

Ministry founder helps those in need 'make it back home'

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WENTZVILLE — The view from the motel couldn't be more depressing.

From the front door of the cinder-block lobby, its tenants watch an unrelenting stream of cars and trucks thunder by on nearby Interstate 70. Penniless and in many cases car-less without the support of family or friends, these are the hard-luck cases that life has dumped on the side of the road.

For all of them, mercy arrives every day in a blue Dodge van.

The driver is Paul Kruse. In just over 20 months this repairman from nearby Lake Saint Louis has helped to pay the minimum \$32-a-night motel lodgings for more than 700 people who through bad choices or plain bad luck have no money and no place left to go.

For more than 300 families, his offers of shelter, clothing, rides and spiritual words have led them out of the darkness of sleeping in cars and camping in the woods to self-sufficiency and permanent places to call home.

There was bright-eyed Beth, who kicked years of addiction to methamphetamine and skirted a long sentence in prison but had burned all her bridges and had no place left to go with her teenage son.

There was Dave, weak from losing more than 30 pounds and waxy-skinned. He was discharged from a hospital this summer in a body cast and left to recover from his third major back surgery alone in a rural motel room until his money ran out. He found his way to Kruse in a back brace.

Some women have been cast out of their homes, others evicted. Many have lost their jobs because of injuries and have no

insurance or medicine.

Some come to Kruse after spending nights sleeping in abandoned trailers or even in fields. Once he tended to a woman, yellow and dying from the last stages of alcoholism.

In the week before Christmas, Kruse was shepherding 11 people in the Budget Inn Motel, including a 3-month-old baby.

Kruse, 59, is the founder of First Step Back Home Homeless Ministry.

In June he was the recipient of a FOCUS St. Louis What's Right with the Region award.

More recently, Sts. Joachim & Ann Care Services, one of St. Charles County's largest charitable organizations for the poor, contracted with Kruse to help people find immediate employment.

Kruse at first relied on his own credit cards to pay for the lodgings. He now depends on the ebb and flow of charitable donations. Recently, the Harmon Foundation donated \$5,000 and Monsanto Co. added \$1,200 as well as food and toiletry kits.

He sees these as gifts from God. They prevent him from ever giving up despite the fact that more than half of the homeless who come to him for help drift away and don't "make it back home."

This is Kruse's second helping endeavor along one of the country's longest highways. In 2001 he and his wife, Lana, founded the TA Truck Stop Ministry off Interstate 70 in Foristell. The truckers told the Kruses sad tales of rootless lives without family or homes. Kruse said it was his first real glimpse into the misery and isolation that people carry in their souls. The truck stop was also the place where he first encountered the homeless.

Helping them, regardless of how they got that way and where they came from, has become Kruse's own way of fulfilling the main tenets of the Bible.

Kruse doesn't look anything like an angel of mercy. His nose is blunt. His voice is gravely. But the words that come out of his mouth give hope to even the most desperate.

He asks for little identification and only basic information. For many this is a blessing because they don't have the paperwork and other basic requirements to stay in a homeless shelter or apply for other types of assistance. When the Salvation Army and others cannot take them, they are told to go find Kruse at the motel.

From waiting room chairs inside the motel's lobby, Kruse conducts the same conversation daily with newcomers. First he tells them he will pay for three nights in the motel and give them weekly survival boxes of food. And then regardless of who they are or where they came from, gratitude and relief sweep across their faces.

"They just can't believe it because they've had so many people tell them no," Kruse said.

Then he explains his plan. It is built on math and survival. They will need to get up at 5:30 the next morning to make it over to Labor Finders in O'Fallon or other temp agencies where manual work is almost always at the ready. With a daily take-home pay of \$50 and an extra \$25 he chips in, his clients can pay the motel's weekly \$175 rate with three days of work. By the fifth day, they can shave \$100 in savings for future, permanent shelter.

"That's how everything is supposed to work," Kruse said. Although he admits success lies in the little details, such as making sure everyone has a ride, and that other clients at the hotel also are offering support.

For those grappling with drug or alcohol abuse and not willing to get treatment, Kruse said he is unable to help them until they help themselves. For women with children, he relies heavily on Mary Kay Laingen, another Lake Saint Louis resident who has formed her own ministry, The New Beginnings.

Kruse's simple plan worked for Beth. She now lives in a small apartment in Wentzville and is employed full time. But Dave, crippled from his back injury, is long gone. Kruse said the disability check Dave was waiting on earlier this year to buy a mobile home near the Lake of the Ozarks might have come in. He might never know.

"Most of these people I will never see again," Kruse said.

Yet there's no time to be discouraged because Kruse's cell phone rings constantly. On the other end of the line could be another desperate plea for help. On Wednesday it was Renee from O'Fallon whose husband had been severely injured at work.

"I understand you help people who are in need," she said into his voice mail, her voice wavering and tears about to break. "We need some help."

Or the voice on the phone could be someone offering clothes, food, money, time or even a ride for those in need. Whoever it is, Kruse said there's always a chance for a miracle.

"Every week something wonderful happens," he said. "It keeps me encouraged and makes me go back."

To volunteer or donate money, clothing or food to First Step Back Home, call Kruse at

314-852-5288.

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