

Pint-Size Nurse Shows King-Size Heart for Homeless in Dallas

Susie Jennings spearheads Operation Care, which has helped rally her community to reach out to an often forgotten group

Susie Jennings, a pint-size nurse, born and river-baptized as a child in the Philippines, is uniting faith-based, social and health-care services with corporate giants to open arms, hearts and pocketbooks for one of America's often forgotten groups: the homeless.

What began as Jennings' blanket drive for the homeless a decade ago has blossomed into Operation Care , a nonprofit organization in Dallas that is backed by a board of directors composed of major players from such groups as Verizon, the IBM Corporation and SBC Communications.

Several times a year now, Jennings said, Operation Care brings the city's homeless from the concrete shadows to celebrate holidays, and be fed, clothed and when possible reunited with families through a visit or a phone call near Easter and Valentine's Day, in summer and fall, and at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

At least once a month, she said, her Operation Care volunteers hit the streets to witness to the homeless, take them comfort items, food and bottled water labeled with emergency and shelter numbers and the words, "Jesus Is the Living Water."

Always friendly, smiling and nodding, Jennings has a vision that looms much larger than her 5-foot frame. Her energy

seldom wanes, and those around her instinctively know they must move with her or respectfully move out of the way.

Operation Care is not unlike other homeless ministries, which often begin with one person's calling and become established operations that enrich communities and lives in limitless ways, according to Steve Burger, executive director of the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions based in Kansas City. "There's always the apparent need and that committed person that becomes totally enmeshed in the issue," he said. "Personalities and past experiences can play in—and the Holy Spirit."

Jennings said the Operation Care outreach stems from the loss of her husband in April 1993. "He had been suffering long-term emotional illness aggravated by a chemical imbalance in his brain," she said. "He had a bad reaction to some medication; during that time he lost a close friend, lost his job, and his psychiatrist moved away. ... Then he disappeared and became a missing person.

"We found his body in Oklahoma. He had committed suicide—homeless and alone. We buried him the day before Easter. ... Reuniting families is an important aspect of this ministry."

That spring, as full-time nurse supervisor for Baylor University Medical Center, the young widow was already teaching a preschool Sunday school class at her church in downtown Dallas.

"Then the Lord grabbed hold of me," Jennings said. "I remember driving home from the church one day and turning my head to

look away when I passed the Canton Street Bridge downtown. Under the bridge, more than 100 homeless men and women peered out from the cardboard boxes that served as their homes.

“But God called me not just to look at them, but to go under the bridge in person and help them. ... At first, I said, ‘Oh, no, God, not me! ... Why me?’ I had always despised homeless people. I couldn’t stand the way they smelled. ... They don’t smell bad to me anymore.”

According to Ray Bailey, executive director and 25-year veteran of homeless outreach with the 50-year-old Dallas Life Foundation, Operation Care’s Christmas Gift gathering at the Dallas Convention Center was the largest homeless outreach event in the city’s history.

Several thousand volunteers pitched in from the mega Prestonwood Baptist Church, The Potter’s House and more than 121 area churches. An estimated 8,000 homeless and needy individuals filed in for food, personal care items, tents, blankets, medical exams, vision care, foot washing and podiatry care, makeovers, haircuts, manicures, individual and family portraits, legal advice, prayer, and spiritual and emotional counseling.

Jennings admits that she seems to meet herself coming and going these days with the demands of her job, ministry and caring for her 88-year-old mother, but she’s not discouraged. Instead, she said, she’s listening to hear if God is calling her to give up her lifetime nursing vocation.

“If God called me, I’d leave it tomorrow to help the homeless in Dallas and across the country for Him.”

Marcia J. Davis in Dallas