

Program provides three-day holiday from homelessness

Gordon Friedman, Statesman Journal 7:14 p.m. PST December 25, 2015

(Photo: GORDON FRIEDMAN / Statesman Journal)



For three days this week, Toni Collins had a roof over her head. Collins, 49, is homeless and normally sleeps in West Salem. She had shelter this week because of Room at the Inn, an annual program, now in its fifth year, sponsored by eight area churches. The churches and more than 50 donors pay to rent Aldersgate Camp in Turner for three days of caring for Salem's homeless.

While at Room at the Inn, local homeless people are given a clean, safe place to sleep, plentiful hot meals, clothes and other necessities, such as hygiene items.

"It was beautiful," Collins said as she was waiting Friday for a van to take her back to Salem. For Collins, leaving meant heading back to the street.

After contracting HIV and hepatitis C, she could no longer work.

Collins found herself on the street, and in and out of jail. Now homeless for more than two years, she was hit with another setback — she recently lost her dog, Stormy, a salt-and-pepper miniature schnauzer she calls her service animal.

"It's my Christmas wish to find my dog," she said.

But while at Room at the Inn, Collins could relax, if only temporarily.

"It's a vacation away from a drunk," she said of her partner, who has problems with alcohol abuse.

Collins said that being at Room at the Inn makes her feel noticed — it helps her retain her dignity.

"We're invisible to the naked eye," she said of the homeless.

"People look down on us. We're people too. Where are we supposed to go?"

Shawna Curtsinger and David West attended the Room at the Inn retreat this week. They had been homeless but recently found shelter in a donated trailer. (Photo: GORDON FRIEDMAN / Statesman Journal)



John, 60, said Room at the Inn gave him a chance at finding camaraderie with the 110 other attendees, and, more importantly, warmth. John didn't want to give his last name because of the embarrassment of being homeless, he said.

While at the Room at the Inn, attendees are given Christmas gifts. They also watch movies and play games. DJ Vincent, who helps to run the event with his wife Gabi, said they try to plan the days so they do things a family would normally do together.



"I feel like a little kid," John said of receiving the gifts.

Mike Warren, another attendee, became homeless four years ago. He has arrangements with the owners of a warehouse in Salem who let him sleep there at night. Warren has attended Room at the Inn every year and plans to keep coming back.

"It's nice to see the people you haven't seen in a year and make sure they're all right," he said.

Shawna Curtsinger said the event was "beautiful." She praised the hospitality of the staff and volunteers. "There's lots of love," she said.

David West, who was homeless for three years and recently found housing in a trailer with Curtsinger, said the event was a welcome reprieve from his usual routine. Curtsinger also helps with the Mechanics Ministry, a program that fixes donated cars

and gives them to the homeless for transportation and shelter.

As people left Room at the Inn on Friday afternoon, they were given final gift bags of food and necessities.

For some it was tough to go back to the streets, but there was no place else for them to go.

gfriedman2@statesmanjournal.com, (503) 399-6653, on Twitter @gordonfriedman or Facebook.com/gordonfriedman