

She Took Back the Neighborhood

When Barbara Brewton Cameron decided to put her personal pain to work, it brought healing to an entire community.

“God told me to rescue the children,” Barbara Brewton Cameron says. It’s a matter-of-fact answer characteristic of the visionary 63-year-old pastor and community leader. “I could have been a statistic,” she continues, “but God told me what to do, and I sat up and did it.”

Barbara’s bittersweet but, ultimately, triumphant story is intertwined with a once crime-ridden Charlotte, North Carolina, neighborhood called Double Oaks. This inner-city community was described in the news as “an open-air drug market of heroin and cocaine.” In the 1970s and early ’80s, hearing gunfire became commonplace in and around the small, graffiti-marked houses.

One night in 1973, Casey Brewton, Barbara’s husband of five years, was walking home from his second job at a Holiday Inn. The steel-mill worker stopped for a moment to talk with friends, one of whom pulled out a gun to show off. It accidentally fired-hitting Casey.

He was taken to the hospital where he lay comatose for a week before passing away. Barbara became a widow with the daunting job of raising three very young children alone.

From Grief to Faith – “I just didn’t want to live after that,” Barbara says. “Not having an in-depth, personal relationship with God, I didn’t want to go on.”

“It had been a happy marriage with a man who was second to none,” she continues. “He loved his wife and his children, and

always remembered Valentine's Day and birthdays."

After the shock and devastation began to wane, Barbara realized that she must carry on for the sake of her children. She used her husband's life-insurance benefits to buy a home in a safer part of Charlotte and found a job with a clothing manufacturer.

Eventually, little Katherine, Gwendolyn and Casey Jr. all reached school age. Their busy mother could finally reflect on the unspeakable tragedy.

The question of why was always at the forefront. "When I finally accepted Christ in my life," Barbara says, "I could see the whole thing in perspective. I couldn't understand my husband's shooting, but I knew there was a plan greater than his death, and there was something more God had for me."

Her thoughts turned toward the old neighborhood. There were the elderly who lived in terror because they couldn't afford to leave. There were the single moms being used and abused by drug dealers. And there were the children-innocent victims who couldn't even play on a park swing for fear of shootouts and drug pushers.

Barbara was drawn to the people of Double Oaks. She understood firsthand the hopeless despair they faced. As she prayed for someone to come save the neighborhood, a surprising vision was birthed in her own heart.

"That's when God said, 'Go rescue My children,'" Barbara recalls, "Not only the young children, but all those that are trapped in a world they can't escape on their own." The Holy Spirit spoke to Barbara through Matthew 25:35-36: "'For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me'" (NKJV).

Barbara explains: "God showed me, through that chapter, what I needed to do. He said, 'If you've done it to the least of these, you've done it to Me' (see Matt. 25:40). I knew He wanted me to empower and enrich the lives of the forgotten."

Partnering with God – In 1982, Barbara rented a five-room house near a small park in the dilapidated west Charlotte community. She created relationships with regional ministries, area churches and local food banks.

"I set up my ministry in a little house that had been used only for drug parties," she says, "God asked me to go in where even the men, for fear of being killed, refused to go. But I knew He placed the vision within my heart, and I knew He was greater than all the obstacles."

From the moment the doors opened, the Mission House was a busy place, complete with a modest food-distribution center and a small soup kitchen. One room housed the Clothes Closet ministry and another, the Book Room.

Through Barbara's partnerships with other Christians, she offered church services, Sunday school classes and special outreach activities for the children. She would organize neighborhood cookouts for the kids, and 80 youngsters would show up.

Not everyone was happy to have this good-hearted Samaritan in their midst. "The drug lords tried to get rid of me because they said I was ruining their drug sales," Barbara says. "When fear began to come in me, I had to stay in the Word of God and keep praying. God directed me and ministered to me. I realized that He hadn't given me a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love and a sound mind (see 2 Tim. 1:7.)

For the next five years, Barbara and a group of loyal volunteers continued to work on a shoestring budget. As word of their efforts spread, people from outside the community took interest in this once-forgotten area. One woman came all

the way from Pittsburgh, having no idea that she would cross Barbara's path at a crucial time in the Mission House ministry.

