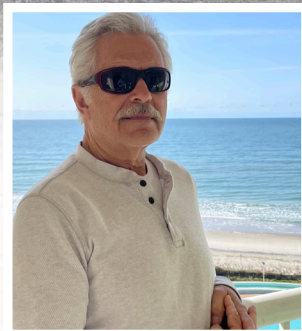


RESTORE FROM RUBBLE TO LIFE ANEW

MEET THE VISIONARY JERRY EVANS



“As a child, I hid all the time.” Trying to stay under the radar as a “nobody” on the fringe was Jerry Evans’ first life goal. Born in Arlington, Virginia, Jerry’s parents gave him away as a baby to a rural boarding farm. The exchange occurred nearly 80 years ago, when “child farms” were unregulated and conditions were unimaginable. The farm’s goal was money generation; the child’s role was work. The farm had no plumbing and no electricity. Food was minimal, and physical and emotional abuse were plentiful. “I lived through some horribly cruel situations,” Jerry recalled.

The continued abuse, fear, and confusion took their toll. At age 13, Jerry ran away. By ninth grade, he quit school and began his first fulltime job working at a local furniture factory.

In 1968, the Army drafted Jerry and assigned him to combat development. “It was the first time in my life that food was unlimited, and I had meat three times a day. It was unbelievable!” he recalled. “But, when I got out of the Army, I was still messed up.” Later in the early ‘80s, he and a partner launched Southern Auto Body Shop, which successfully served the Fredericksburg market for 20-plus years. Jerry sold his part of the business when he thought it was time to retire.

Another place where Jerry willingly worked—and continues to do so—is his church. A committed member of Fredericksburg Baptist since the early ‘80s, Jerry served as an usher, elevator operator, and even a dishwasher.

A merciless fire destroyed a rental house in Fredericksburg, Virginia in January 2023. The dwelling was more than a valuable rental home; it was a valued homestead for six men who had overcome homelessness. The house was a total loss, but there was one positive outcome: The kindhearted landlord was motivated to heightened action. In his mind, one homeless person on the street was one too many.

Miraculously, just six months later, this landlord-entrepreneur, Micah Ecumenical Ministries, and the Fredericksburg community celebrated the opening of Hesd House. The name “Hesd” is significant, for its Hebrew translation means “God’s unconditional lovingkindness that never gives up on humanity.” The property is significant, too, for it provides accommodations for 15 unhoused individuals. But before hearing more about how Hesd House came to be, one must understand the man who made it a reality.

Jerry Evans’ early life continues to haunt him, so he turns to his Heavenly Father for comfort. He wrote this poem, which came to him in bits and pieces while dreaming. “Maybe it will help someone else.” —Jerry Evans

A PLACE FOR YOU

Peace, be still and know the truth.
I was always there with you.

When you didn’t have a home.
When they left you on your own.

I saw you in a lonely place.
I saved the tears that kissed your face.

You wear guilt like iron chains.
Your broken heart is wrapped in shame.

I see all the selfish things they do.
See me reaching out to you?

I gave my life to set you free.
I paid the cost. You belong to me.

Now everything will be alright.
I will stay with you all night.

No one can hurt you anymore.
No more tears, not like before.

You can stay here with me.
Close your eyes and you will see.

You were always part of my plan.
You are safe here in my hand.

You don’t have to be afraid.
You know of the plans I’ve made.

You were never meant to be alone.
You were born to have a home.

I have prepared a place for you.
Love lives there. I live there, too.

Sleep well, you are safe now.

BACK TO HESD HOUSE

“Throughout my life, I continued to get drawn to people who live life on the margins,” Jerry said. That is why, after the house fire impacted its formerly homeless residents, Jerry resolved to buy the Thomas Jefferson Motel. “I realized we could accomplish a whole lot more if we had a motel with multiple rooms instead of a house,” Jerry explained. “It just made sense.”

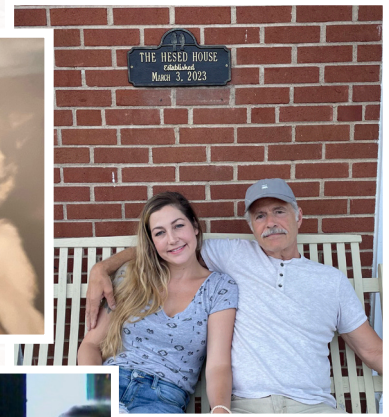
Micah Ecumenical Ministries successfully sheltered individuals in several Fredericksburg motels during COVID’s remain-in-place mandate and even discussed buying a motel. However, the nonprofit was already entrenched in its vision for Jeremiah Community—a neighborhood of small, single-family houses—and it would have been impossible to fundraise and plan for both at the same time. Meghann Cotter, Micah’s Executive Servant-Leader said, “The pandemic laid the groundwork for us to realize that hotel accommodations were a missing piece between living on the street and Jeremiah Community’s permanent housing. God laid the foundation for us to be ready to receive Jerry’s offer, and Jerry responded to God’s call to invest in ‘the very least’ of our community. Without him, we never would have had the bandwidth to take on purchasing a motel.”

The Thomas Jefferson Motel’s location—near public transportation, grocery stores, and workplaces—also made sense for those who would eventually attempt life transitions there. However, the property was built in 1947, and it was in dire shape with no repairs or updates in 76 years! Jerry funded the \$1-million purchase and went to work. From March to August 2023, he labored on site from sunup till dark.

Soon, grants and other financial support arrived from churches, community partners, and funders, as well as the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Likewise, local businesses and civic groups donated furniture, furnishings, and kitchen appliances. Jerry, Micah, and a small work crew revitalized the motel rooms with new windows, doors, heating/ac units, plumbing, and flooring. Thanks to the generous help of community partners, outdoor lighting, cameras, and keyless entry-door locks were installed for enhanced safety and security. Also, a new roof and paved lot are on the horizon, given by generous donors.



Hesed House



Photos: Jerry Evans during his time in the Army; Jerry and his daughter Melissa outside Hesed House; Jerry with his daughter Rachel; Jerry working on a bathtub in Hesed House.

“We can help get people out from living in a tent or under the bridge, but there’s a difference between having a shelter and a ‘home,’ Jerry shared. “I want our transitional residents to be more than just warm and dry. I want them to be warm, dry, and happy.”

Meghann summarized, “Because of Jerry’s efforts, Hesed House will welcome folks off the streets so they can begin the process of healing.” Equally exciting is the prospect of their business–philanthropic hybrid being replicated in other cities plagued by homelessness. Jerry envisioned it as “a model that can give people their dignity back, helping move them to the next phase of their life.”

HIS LIFE’S CALLING

Why would a retiree with the capacity to live life to the fullest so generously give his time, talents, and monies? “They are my people,” Jerry explained. “You don’t know what it’s like to be homeless, but I do. Being homeless for a while changes your mindset. You struggle, you suffer, and you lose your self-worth. We need to remember that life deals everyone a different hand of cards, and being homeless could happen to any of us. Money doesn’t do any good sitting in the bank, so sharing is the right thing to do. I don’t do it for kudos or pats on the back. I just want to know that I made a difference while I was in this world.”

Jerry, Hesed House, and its guests share a common thread: their God-empowered restoration from rubble to life anew.