was working with the Urban League, I was on the paid staff but I didn't belong to the Urban League. My work didn't end when the Urban League's day ended."

Mrs. Mack, who was ordained as a minister in 1987, has dedicated her life to serving others. She makes the statement matter-of-factly but said that there is nothing particularly noble or saintly about her devotion to helping people.

"I had a calling. It's as simple as that. There is a difference between being called and being hired," she said. "I appreciate the years I was with the Urban League, ESR and the city, but I also knew that there was a calling. I had to go beyond my job."

Mrs. Mack is not sympathetic to social workers who have the responsibility of helping the less fortunate but who insist that budget and staff restrictions will not allow them to address everyone's concerns. Having worked on the other side of the fence, Mrs. Mack said that she is aware that there are rules and regulations but that those rules can sometimes become a crutch for unenthusiastic workers.

"I get frustrated sometimes but I also understand the system," she said. "I maintain that no social worker should ever leave a problem that they can't solve. Education should make the difference but it doesn't always take book education to solve a problem. Sometimes it just takes common sense."

Not one to tolerate complacency on the part of social agencies, Mrs. Mack has no qualms about speaking her mind to the powers that be. She watches and questions funds that are received and spent on behalf of the disenfranchised. If she disagrees with an issue or the treatment of the less fortunate she says so. And she is heard.

"People have been sitting in positions for years doing nothing. There are people sitting in big jobs in the name of helping the poor and they're nothing but poor people's pimps," she said, lifting her voice in anger. "They don't like me for saying those things but that's all right. It doesn't bother me, because I feel I'm speaking the truth. What bothers me is when people hear the truth and won't take heed."

While she is hard on agencies that don't meet their responsibilities, Mrs. Mack is equally firm with residents whom she said are allowing their Afro-American cities to be destroyed by drugs and crime.

"I tell people the truth. Sometimes it hurts. I may have to tell them to get their acts together. They may get upset then, but they come back and thank me sometimes," said Mrs. Mack.

Mrs. Mack believes in some things with a passion, as demonstrated by her determination to make the Back to Life Center a reality. She received the house as a gift after mentioning to someone her dream to open such a facility. She and the community spent time removing debris, snakes and discarded drug paraphernalia from the premises, and Mrs. Mack lived at the house herself for weeks before it was ready for opening. It was the same kind of determination, she said, that sustained her through raising her six children and watching them all attend and graduate from college. In retrospect, she said, it was those six individuals that motivated her to continue her work and to make a difference in her community. She said, too, that because her children were able to succeed against the odds, she is concerned that the children of other Afro-American mothers have the same



photo by Mike Cunningham

Evangelist Lee Faye Mack: "I had a calling. It's as simple as that. There is a difference between being called and being hired."

opportunities. But in order for that to happen on a large scale, Mrs. Mack said that the Afro-American community, from the ministers to the politicians, will have to speak out for what it needs.

"We have mothers, grandmothers who are being beaten by drug users and their own children. We've got to stand up. We've got to say 'If you're going to deal drugs, go somewhere else, because we're not going to stand for it in our community,'" she said. "I'm a hard person on the ministers. A lot of people take issue with me on that. But I maintain that black ministers have people in their congregation who say they are all saved. Then those aren't the people who need them. The people who need those ministers are the people out here who aren't saved and who are struggling. A lot of times, ministers stand in the pulpit and tell people how to live a heavenly life, but they need to help them live on earth, too. Ministers are nothing but servants, but we'll make ourselves kings and queens. When are we going out into the valley to help people? I heard one minister say he had been to the valley but we don't ever get free of going to the valley to help somebody. I just hope I can be a light in the window and help somebody."

The Back to Life Center: A bridge to better times

By ROBIN BARKSDALE
Community News Editor

East 21st Street winds to a dead end just after the 900 block. Ironically, it is right at that dead end that some members of the community are finding a new beginning.

Situated there is the Back to Life Center, its huge banner appearing to issue a challenge to the "Dead End" traffic signs that sit just outside its doors. The traffic

people who have reached the end come to find their way back.

