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Giving the Homeless a Hand

Palmer Runs Nonprofits; Tapped for Expertise

■ By SHERRI CRUZ

When Jim Palmer was 14 years old, he began looking after a 6-year-old boy.

The kid's name was Michael. He was homeless.

At a time when most teenage boys were busy figuring out how to talk to girls, Palmer was figuring out how to help Michael and other homeless children.

"I felt that was a calling, that's what I'm going to do," Palmer said. "I'm going to help homeless families one way or another."

He led his first agency, Irvine Temporary Housing, at 19. Today, Palmer is president of the Tustin-based Orange County Rescue Mission Inc., a privately funded, debt-free religious nonprofit that helps people move from homelessness to self sufficiency.

The Rescue Mission serves what Palmer calls "the least, the last and the lost."

In all, Palmer oversees a \$14 million budget, 65 employees and thousands of volunteers.

Under the Rescue Mission's umbrella: the Village of Hope, a 5-acre residence for 192 people; low-rent transitional housing in Orange and Buena Park; a 142-acre ranch near Warner Springs for abused and neglected children; and Operation OC, a group that helps out in disasters.

The Rescue Mission, founded in 1963, takes a long-term and comprehensive approach to tackling homelessness.

At its largest residence, the Village of Hope, on the former Tustin Marine base, residents stay for up to two years.

"It's actually a boot camp," Palmer said. "When people come here, you're helping them change their entire life, their habit structure."

There is a Christian bent to the program. Palmer contends Christian teachings are integral to the overall program, which includes other onsite services, such as counseling, healthcare and help with finances.

Inside the Program

People who are accepted into the program abide by strict rules and a daily regimen, which includes various work assignments on the land. Residents mow the grass and cook the meals.

They also prepare 450 meals a week for the Santa Ana Armory.

Residents get up at 6 a.m. and get their kids off to school—the local school bus picks up the older children.

Clients take turns caring for the younger children at an onsite center.

At 6 p.m., they eat dinner. Residents also regularly attend chapel service. There is time for fun on movie night or band night. They are back in their rooms at 8 p.m., where there are no TVs. Security is tight.

They give up cell phones and other gadgets and they forgo welfare payments.

Everything they need is at the Village of Hope—a hair salon, a health center and a warehouse that supplies diapers, clothing, shoes and daily necessities.

Pepperdine University graduate students provide counseling and Irvine-based Concordia University offers after school tutoring. Healthy Smiles for Kids of Orange County, based in Garden Grove, fixes teeth.

The Rescue Mission is expanding to Temecula. Last month, it launched a food distribution program with the Rancho Community Church in Temecula and it is looking for a site to build more transitional housing.

While Palmer always has focused on the 35,000 homeless in OC, he has been tapped

nationally as an expert on homeless nonprofits and has worked with other organizations to gain experience.

In February, the Obama administration named Palmer, a Republican, chair of the Program and Evaluation Committee for the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees AmeriCorps and other volunteer organizations. President Obama is expected to sign legislation soon that triples the size of those organizations.

Former President Bush appointed Palmer to serve on the Corporation for National and Community Service's board through 2011.

"He's been an extraordinary leader and champion on the board who brings a real-world perspective from running a highly successful nonprofit," said Sandy Scott, spokesman for the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Palmer's Background

Palmer got some of that perspective while working for New York-based Community Counselling Service Co., where he gained his fundraising chops. The organization raises money for the Catholic Church.

"I became their youngest executive," he said.

Later he started his own company, which raised money for nonprofits. His biggest client was the Orange County Rescue Mission, which wanted to raise \$2.3 million to build transitional housing for women and their children.

The Rescue Mission raises 90% of its income from personalized monthly letters sent out to donors who have given before, including big-time

donors Howard and Roberta Ahmanson. It reaches new donors by requesting donations during Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Palmer raised funds for the Rescue Mission for two years before becoming its vice president, and six months later, he was president. Shortly thereafter, the House of Hope in Orange opened in 1994.

The House of Hope confirmed one of Palmer's tenets that he now brings to every project—build the best.

"I was of the philosophy that you don't give your used to other people. You give your best to other people," he said.

The Rescue Mission built a 1940s Craftsman mansion that fit in the city's historic district. The inside was beautifully furnished and the community donated antiques and original oil paintings.

"What we found was their self esteem skyrocketed because of the love they felt through people's contributions and giving them this special opportunity to live in a beautiful place," he said. "It was one of those aha moments."

Palmer, born and raised in Newport Beach to a middle class family, could be one of the most under the radar, influential people in OC. He has quietly served on numerous boards in the county and helps shape policy for city, county and federal governments.

Among his roles in government, Palmer is Orange County Housing and Community Development commissioner, and a councilman for the city of Tustin.

When Palmer's not working, he spends time with his wife and four children. Three of his children were fostered and then adopted. He recently bought a Mini Cooper to race with his sons.

"Over the weekends we spend a lot of time on that kind of stuff," he said. "Late at night I'll be back at work." ■



Palmer: has worked with homeless since age 14