



Homeless clients and volunteers look through clothing donated to Least of My Brethren during an Aug. 23, 2020, meal in the parking lot of Mohm's Place in Council Bluffs. COURTESY PHOTO

 NEWS

## Least of My Brethren helps homeless furnish new homes

🕒 **February 5, 2021** by [Mike May](#)

When Dave Harvey helps a formerly homeless person get settled into an apartment with some used furniture, he can relate to their situation. He was never homeless, but remembers the tough times he and his divorced mother faced as he grew up.

“My mom and I didn’t always have it easy,” he said. “I look at a lot of these people, and I remember times when my mom worked three jobs just trying to make ends meet.”

For nearly 20 years, Harvey and his wife, Cheryl, members of St. Patrick Parish in Gretna, have operated Least of My Brethren, a ministry helping Omaha and Council Bluffs homeless people with food and clothing, bicycles to help them find and get to a job, and furniture once they obtain employment and housing.

He recalls living in a one-bedroom apartment and his mother sleeping on a sofa because she didn’t have her own bed. “I remind myself that everybody I’m helping – that could have been my mom.”

Over the past seven years, providing good, used furniture has become a growing part of Harvey’s ministry, having furnished about 1,300 apartments to date, he said.

Numerous organizations, including Catholic Charities, Heartland Family Services, Salvation Army, Together, Inc., and Community Alliance, help clients find housing and provide security deposits or first month’s rent.

These people need help making their new apartments a home so they won’t be sleeping on the floor in a sleeping bag, Harvey said. “By giving them a place to sit, a place to sleep, to make themselves a meal, to watch a TV show – there’s a little more normalcy that comes to it.”

“And, we hope it creates a sense of pride,” he said. “The best thing for us is to see somebody a year later, and they tell us they’re still there.”

## **CALLED TO DO MORE**

Before beginning their ministry, the Harveys donated to and volunteered at area shelters for several years, but eventually felt called to do more, and to do so in a more personal way.

“Realizing how blessed you really are – how can you be so blessed and not share it? I think doors are opened for us a lot,” he said. “Jesus stands at the door to our hearts all the time and challenges us, so we need to take a step through.”

At first, Harvey and his wife spent 25-30 hours a week collecting and delivering food, clothing, hygiene items and other essentials to the homeless. As their ministry grew, a small core of volunteers from their parish joined their efforts.

As Harvey became aware that, during much of the year, numerous people live outdoors near the Missouri River, the ministry also began to gather and distribute sleeping bags, tents and other items to support their living situation.

## **ALIVE AND THRIVING**

One of those people who received assistance was Jonathan Russell, who had become homeless at age 18.

Russell grew up without a father and experienced the death of his mother when he was 5. He was bitter, engaged in delinquent behavior, lived in foster care, and was adopted but later kicked out of his home. He spent time in jail and finally ended up by the river, a methamphetamine user who eventually attempted suicide.

Now Russell is giving back in gratitude as a regular volunteer with Least of My Brethren, and is eager to share with the homeless and other volunteers his story of how Harvey's ministry helped him get on his feet.

"Dave would take his Sundays to come drop off supplies to homeless people and try to give them hope that there are people who care," Russell said. "If it wasn't for Least of My Brethren, I don't think I would be alive today."

Russell now has a home, a family, two jobs, and will celebrate five years of freedom from substance abuse next month.

## **SCOPE OF HOMELESSNESS**

Harvey said it's estimated that 1,500 to 2,000 people in the metro area are homeless at any one time. Many head for area shelters during the winter. But about 50 people live outside year round, with others living in cars or abandoned buildings, he said.

In addition to the rise in unemployment due to the pandemic, Harvey notes other reasons people become homeless. Some have suffered work injuries but have insufficient insurance to pay their bills, and others are fleeing domestic violence or human trafficking, he said. Mental illness and substance abuse are also major factors.

To meet the needs, Least of My Brethren depends on 50-75 volunteers in any given month to help pick up and distribute donations.

Three groups use trucks to pick up donated furniture, others collect and sort clothing, and still others assist with two monthly meals for up to 225 people, and distribute up to four pickup trucks full of clothing each of those two days, Harvey said.

The meals include a breakfast the last Saturday of each month in the parking lot of St. Peter Church in downtown Omaha, and a lunch the last Sunday of each month in the parking lot of a Council Bluffs shelter. During winter months, the meals normally move indoors, except for this year due to the pandemic. Harvey said he hopes the meals can resume in March.

The ministry also distributes about 40 bicycles per month, and provides haircuts and other help with personal appearance for homeless people preparing for job interviews, he said.

## **GENEROUS SUPPORT**

Harvey hopes his ministry, which is focused on acts of mercy, has merited God's favor. He also is grateful for the many volunteers who assist with the effort, which has allowed the Harveys to scale back their time commitment to 15 hours a week.

"The biggest surprise for me is the number of people in the community that have come out and want to get involved," he said, which is invaluable for such an organization that has no staff or office.

Least of My Brethren also relies on its Facebook page to promote its mission, and now has more than 5,400 followers who are the group's "eyes and ears" for gathering donations. It also provides a means for volunteers to get involved.

Harvey said there are rich rewards for helping serve "the least of my brethren" in the area.

"There's nothing better than when you see somebody a year later and they're still on their feet, and they come up and give you a big hug, or the mom who is in tears because she and her kids are (no longer living) in the car," Harvey said. "That's what makes it all worthwhile for us."

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## WANT TO HELP?

For more information or to volunteer, visit the organization's [Facebook page](#), its website, [leastofmybrethren.org](http://leastofmybrethren.org), email [leastofmybrethren@gmail.com](mailto:leastofmybrethren@gmail.com) or call 402-681-5424.

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