The Back to Life Center actually is a house that, with the exception of the banner hung across its front porch, appears not very different from any other house on the street. But this house is a community house. And the house itself has been resurrected from its days as an abandoned structure that was used primarily as a shooting gallery by neighborhood drug traffic. Now, it

there are homeless persons in search of food, clothing or shelter. There are neighborhood wives and mothers who come to discuss ways to keep drug dealers away from their children, and there are children of working parents who cannot afford traditional day care services.

Founded just a little over a year ago by Evangelist Lee Faye Mack, the Back to Life Center caters to whatever is ailing its community. It is different because its programs and services are not pre-arranged. If the community has a

and openly discuss their problems. From that need grew a women's support and counseling session which meets twice each week. The women in the group meet to talk about such issues as teen-age pregnancy, how to keep drug dealers from recruiting their young children and male/female relationships. They are frank, honest and open discussions that allow room for praise when earned and point-blank, but constructive, criticism when warranted. At a recent session, the women wanted to discuss the problems facing Afro-American



Lee Faye Mack leads a discussion during a Women's Support Group session at the Back to Life Center.

"I like coming here because we can talk about anything we want and we find out that other people are feeling some of the same things. I may not agree with everything Mrs. Mack tells me but I listen and it may at least give me something to think about because she's going to tell it to me straight and I appreciate that."

-- Women's Support Group member

need, the center creates a program to service that need.

"This is a vision and a dream that God has given me. We felt that the community needs to be involved in deciding some things for themselves," said Mrs. Mack. "In order for them to be appreciative and to take care of this, they need to be involved with what kinds of programs are offered. We want to give them what they need to help them get back into the mainstream of their community and society in general."

One of the services members of the 21st Street community wanted was an opportunity for a support group which would allow people with common concerns to come

men and women in their relationships and what each could do to keep their families together. There were questions about how to deal with the peer pressure that a spouse or companion may give in to. There were questions about how to get a mate to accept responsibility in the family and how to react if the mate does not accept that responsibility.

Mrs. Mack serves as moderator for the discussions but not as judge. She poses possible causes and solutions and the group takes it from there.

That particular discussion of family relationships led to the issue of drug dealers and the contact that they have with young children in the neighborhood. One group mem-

ber commented that something should be done about the pressure dealers put on kids. But she was quickly reminded that she should take responsibility for teaching her children to absolutely denounce the drug trade and that she should not allow her children to travel to areas that are known for drug trafficking.

"You've got to stay on top of what's happening," group members told her. "You are responsible for your child. It is best that we know where our children are. It's not a matter of trust anymore."

The group is nothing if not candid in their discussion and their terminology. Little is glossed over or sugar-coated and that's the way they like it.

"I like coming here because we can talk about anything we want and we find out that other people are feeling some of the same things," said one participant. "I may not agree with everything Mrs. Mack tells me but I listen and it may at least give me something to think about because she's going to tell it to me straight and I appreciate that."

ate that." "I think it's the atmosphere that they like," Mrs. Mack said. "People feel free to say what they have to say. They don't have to be worried about the grammar they use or about if they say things right. They just say what they feel. They feel comfortable."

In addition to the women's support group, the Back to Life Center offers drug prevention programs, intake and referrals to social service agencies and motivational seminars. The center also has features which are unique to their particular mission.

There is the Life Line, which Mrs. Mack said "helps people get back to a productive life." Under the Life Line program, persons who have been displaced from their homes for one reason or another are placed with families who agree to provide them with room and board until they are back on their feet. Mrs. Mack said that the individuals in the program are heavily screened and that the concept is a carryover

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photos by Mike Cunningham

Regular Family Morals workshops are held at the Back to Life Center. The sessions focus on teaching young children proper etiquette and manners.

signs have been there for years. The center is a new component in the neighborhood - a place where

belongs to everyone and its doors are open to any and all who are in need of help. On any given day,