



**Thank you** for joining us in preparing, serving, and celebrating this Room in the Inn 2014. The event pulled together eight different Churches, 42 donors, 50 welcome gift bag shoppers, 80 guests, and 140 unique volunteers. I was challenged this Christmas season to test an assumption about the grace of God. "God's grace runs down hill and puddles up in low places." (Geography of Grace, by Kris Rocke, Joel Van Dyke)



In our efforts to share our love and time with those who many would consider the least among us, our experience of joy, hope, and love was overwhelming!

The 80 guests we welcomed this year each have a unique story and can be better understood in the context of one of three life-phases this season:

- The first group (about 25 people) most closely identify with what we would call *generational poverty* and *chronic homelessness*. They are experiencing scarcity in their ability to find a safe place to sleep, regular meals to eat, and relationships to find belonging. Many of these neighbors have pets for companionship, acceptance, and security. Aldersgate Camp and their Director Eric Muller make a once-a-year exception to pets to make the stay possible for them and their animals. This is particularly wonderful, considering the significant amount of stress involved if people are asked to be away from their pet (companion).
- The second group (around 30 people) most closely identify with what we understand to be *situational poverty*. They include couples and families living in their cars and motor homes. They have experienced a crisis in the past year, which has disrupted their housing, and left them with the possession of tenuous shelter and transportation. These neighbors move from parking lot to parking lot looking for safety, resources, and opportunities.
- The third group (about 25 people) have moved into housing since we started working with them six years ago. These neighbors have stabilized their housing through assistance programs or jobs. They still join us for the retreat to meet their needs of belonging and acceptance in a family.



**Beautiful** is the first word that comes to mind when reflecting on our volunteers and donors this year. In both cases, we had about 50% returning from previous years and 50% were brand new supporters. My heart is always warmed by the families who bring out their kids to share in the efforts to welcome, serve, and listen to the stories of our guests. I always give our guests the opportunity to write thank you cards to those who made the retreat possible. However, after the overflow of thanks from volunteers this year I wish I would have also written all their words down to share. I think we can be surprised by the amazing encounter we have with people when our agenda is simply: to serve. Jesus shares these words with his disciples "whatever you have done to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you have done to me." Many of our volunteers had a

profound Christmas experience of touching others with – as well as being touched by - the presence of God.

In the Statesman Journal article below, you will have the opportunity to hear some of Sherry Martinez's story and her journey from living in her car to finding hope and housing. I want to share the rest of the story with you. After Sherry made some new friends and found a new hope in Jesus last Christmas, she started looking to help others. One of the families she began to help was living in a motorhome. Over the past year she has regularly advocated for them and provided assistance even as she was moving into an apartment herself. The family was so encouraged by her love; they attended Room in the Inn with her this year. Sherry had regularly talked with them about the people and hope she received from her time last Christmas - they wanted to experience this for themselves. In a beautiful turn of events, one year after Sherry was baptized last Christmas Eve, she assisted in the baptism of her friend John this Christmas Eve.



We believe Room in the Inn is a tangible expression of the Good News of acceptance and hope that people experiencing poverty need all year long. **Church@thePark** currently helps provide two opportunities to listen, share, pray, and start relationships through a shared meal each week. Our meal on Thursdays take place in Cascade Gateway Park at 5:30pm and our breakfast on Sundays takes place on the edge of the park at 2410 Turner Rd SE in the Oregon Jaycees Building. We see the great value to the depth of our relationships in providing a retreat experience like Room in the Inn in addition to regular assistance. We will take the extra funds from the abundance we received at Christmas and put it toward our Men's and Women's Retreats in March and May.

## Statesman Journal Article: Homeless Find Family for Christmas with Room in the Inn

Two years ago, Sherry Martinez was living in her car and celebrating Christmas by herself after becoming estranged from her four kids.

"When you're alone at Christmas, that's probably the worst time of year when you're alone," she said.

Martinez was a strong Italian woman who had never had thoughts of suicide flit through her mind. But they did that Christmas.

That's when she decided to turn to Church at the Park, based in Cascades Gateway Park, and look to God to provide her needs.

Her next Christmas was spent with Room in the Inn, a three-day retreat that the church organizes for the homeless. Guests get to escape the stressors of their daily lives, stay someplace warm surrounded by friends and indulge in traditional Christmas activities.

This year, Martinez, 59, is back at Room in the Inn, but she no longer is homeless. She's been living in an apartment with her little Shih Tzu dog for five months.

"When you come out here, you've got a whole other family," Martinez said. "They make you feel like family." With Church at the Park as the main driving force, the retreat started at Turner's Aldersgate Camp and Retreats four years ago when organizers realized the greatest need come the holidays was a sense of family at Christmas, said D.J. Vincent, pastor and event organizer.

The name plays off of the story of Jesus' birth. When Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, they found there were no room available for them to have their baby born in.

When God sent his son into the world, he chose to use a family living on the fringe of society, who were barely making their way, Vincent said. It seemed very appropriate to organizers to pay attention to those living on the edge of poverty and society today.

"Jesus has come and because of that we've made room at the inn," Vincent said.

People continue coming out to the retreat even after they get a home, because it's now a part of their Christmas tradition, said Mark Walker, a pastor. They're also still living in poverty and don't have extra money to spend on the holiday.

The guests are either connected to Church at the Park or were invited by someone who attends. There's 20-30 people who have been coming to the retreat for years, Vincent said.

Richard Stu Naylor, who's spent four Christmases at the retreat, said there's a wonderful family atmosphere filled with smiling faces. He loves all the options for activities. Guests can sing carols, watch classic Christmas films, build gingerbread houses, sleep all day, win a Yahtzee tournament, walk a friend's dog in the woods and attend a candlelight service Christmas Eve.

"It's heaven," he said. "I've been looking forward to it all week."

The retreat began Tuesday and lasts until 1 p.m. Thursday. This allows guests to have one day where they don't need to move and have half of Christmas Day to spend with family they may have nearby. Guests are given new pajamas, socks, pants, shirts, sweatshirts, coats, gloves and hats that were donated by eight churches.

Even in that short 72-hour span, Vincent said, they've seen guests moving from focusing on their day-to-day needs to the larger problems they may face, such as addiction or mental illness.

"We end up taking a lot of folks from this event into recovery," he said.

The premise of everything both the church and the retreat do is to build relationships with the homeless, Pastor Cathy Walker said. Martinez said the pastors are there to help their community with everything they could need.

The bonds formed at the retreat were already strong but became even stronger for Martinez after she was baptized there last Christmas Eve.

"Without this, I honestly probably wouldn't be here (on earth)," Martinez said. "Because of Church at the Park, I'm probably happier than I have been in years."

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### I leave you with a few of the Thank You Notes from our guests:

"Thank you for the caring and giving Spirit that you have bestowed on us all." --E.C.  
This was one of my greatest Christmases in the last four years.

It is one I will always remember." --Rosie

"These have been the three most peacefully days of our year." --The Peppers

"The people here are so welcoming and easy to talk to." --James

"Being here has made me feel human again." --Steve

"Being helped like this makes me realize what I can do for others." --John

We are so grateful for your support & participation,  
DJ & Gabi Vincent

