

Desperate times lead to new lives

Victor Valley Rescue Mission seeing more men who've lost jobs, families

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[HOLLY LA PAT, Special to the Daily Press](#)

December 2011 - Four years ago, Robert Petersen was a plumbing contractor who'd been married 37 years.

"Everything started to fall apart on me at one time," he said.

When the recession hit, Petersen's plumbing business dwindled. His mother died. His wife divorced him.

"I'm 62 right now and that's a drastic change — from a lifetime of working and having a marriage to not having any of that," he said.

His motivation lost, Petersen drifted across the country. Eventually he found himself at Victor Valley Rescue Mission, where they're seeing more and more stories like his.

"You're not just getting guys that have been chronically homeless," said John Schmidt, program manager at Victor Valley Rescue Mission. "You're getting guys that have lost their wives, lost their children, lost their businesses, lost their careers."

Not long ago, the men who came to the mission for food, clothing and help were typically single, with long-standing addictions and a history of homelessness. Now Schmidt is seeing electrical contractors, welders and plumbers — men who used to have stable jobs, homes and families.

"Over the last couple of years, we're seeing guys in the program that have just gone through some seismic event in their job or their family," Schmidt said. "They're turning to these other elements — alcohol and drugs. Half of the guys we have fit that description."

Jim Dixon battled alcoholism off and on from the age of 13, but he still managed to marry, start a family and maintain a welding career before things fell apart. His marriage broke up when his daughter was 7 and his son was 4. From there, his drinking problem progressed to methamphetamine addiction; soon he was arrested for vehicle theft.

"For about the next 10 years it was just a revolving door," Dixon said. "I would go into prison, I would get out and go straight back to what I knew, which was drugs and alcohol."

The last time Dixon got out of prison, he spent three months living on the street before he went to the mission for a meal and a place to sleep. At that point, Dixon said, he had just about given up, but he didn't have the courage to commit suicide.

"The funny thing is, the night before I came here, I actually prayed to God for the first time," Dixon said. "I prayed that God would take my life, because I just didn't want to live anymore."

That was less than two years ago. Dixon graduated the mission's nine-month recovery program and became an intern there. Now he's a full-time employee, serving meals, providing clothing and praying for men like himself.

What changed him, Dixon said, was love.

“They loved us when nobody else would,” he said. “Honestly, that’s what scared me: How can these people care for me when I’m just a bum? They guided me as far as Jesus and gave God room to work in my life.”

Although he was a certified welder for about 12 years, Dixon doesn’t see himself returning to his old career.

“I believe God has another calling for me,” Dixon said. “For so long I took from people, whether it was emotions, money, whatever. Now I’m given the opportunity to actually give back. That’s what’s so beautiful about working here at the mission.”

“The guys that make it through this are the guys that have really hit rock bottom and they’re saying, ‘I can’t do this,’” Schmidt said. “They’re so teachable and so hungry to get out of the pain.”

“What I’ve received since I’ve been here outweighs anything I’ve ever had in my whole life,” said Petersen, who is now an intern at the mission. “A new life — that’s the greatest thing in world.”



Jim Dixon greets visitors at the Victor Valley Rescue Mission's afternoon meal. Dixon has transitioned from a prison, to homelessness, to staying at the mission's ranch and is now a paid employee of the mission.