Claire Estes decided to retire in the warmth of the Carolinas. She joined a small Baptist church near her new home and was introduced to Barbara by a mutual friend. "That dear lady was the friend, mentor, mother and support that I needed to help me," Barbara says. Claire inspired more churches to get involved, encouraged Barbara to become an ordained minister and gave generously from her own personal resources.

One of her most amazing gifts helped fulfill a very big dream. Barbara was keeping close watch on a notorious old property in the neighborhood. "I would look out the window of my little ministry house and see the drug activities all around that large building," she says. "A sign out front read 'Game Room' but syringes, beer cans and bottles littered the property. Bars were on the windows and doors. And pimps kept old mattresses in the basement for prostitution."

Asking the Lord for direction, Barbara prayed fervently and received an answer. "God sent me over there to march around that building seven times and possess it for the kingdom of God," she says. "And I did!" (See Josh. 6:1-5.)

Although they didn't know how it was going to happen, Barbara and her prayer partners believed the building was going to be their new place of worship. They needed the space to accommodate their ever-expanding ministry.

Double Oaks was slowly beginning to change. The Mission House never turned people away. They shared what little they had, and through their efforts, people learned how to stand on their own.

One elderly man in the neighborhood took special notice and decided to pay a visit to the Mission House on a Saturday afternoon. He was the owner of the Game Room building.

“He drove up on a day when we had 85 kids playing at our little house,” Barbara recalls. “And he said I could have his \$95,000 property at a cost of \$65,000, as is.” Barbara accepted his offer immediately, knowing that she didn’t have the money, but trusting God to fulfill the vision.

When Claire heard the story, she was ready to put the final piece of the puzzle in place. Three years prior, she’d received a family inheritance, and believed the Lord had instructed her to set that money aside and not touch a dime of it until He directed her where to spend it. The amount of her inheritance was exactly \$65,000. After purchasing the property and extensively renovating the structure, Pastor Barbara Brewton opened Community Outreach Christian Ministries and walked into a debt-free miracle.

Abundant blessings Throughout the early 1990s, the church thrived. Worship services were packed, grocery distribution was expanded, more hot meals were shared and many at-risk lives were saved. In 1994, Barbara married a fellow pastor named Houston Cameron, who stepped up to help share the burden of the expanding ministry.

Word-of-mouth success stories and positive media attention led to two important blessings: an increase in donations and heightened interest from local government officials. Eventually, a large multipurpose structure was added to the existing church building, providing classrooms, transitional housing, a dining room and a much-needed commercial kitchen.

Barbara also spearheaded a community coalition that included the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership, Habitat for Humanity, the area police department and private developers. Their goals were to increase police presence on the streets, buy and fix up area properties and offer loans for residents to become first-time homeowners. Once again, Barbara’s hard work and undying faith made a difference.

By the fall of 1997, local news outlets reported “a 77-percent drop in violent crime, clean streets, new gutters, the formation of an active neighborhood association, a community garden and the raising of a new entrance sign marking the neighborhood.” Now called Genesis Park, the once forgotten community is a true example of how God can make all things new.

Today, Barbara Brewton Cameron and her band of volunteers are still hard at work on behalf of the desperate and neglected. The outreach arm of the ministry is now called Harvest Center—an independent, Christ-focused facility where every donated dollar is used to provide hope, encouragement and nourishment.

In 2005, almost 30,000 hot meals were served at Harvest Center. Every month, 300 families received bagged groceries. Hundreds of children were tutored and mentored at the After School Excellence Program. And countless adults were able to break the hold of alcohol and drugs through the Overcomers Recovery Program.

As Barbara looks forward to the next crucial phase of her ministry, which includes plans to build another multipurpose facility in another needy neighborhood, she takes a moment to reflect back on all that God has done. “God told me that if I would just obey Him, He would send me everything I needed,” she says. “It seemed, to the natural mind, impossible. But I tell you, He is an awesome God.”

Vonda Harrell is a freelance writer, editor and producer.