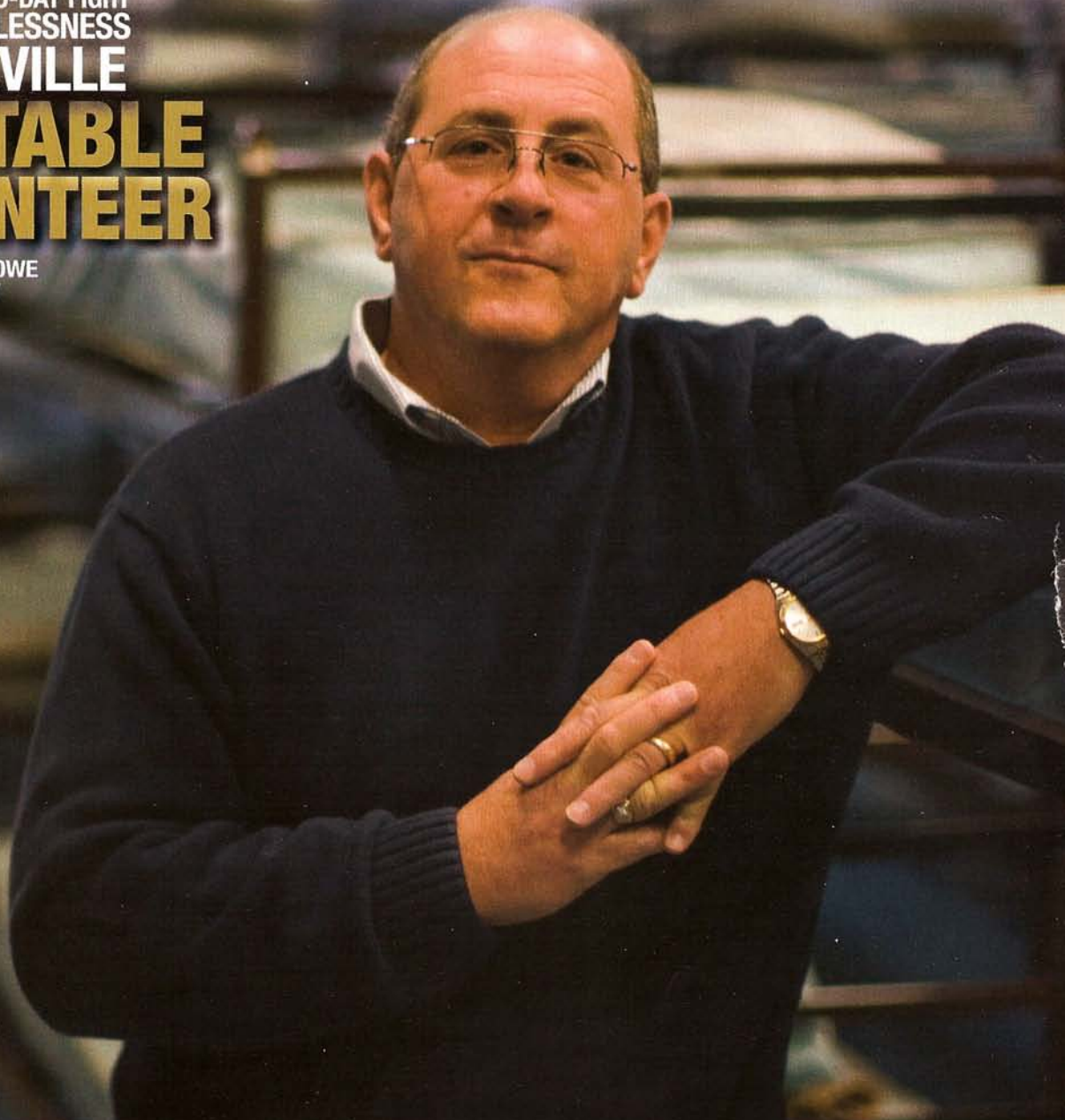


BURT ROSEN
LEADS THE DAY-TO-DAY FIGHT
TO END HOMELESSNESS
IN KNOXVILLE

**VERITABLE
VOLUNTEER**

BY J. BRANDON LOWE
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omelessness is a delicate issue, and a problem our city must face together. Prominent figures in Knoxville have joined together on a task force and seek to end, through a "Ten-Year Plan," the plight of the chronically homeless. The plan seeks more involvement from the community, and more responsibility among the homeless.

Burt Rosen is president of the Knox Area Rescue Ministries (KARM), a network of individuals working to end the problem, making him the city's acknowledged leader in this day to day battle.

