

Remember This Viral Video? Meet the Ministry Behind It

When the physical transformation of Jim Wolf found its way onto the Internet via a 2-minute time-lapse video, it went viral. People everywhere watched as Wolf, then a homeless United States Army veteran, miraculously changed into a well-dressed businessman.

“The idea was to break down stereotypes,” says Marge Palmerlee, executive director of Dégagé Ministries, an organization that has served the homeless and disadvantaged in Grand Rapids, Mich., for the past 47 years.

Palmerlee says they worked with a local video producer to tell Wolf’s story. The experience propelled Wolf to get the help he has always needed.

“A 2-minute makeover doesn’t change people,” Palmerlee says. “But we walk alongside them and help them to do the difficult work of an internal transformation.”

Dégagé begins by meeting the physical needs of those in their community. Last year the ministry served 55,000 meals and provided facilities for the homeless to shower, do laundry and use the restroom.

Dégagé charges a small fee for some of its services, but no one is sent away hungry, and anyone can earn a money voucher to buy food or a bus ticket.

“One-way giving affects self-esteem,” Palmerlee says, adding that Dégagé’s goal is to help others become participants in life rather than just recipients.

In addition, the nonprofit’s resource office gives one-on-one assistance to those looking for housing, transportation,

employment and medical care, and the Open Door Women's Center offers housing for up to 40 adult women in crisis situations every night.

Dégagé also hosts support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, and offers fun classes and activities for men, women and children.

"It's just coming together and saying, 'How can we help you to view yourself in a positive light?'" Palmerlee says. "Everyone has potential."

Of course, the ministry's main goal is to share the love of Jesus. However, Palmerlee says it's a common misconception that the poor and needy are without Christ.

"Many of them are deeply committed Christians who have lost hope," she says. "We accept people where they are and challenge them to be all they can be."

If your memory is foggy, watch the video below:

– Sarah Breed