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Prostitutes, homeless, runaways and others find solace and hope at the 23rd Psalm Cafe

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Faith in Action

It lifts Ben Houston's soul when the hopeless find solace in the 23rd Psalm.

Taking its name from the "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" Scripture, the once-decaying house is now the focal point of this gospel-singing Nashville native's life.

"My heart is right here. In this mission," he says, noting that the gospel of reclamation he spreads from Buena Vista Pike first had to be applied to the building itself. "It was going to be torn down, but I was offered it rent-free for the first year if I'd fix it up."

Just out of eyeshot of the Titans practice bubble, where young men battle for millions, the battles in this neighborhood are more aptly illustrated by the gang graffiti on the side of the market across the street. "It's rough here. It's called Crack City because of all the prostitution and drugs," says Houston. "A lot of the young men feel that if they can live to be 25 they've done well. That's the sense of hopelessness in the area."

His 23rd Psalm "mission to the inner-city" offers hope to these young men. Perhaps this will lead them from despair and self-destruction. It's the same philosophy Houston uses in his ministry to prostitutes, the homeless, runaways and killers. The latter are the congregants he serves when he offers up gospel music celebrations at the state prisons.

The Rev. James "Tex" Thomas, of Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church, voices admiration for the 42-year-old singer: "Ben is sold on his vision that he can make a difference because he has faith in people, especially the down and out. He is sold on the idea that you ought to help folk, that you ought to build people up. That we should come together."

Rabbi Ronald Roth of West End Synagogue also praises Houston's ministry. "He's a courageous guy to do what he's doing. He's certainly been trying to bring diverse people together, which is not what everybody is doing."

When he opened the 23rd Psalm in 1997, the idea was for it to be a coffeehouse where people could gather nightly for Christian music and fellowship.

Now the music is restricted to Saturday songwriter nights and, despite the "23rd Psalm Cafe" sign outside, the only food served here is for the soul.

"We needed to focus on what we were here for," says Houston. "You see that picture over there on the refrigerator? That's a man who's 58 and he grew up picking cotton. He came to me and said he didn't know how to read or write. He wanted to learn."

"There's a certain shame in older people, so they need one-on-one help. We are able to do the direct training. We do a lot of literacy work here and out at Riverbend. Inmates can't come to us. We have to go out to them."

People come with blankets to donate to the homeless. And if a neighborhood school needs a television, a computer or a gallon of paint, "we go to bat for them."

"This is a place for the community. If people need food, diapers, baby formula, they give us a call. We work with various churches to help the poor and needy."

It's also a place that community gathers, whether to hear lawmen talk about crime prevention, to hear politicians tell how they'll make life better or for educational programs. Rabbi Roth and a Holocaust survivor came here "to speak to the teens about the tragedy of anti-Semitism."

Houston takes his musical volunteers with him to schools and senior centers, places where "positive music" is needed.

The ministry perhaps is best summed up by its work with prostitutes who work the streets of Crack City.

"They come in here thirsty, and I'll give them a drink of water. They are very respectful. Then they go back out there," says Houston.

"Our hope is to clean up the area and try to change hearts, change souls and save lives. People need to know they can come here as a place of peace.

"I feel that before I hit 100, I'll probably die, so I want to take the rest of my life in giving back, in helping people."
