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## Cy-Fair Helping Hands helps couple become self-sufficient

CRYSTAL SIMMONS Published 3:45 am, Friday, November 23, 2012



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Jean and John Dreyer with Cy-Fair Helping Hands visit the homeless in the community to deliver food and blankets.

A little assistance was all one Cy-Fair couple needed to become self-sufficient for a year.

Considered chronically homeless, Ed and Cora Wonk had lived more than a year on the streets off and on since 2003. Statistically, they were not likely to stay off the streets.

However, John and Jean Dreyer of Cy-Fair Helping Hands and a couple of local churches decided to give them a chance. Out of the 200 individuals the non-profit helped last year, 20 became self-sufficient.

The Wonks weren't always so desperate. Ed Wonk worked as a plumber at different construction sites. His modest income was enough to keep the couple comfortable, but not enough to allow them to save. When the recession hit and Wonk lost his job, the couple was left without options. Eventually, his plumber's license expired and he couldn't afford to renew it.

"With the hit to construction, there was just no work," he said. "You really couldn't find work. So we wound up being homeless, living on the streets."

"It's very hard out there. Everyone tells you to get a job, get a job get a job, but it's very hard to get a job when you have no permanent address; you have no way to clean up to prepare yourself, so you can look decent for an interview"

Once the couple was kicked out of their rental home, life became purely about survival. Cora Wonk had to stop taking her medication for her bipolar disorder. Because of her fragile mental state and the danger of the streets, Ed Wonk wouldn't leave her side. The couple both knew homeless women who were raped or murdered without thought. Sometimes knife fights broke out over what little resources the homeless had. Transportation was an issue. Most of all, the couple remembers always having to be on the move, never having a place to rest.

"There's zero tolerance for the homeless," she said. "You can't rest under the bridges or on the buses. You can't go anywhere. You can't go into the library. They'll kick you out because you smell. There's literally no place for you to go and just rest."

Even though thoughts of living on the street visibly disturb Cora Wonk, good deeds vividly stand out in her mind.

She recalls a police officer who let the homeless sleep during his patrol shift instead of chasing them away, a stranger who bought her a tent, a group of Texas A&M students that ventured into a homeless camp with a pot of chili during the holidays. She remembers heading over to the Houston First Church of God every Thursday for a hot meal and a shower and food packages every Friday from Cy-Fair Helping Hands.

That is how to help the homeless, not arresting them and chasing them back in forth into different counties, she said.

She may have a point. In the Houston area, more than 8,700 people are without a home, according to the Houston Coalition for the Homeless. That number has stayed constant since 2009, the coalition reports.

In Precinct 4, Constable Ron Hickman said many homeless individuals come from neighboring counties.

"It is an intense social issue," he said during a recent Houston Northwest Chamber of Commerce public safety meeting. "There ought to be a different approach to dealing with that. If you're just picking them up and throwing them in jail, you haven't accomplished a lot. They're going to go right back to where they came from."

The turning point for the Wonks came after they hit rock bottom.

"One day, the police were just harassing all the homeless people to an obscene amount, that my wife almost had a nervous breakdown," said Ed Wonk.

Fortunately a friend from church saw them and called the Dreyers of Cy-Fair Helping Hands.

The Dreyers sent the couple to Crestwood Suites, where they were able to shower and Ed Wonk was able to leave his wife to search for a job without fear that she would be assaulted. Once there, the couple continued to receive help from the non-profit as well as Houston First Church of God and St. Giles Presbyterian.

Their efforts paid off. Wonk took the first job he could find making minimum wage at a warehouse. Working at least 40 hours a week, Wonk was able to scrape together the \$900 a month needed to stay at the hotel, where they have been staying for the past year.

Now, the couple is looking forward to the future. Ed Wonk hopes to save enough for a car and a deposit for a real apartment. Cora regularly helps out at Houston First Church of God and the St Giles Presbyterian Church food pantry to check on her friends. She

also dreams of opening her own shelter one day.

"I want to help them all," she said. "I know what it feels like to be homeless and I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

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