The issue is close to Rosen's heart. His son, Matthew, is homeless and has been missing for over four years. Rosen lives with the irony that while he

fighters to help the homeless of East Tennessee, his son remains missing. But that hasn't stopped him from making a profound difference in the lives of many people in Knoxville that had nowhere else to turn. We had a chance to spend some time with KARM's humble leader, and what we found out about his organization may surprise you.

"I DIDN'T THINK I HAD THE STOMACH TO WORK WITH THE HOMELESS POPULATION..."

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT KARM?

One thing that I noticed early on was that people thought that in order to receive services you were professing your faith. But that is not the case. We are unabashedly Christian, but that isn't a requirement. Our faith is the foundation that drives what we do and how we do it. Our services, however, are offered without regard to religious beliefs. We tell people that knowing Jesus isn't going to pay their bills. You still have to get a job and be a responsible person in the community.

Meals and overnight lodging are the largest and most visible aspect to the community. However, it is our residential programs, made up of 40 men, 30 women and 18 families, that are the high impact, less visible part of our work.

We knew that ultimately we were going to have to provide something that was more in-depth. Through our Abundant Life Kitchen, we help disenfranchised adults gain the skills that make them successful in the food service industry. KARM is a lot more than a first act of compassion. There is no free ride here. Everyone that stays here participates in the upkeep of the facility. People that were living under the bridge, that were strung out on drugs or had other life challenges, come in here and then are able to make it out there. And they aren't doing it at the taxpayer's expense. These are folks that are making their own way. They are renting apartments and paying their bills. They are contributing dollars into the system rather than draining from the system. And that's huge for us. Can we stop homelessness? I don't know. It's a good place to start. Most folks who tour here say, "I had no idea."

WHO DOES HOMELESSNESS AFFECT IN OUR COMMUNITY?

Homelessness is a big issue, and if it were not, our city mayor and county mayor would not have gotten behind a 10-year program to end homelessness. The issue affects everybody. It touches every aspect of our community. It's a taxpayer expense whether you feel it or not.

Plus, it impacts the image of our community. You have 50-60 people on the streets. That is not what you want when you are trying to show off Knoxville. Also, if you look at the demand on emergency room services, you begin to see it touch on every area of the community.

The fastest growing segment of the homeless population is "women with children." We are home to as many 50 children at any given time. Kids who get their start in a shelter have significantly larger amounts of problems in schools. Whether or not it's the most important issue in the community depends on your frame of reference. If you Googled homelessness, what you would find is that cities all over the country are trying to figure out how to deal with this problem. A fourth of the homeless population are veterans. What kind of statement is that for us, even if that statistic is off a little bit? That's pretty staggering.

WHAT IS YOUR HOPE FOR SOMEONE THAT COMES TO KARM FOR HELP?

This is the place where someone comes when nothing else will work. Here they'll find an open arm and a listening ear.

What you've got here is people that are used to being treated a certain way. So, we say, if you'll trust us enough to hear your story, then just perhaps there is more to you than what meets the eye. And here is an opportunity, if you want it, to turn your life around. We're not for everybody, but we want to make a difference in that individual's life.

The staff is focused on engaging people in relationships. For those people who are staying overnight, we have outreach teams that serve as program service evangelists. It is designed to target those people that are in a transient state, in order to get them into a higher level of service. We want them stabilized, and back out into the community.

What KARM believed long before I ever got here, is that it's a change of heart that can really change a person's behavior. Unless a person's heart changes, they just learn to play the game a different way. Also, I think every person is worth understanding. And that is what we really try to do. That is the essence of it.

HOW CAN PEOPLE HELP THE HOMELESS IN KNOXVILLE?

I would first want to shatter the myth and set the record straight for people in Knoxville. Because what they picture is a place where there are some beds and a place where folks hanging on the street can get a meal. But there is really so much more going on here.

I would want readers to know that there is more to KARM than your typical rescue shelter. For us, just a little less than half of them make that transition and find a way out. They actually start employment while we are here. But there is a need for people to help voluntarily, doing everything from helping with laundry to serving and preparing meals. We look for volunteers to enter into relationships and we use a mentoring model here that matches a trained volunteer with a resident. We do a guest chef program; someone can come in and do a guest chef spot and teach a particular culinary skill or maybe teach a specific menu. People can get involved that way. There are diverse ways in which people can help.

Because we are not government funded, we rely on donations—and that is a very practical way to help. The other way is to donate gently used goods to one of our thrift stores.

WHAT KARM DOES:

- Serves over 1,000 meals daily
- Operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
- Facility has 200 beds for men, 40 for women
- Responds to the needs of the poor and the homeless
- Offers job training to provide the skills needed for a new life
- Provides a hot, nourishing meal and safe refuge at night for the homeless
- Provide shelters for families of domestic violence and substance abuse treatment
- Case managers reach out by working to find people solutions to their homelessness