

# The Agape Center

Winter, 2016

## SML's Largest Volunteer Organization

By Karen Baker

The Agape Center has become such a fixture in this community it is hard to believe it is only twelve years old. With nearly 300 volunteers, it is the largest year-round volunteer organization in the Smith Mountain Lake area. Serving nearly 900 clients per month, which represents about 2700 individuals from Bedford and Franklin Counties, the Agape Center provides individual mentoring to every client, clothing, household goods, furniture, firewood, and food. Hunters for the Hungry provides venison during the fall and winter months. Local farmers and orchards provide seasonal fresh produce. Volunteers come from thirty-seven local churches, fourteen of which are sponsoring partners with the organization. All funds to Agape are tax-deductible and make up the budget of just under \$200,000 annually. There is no paid staff.

What makes this totally volunteer, donation-based ministry run like the well-oiled machine it is sometimes referred? Many of the retirees who volunteer come from corporate settings and have asked, how does a volunteer organization get such loyalty among the 'staff' and such consistency in policies and procedures, without intensive training and supervision? Such questions are answered with ease by Executive Director, Sue Lipscomb. "It is totally God who directs this ministry and brings people, goods, funds, and specific expertise exactly when it is needed. Our ministry

is covered in prayer by a prayer team, and the volunteers, who feel they are directed to work here by the Lord, see it as a calling from God, not simply a volunteer activity."

The Agape Center was born in the church basement of Radford Baptist Church (RBC) in 2004 when two women, independent of each other, felt God calling them to start a clothing ministry to the community. Courtney Carr and Emily Mason were given permission to store the clothing in the church basement with the original intent that it would be community-based; it was opened once a month for the poor in Bedford and Franklin Counties.

Within the first few months, space was located to move the ministry outside of the church basement. Courtney and her husband, Todd, painted and repaired the retail space nearby. Once the Agape Center moved into its own quarters, the clients increased dramatically from the original eight families, as did the donations of clothing, household items and furniture. Food was purchased at Kroger and the food bank. Agape was on the move, and the client volume continued to increase.

Sue Lipscomb, who was a part of RBC at the time, was tapped from her role as director of the children's ministry to organize the burgeoning food pantry and clothing ministry. This was the last thing Sue felt called to do, but she agreed to pray about it in the hopes another answer would be provided. But God had given Sue the skills and He then gave her the passion to lead this ministry. With the total support of her husband, Jack, she agreed to take on this responsibility with two stipulations that would clarify the organization's purpose and role in the community. First, there needed to be a board of directors to have authority and accountability for the organization. Second, there needed to be a structured mentoring program where each client would meet one-on-one with a spiritual mentor for support and prayer. She became Agape's Executive Director in 2005, and the mentoring program that she championed would prove to be the distinguishing element of this Christian organization in serving the poor in the community.

In 2005, the first board was formed with eight individuals from RBC. Jim Miller, an original board member, drafted the constitution and by-

laws and filed the application with the IRS as a tax-exempt organization. The goal was to make the Agape Center a community-based ministry and to recruit volunteers and church participation from the area. The community need was proving greater than a single church could support in terms of space, volunteers, and finances.

Jim Miller was the first leader of the Pantry, establishing relationships with the food bank (now called Feeding America Southwest Virginia) and Lake Christian Ministries to accept food for Agape. Now living in Texas, he recently recalled, "Living in a rural area, saw the Agape Center as a great way to reach out to the community. I enjoyed being a part of it, meeting not only the needs, but also working with the caliber of people leading Agape, Sue and Jack Lipscomb. I think the Agape Center has been a great mechanism to bring churches together and I am pleased to see the number of churches now cooperating in this ministry."

Jim Miller, also an early volunteer mentor, says, "I think the mentoring program is great and I am really encouraged about the Getting Ahead program that helps clients grow to the next level in improving their situations."



**Gladys Hoover and daughter Marti Anderson were the first volunteers at Agape from Covenant Fellowship.**

While it was initially difficult to attract volunteers from other churches, getting church sponsors took even longer. It would be yet another year for another church to recognize that Agape was an independent Christian ministry, and that help was needed from the broader Christian community. Dwelling Place Christian Fellowship was the first to join Agape as a sponsoring church in 2009. There are now fourteen church sponsors, the most recent being Westlake Baptist Church, which joined in November 2016.

