

# Welcome to our Paradise

**Eno and Debi Maletic share the gospel with homeless people in Marathon, Florida—where carefree islanders rarely see Christian compassion.**

It's virtually an unwritten rule that any musical group playing in the Florida Keys has to be asked to perform at least one song by Jimmy Buffet, whose lilting tunes have for a quarter century celebrated the islands' hedonistic reputation as one long party with great sunsets and lots of fishing.

Yet the shouted request for "Coconut Telegraph," a ditty about local gossip, comes a little unexpectedly as Debi Maletic and a band play for a dozen or so people in an upstairs room in Marathon, halfway down the chain of islands that snakes out from the southern end of Florida 100 miles into the ocean. That's probably because Maletic is leading worship.

But if the drinking song appeal is unusual in a church service, then so is this midweek congregation, comprised of an assortment of runaways, dropouts, misfits and assorted others down on their luck who will later drift away to their makeshift homes in the woods, under bridges, in cars.

Once living prosperously in New Jersey, Maletic and her husband, Eno, have spent the last few years ministering to some of those who have found the Keys' promise of paradise to be an illusion.

Through their HigherLove Mission Outreach, the pair run a drop-in center, provide hot meals, refer those looking to change to rehabilitation programs, help reunite others with their families and doggedly preach that anything is possible

with God.

“We are missionaries to those that are the most unloved and sometimes the most ungrateful,” she says. “We need to give them the opportunity to come to Christ because it’s the only answer. Without Jesus they don’t stand a chance.

“The most important thing we can give them is an opportunity for Jesus to touch the woundedness that nothing else, no one else can, not even the best psychiatrists,” she continues. “There’s a place for that, and for medical help, but nothing will touch that woundedness but Jesus.”

After funding the ministry themselves for several years largely through Eno’s landscaping business, the Maletics have recently been given money by the city for their programs. “Nobody else is doing what they do, and they do it with a lot of love,” says John Bartus, Marathon’s vice mayor. “I’m impressed by the services they are providing to the homeless community.”

Judy Bell credits HigherLove with giving her new life after being homeless. “If it wasn’t for them, I’d still be on the streets, I’d still be drinking and smoking,” says Bell, now a volunteer at the ministry. “They helped me feel good, believe in God. ... I’m going to help them as much as I can.”

Stanley Green, who in his 70s sleeps under a tree, likes being able to visit the HigherLove center “to sit down and relax, wash up. It’s very peaceful, quiet.”

He enjoys the services, too. “They don’t preach like most people; they don’t preach fire and brimstone. They have done a

whole world of good to me, shown me there's a better way of living. I used to be so angry at people; now I say a prayer to Him every day and night."

HigherLove isn't what the Maletics had in mind, though, when the former bouncer and cocktail waitress moved down to Florida to join the staff of a church, eager to be in full-time ministry after coming to Christ.

Things didn't work out, and they ended up forming a small home fellowship under the oversight of their old pastor from New Jersey. Then a homeless person came into one of their services. "You could smell him 50 feet away," Eno recalls. "He was filthy, hadn't showered in a month."

But he enjoyed the service, and the Maletics discovered hidden homeless camps in the surrounding mangrove plots when they offered to give the visitor a ride. In subsequent weeks he returned, bringing homeless friends, and as more of them came along, fewer of the regulars did.

"We didn't take on a homeless ministry; we just got to know one homeless person as a human being, " says Eno, who describes himself as having been a typical "conservative Republican" with the opinion that "there's no reason anybody should be homeless in the U.S. if they just got a job and made some money."

But he discovered it isn't always that easy in the Keys, where service jobs don't pay well and the cost of living is among the highest in the country.

"Our understanding of what is the church has been turned

upside down," he admits. "My original conception was you went there to experience God twice a week. Now I know there are no limits, it's full time, 100 percent."

For Debi a turning point came early on in a service when she asked if anyone wanted prayer and a woman with a bloodied head raised her hand. "She said she'd been hurt and I thought she'd ask God to heal her, but she said she would like Jesus to help her forgive the person that had done this to her," Debi remembers. "I couldn't even talk. ... The selflessness of that just made such an impact on me."

Although untrained, the Maletics have learned through experience and the leading of the Holy Spirit how to deal with people fighting addictions or other life-controlling problems. "They'll bait you to see if you are for real," Debi says. "You have to be in constant prayer, or your human nature kicks in. You need to keep seeing them with the eyes of Jesus."

The street smarts she learned as a teenage dancer on Broadway and young bit-part player in movies stand her in good stead in the homeless world. And she believes God used even her lifelong love for animals—she used to work as a veterinarian technician—to prepare her for ministry in the Keys.

"I seemed to have this uncanny ability to come across animals in need and distress. One time I remember God telling me, 'I'm going to teach you how to love people the way you love animals.'"

Not everyone is supportive of their work. They lost one ministry location when the owners became unhappy about all the homeless people attending and had to hold services on the

beach until they found another home above a furniture store's storage facility.

Success stories are bittersweet, for they usually end with those the couple have helped moving away, back home or into rehab programs, and "so the more successful we are, the more friends we lose," Eno says.

Debi recalls reuniting Willie, the woman who asked for prayer to forgive her attacker, with her family in Louisiana. An alcoholic, Willie died a few months later at age 42.

"But she didn't die in the woods," Debi says. "She died at home, reunited with her daughters."

---

Andy Butcher is the editor of Christian Retailing magazine and former senior writer for Charisma.