By 2012, the number of families being served had risen to nearly 350 and the 12,000 square feet could no longer accommodate the amount of goods and people using the facility. The board began to search for a new location.

The Agape Center purchased the Moneta Sew-



**Joyce Nunn, now from EastLake Community Church, is the longest serving volunteer at Agape.**

ing Factory, which had been vacant for quite some time, and provided an open warehouse-type of structure with 22,000 square feet. Renovation started with volunteer construction workers in August, 2012 and Agape relocated to their new home in January, 2013. By the end of 2016, volunteers have increased from 140 in 2013 to nearly 300 from over 37 churches in the area, some as far away as Lynchburg and Roanoke. Client volume has risen to nearly 900 in November, 2016.

Since moving to the current location, services have been added or expanded, including providing birthday gifts for clients during their birthday month, providing baby baskets for newborns of our clients, as well as Christmas gifts for all clients and their family members. All donations are put to good use, whether as gifts, silent auction items or prizes for fund-raising events, or emergency situations, such as when a fire has consumed clients' entire earthly possessions. Repair services for electronics, electronic toys, bicycles, and toys have been added to the mix as volunteers with specific skills and interests have joined Agape. Educational programs and Bible studies address specific client interests and needs. Teams of volunteers have been created for firewood pick-up and chopping; food pick-up; furniture pick-up, and book donations/library for clients and volunteers.

All funding for the Agape Center comes from individual donations, fundraising, grants and member churches. Agape has been a recipient of the popular Charity Home Tour since 2013. The Agape Open golf tournament celebrated its 12th year in September. The Ride for Hope introduced support of Agape in 2016, as did the Blue Grass/Gospel Concert. Additionally, groups such as the Southside Seniors, the SML Quilters Guild and local Bible study groups, home groups, and school groups, donate funds, specific new items, or volunteer help for specific projects. This is the twelfth annual Angel Tree children's Christmas gift collection through sponsoring churches.

As the organization has grown, board members with specific expertise were recruited to guide the Agape Center. During the past year, the board's strategic planning committee studied the operation and solicited feedback from clients, volunteers, and sponsoring churches; this effort resulted in identifying the severe space constraints, including the need for educational/training/conference space, as well as the issues of safety and security for the building. In response to the input, a building program was soon underway for the addition of a 5000 square building, a pole

barn for utility storage, and renovations within the building to accommodate additional programs, mentoring rooms, and warehouse/storage space. The cost of this project was projected at \$300,000 and nearly two-thirds of that money has been raised through private donations.

There is a continual need for volunteers, finances, and help with specific projects, such as baskets, fundraisers and special events. If you have a skill, it can be put to good use. Some of the ongoing volunteer positions include store clerk, reception, telephone operator, donation intake sorter, clothing sorter, pantry and furniture pick-up, library clerk, linen sorter, USDA clerk, data, and runner. Some of these positions are scheduled only when the Agape Center is open; others work at home or on your own schedule.

Sue Lipscomb, who has been a part of Agape since it began, says, "I am so privileged to be here. It was not my choice to manage the organization, but God has given me a passion for this ministry. My love has grown deeper for the clients than I could have ever imagined.

"When I was in third grade, my dad took our family of six from Minnesota to start a traveling singing and evangelism ministry. Looking back, I now see how poor we were, with some of our offerings coming in the form of vegetables. But we were rich in the Lord, and so I never had a sense of need. I think that experience helped shape the person I am and prepare me for this ministry to those who are in need. I am humbled by the growth in numbers and the depth of experience and compassion our volunteers bring. I cannot imagine doing anything else. I wake up each morning with anticipation for what God will do each and every day. There is always a surprise, not always what we want, but something that helps shape us to be more in touch with God.

"Leading Agape has been a walk of faith, over and over again. Whether the needs involve space and buildings, finances, food in the pantry, or specific volunteers for specific tasks, God has been faithful. There have been days we opened with no fresh produce and before the first clients have come to the pantry, a load of potatoes, or mixed vegetables, or fresh bananas will show up at the dock. It has been an unbelievable journey, and I am forever grateful I obeyed God's calling to this incredible ministry."

For more information about current needs and volunteer opportunities, please visit the Agape website at: [www.agapecentersml.org](http://www.agapecentersml.org).

## Volunteers

Ellen Beck was one of the early volunteer mentors from RBC, beginning in 2006. A retired social worker, Ellen recalled, "When you work for the state (government) you cannot talk about Jesus, who is the only one who can solve some of the clients' problems. Many of my social service clients' lives were so out of control;



their situations seemed so hopeless. I was dealing with second and third generation welfare clients, and it was very discouraging not to be able to offer them the true hope that I knew about. There was a time in my own life when I recognized that my own personal life was a mess. I did not become a Christian until my thirties, so I understood where they were, and what a difference a relationship with Jesus could make for them, as He did for me."



George Oliver, a nine-year veteran of Agape, dedicates one day per month to mentor.

George Oliver, a mentor who started in 2007, is an businessman whose job takes him all over the world. On Sundays, he is in his church, Radford

Baptist, but one Saturday every month he is found at Agape, mentoring to those in need in our community. He says, "I have chosen to serve at Agape in order to fulfill God's call on my life. Mentoring is part of that call, to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to share the good news of the Gospel with people who may never have heard nor understood it before. I help clients with help and hope, and I receive blessings from God every time I come."

# Most Recent Church Sponsor: Westlake Baptist Church

Justin Likens, Pastor of Westlake Baptist Church, says, "We believe that scripture commands us to reach out to those in our community, to meet physical and spiritual needs. We feel that Christians have a more meaningful impact when we work together on larger issues, so partnering with the Agape Center was a natural. It provides the structure and the organizational ability to address these needs, rather than us reinventing the wheel. We know there is a tremendous need in our area, and it is simply too much for a single church to be able to meet all the needs. At Westlake, we receive many requests every week and we don't have the capacity to vet the process. We want

to be good stewards of our time and resources, so it is a blessing to be able to channel these requests to Agape as we come alongside to support this effort. We have several people in our congregation who are involved with Agape, and knowing their passion and confidence in the organization gives Agape great credibility. The most important aspect of Agape from our viewpoint is the mentoring. Having people trained and equipped to bring spiritual matters to the surface is like having our own outreach ministry, and we are grateful that we can refer them to Agape, knowing the spiritual needs will be addressed."



## Client successes.....

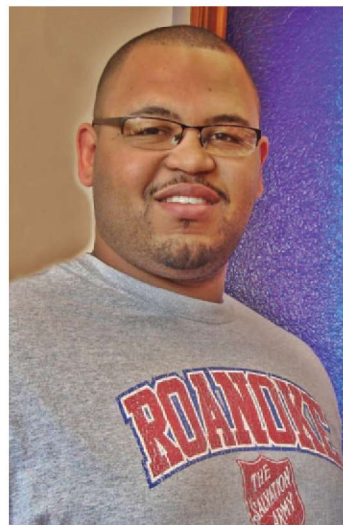
### Brian Childress

Brian Childress has been working at the Salvation Army eighteen months, and sees it as his ministry.

Former Agape client, Brian Childress, has not stopped serving others since he landed his job with the Salvation Army of Roanoke in summer of 2015. He had been an Agape client for about six months after he lost his job as a teller. Brian says, "I personally tasted poverty as I watched family members struggle, and I don't ever want to go there again, living paycheck to paycheck, money mismanagement, ill-advised spending, gambling, bad credit scores, living on cash advances, and still living beyond their means. I determined I didn't want that anxiety in my life."

However, when he lost his job, poverty did hit him personally. Discouraged and financially strapped, he came to Agape for help and encouragement. His mentor, Gary Rogers saw him through as they prayed and kept focusing on his qualifications (a college degree and good job experience), his motivation when the answers seemed to be 'no' too often, and they trusted God for the right position to be available. Brian got a job at the Salvation Army in Roanoke as a bookkeeper, which utilizes his accounting education and job experience. But it also offers him opportunities to serve others through

the Salvation Army's Christmas Kettle Program, their Angel Tree program and also gives him time to minister in his church, Inner Faith Fellowship Ministries in Rocky Mount, where he is a part of the security team. Experiencing poverty as an adult has given Brian a new sense of gratitude toward those who volunteer to help, and also toward those who are still struggling and in need of services. "I consider my situation as not terribly severe but for many, the services and the funding have dried up. I also understand poverty is a place that you don't have to stay in. I believe if you live in it, you choose to live there."



"There are others, like myself, who have been in that season. I didn't like it and don't want to be in it again. There are some things you can't control, but I think if people are really serious about living on the other side of poverty, they can do it. If I could give any advice, I would tell them to have a relationship with God, with your family, and then get your finances in order. Create and follow a budget. Be aware of your credit score and endeavor to keep it good." This is advice that Brian lives by on a daily basis.

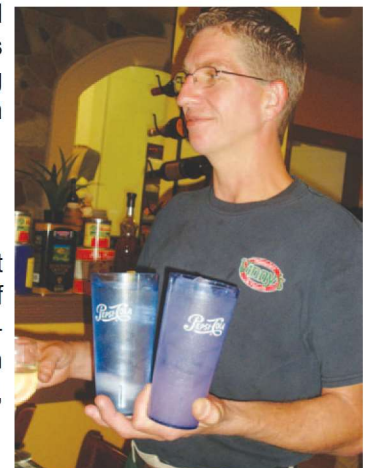
### Melissa Burke

Twelve Agape clients have proven their commitment to Getting Ahead (GA) by participating in three-hour classes twice a week and doing hours of homework since October. Coming to every one of the 16 sessions and being on time are important elements of the class. Melissa Burke, a GA participant, took that commitment seriously.

Jan Hogle, GA facilitator, recalled the incident: "One day, Melissa was absent, and everyone was concerned. This was not like her. Finally she arrived, twenty minutes late, flopped into her chair, breathless, her hair still wet, and embarrassed and apologetic for her tardiness. Melissa, clearly agitated, explained her delay: 'I was all dressed for class, and went out to feed the chickens. The cat scared the chickens, who flew into the pig pen. I went into the pig pen to retrieve the chickens and fell down, getting covered with muck! So then I had to re-shower and re-dress for the class.' The entire class applauded Melissa for her outstanding demonstration of commitment," Jan concluded.

### Chris Dudley

Chris Dudley had been a client at The Agape Center for four and a half years, receiving food and clothing assistance. However, once he began working consistent hours at Vinny's, he no longer needed help.



# Shadow volunteers

**Kent Daniel** heads up the Firewood Team, coordinating wood pick-ups and chopping wood for Agape clients. He is a part of Radford Baptist Church, has served in many areas of church life, in the US Marines and for the past 22 years as a Roanoke police officer, currently as a K-9 officer. Kent also serves on Agape's Safety Committee, which evaluates ways to make the building more secure and safe for the volunteers and clients.

**Donna Cosmato**, from Dwelling Place Christian Fellowship, had been an Agape volunteer since 2010, serving as a mentor, clerking in the store, and as a receptionist. Then came surgery with a long recovery period, and aging parents and in-laws who required more attention. The time had come when she could no longer come to the Agape Center on a regular basis. Yet, she desired to continue her involvement, and the idea of using a talent from her childhood emerged.

Since she was ten years old, Donna had found pleasure in crocheting items and thought perhaps her skills could be used for Agape. It was an opportunity Agape could not refuse, so using yarn donated to Agape, Donna began making items for the clients. For the past two years, Donna has provided gloves, hats and scarves for Agape clients. More recently, she has begun making lap blankets and baby blankets, which are used as client gifts.

When Donna's mother visits from Indiana, they crochet together. However, Donna takes it a step further, sending donated yarn to her mom by mail, and her mother mails the completed items back to Donna for use at Agape. Donna says, "A lot of times unfinished projects are donated, and we either complete them, or perhaps use them in conjunction with another item. If we can't incorporate them, we at least can use the yarn in other projects. We use every scrap of yarn we have!"



**Will and Joanie McCullors** both serve in the shadows of Agape, consistently providing significant value to the organization. For the past five years, Joanie has been serving Agape in several roles. She says, "I have finally landed the job best suited to my skills, making 60-100 appointment reminder calls each week to clients from home." Will is Agape's IT expert, creating new computer programs such as the electronic scheduling system, Angel Tree gift tracking, and Pantry notification as clients arrive. Will is the primary interface with volunteers as new projects are developed, and he supports the electronic data base changes and troubleshoots whenever problems arise. Joanie and Will are from Radford Baptist Church.