

Revamped shelter to help assist area homeless veterans

By Susan Norman

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Winder's only homeless shelter for men now has a new name and focus.

After losing city funding in 2011, the shelter's executive director, Fawn Alexander, asked a retired U.S. Army veteran to help her transform The Light Homeless Shelter on King Street into one that primarily would serve homeless military veterans.

Norman Lloyd agreed to help establish the facility as the region's only shelter for homeless veterans and enlisted the support of others who formed a board of directors last year, made connections with

regional veterans agencies, and began raising money.

On Jan. 31, the board hosted a flag-raising ceremony to mark the facility's new identity as the Northeast Georgia Homeless Veterans Shelter.

With a handful of homeless vets looking on, the Rev. Usia Lyons of Temple of Glory Church in Winder opened the event with prayer.

Druscilla Gregg of the Barrow Regional Medical Center Auxiliary then presented to Lloyd a new American flag that her group had purchased, and Lloyd handed it off to a member of the Winder-Barrow High School JROTC Color Guard team.

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CEREMONY

As other members look on, Norman Lloyd, chairman of the board of the Northeast Georgia Homeless Veterans Shelter, speaks during the Jan. 31 flag-presentation ceremony. Board members pictured left to right are Randy Simonette, Sharon and Richard Kohus, Jamie Keys and Lloyd. Not pictured are board members Kirk Fletcher and Fawn Alexander, who did not attend the ceremony.

Photo by Susan Norman

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In a precision drill, the student soldiers carefully unfurled the flag and raised it on a new flagpole. WBHS student Anne Doriscar sang the National Anthem. Nearby was the high school's principal, Al Darby, who was beaming.

The flag was raised only to half-staff in honor of the late Charlie Eberhart, who had died the previous day after a lengthy illness. He not only was a long-time Winder councilman but also was a supporter of the shelter that is only blocks away from Eberhart & Son Mortuary.

Standing at attention during the ceremony, with their hands in salutes or over their hearts, were most of the shelter's board members: Jamie Keyes, a veterans advocate who serves on the board of the Georgia Jail Diversion and Trauma Recovery Program for veterans; Richard Kohus, a retired firefighter and commander of the American Legion Post 53 in Winder; Sharon Kohus, president of the Women's Auxiliary of American Legion Post 53; and Randy Simonette, a 10-year Air Force veteran who now works in the private sector. Board member Kirk Fletcher, a Naval Academy graduate with 10 years of U.S. Marine Corps service, was unable to attend. Also absent was Alexander, who remains the shelter's executive director and a board member, but works full time managing the Winder Community Center.



SPECIAL GUESTS

Attending the Jan. 31 flag raising ceremony in addition to the WBHS JROTC Color Guard and shelter board members, were the Rev. Usia Lyons, former mayor John Mobley, WBHS principal Al Darby, WBHS senior Anne Doriscar, Barrow County Chamber of Commerce president Tommy Jennings, Gladstone Everard of the Georgia Department of Labor, Barry Burns of the Georgia Department of Veterans Services and mayor David Maynard.

Photo by Susan Norman

found the shelter "kinda by accident."

He was placed in a room with three other men.

"The room where I'm staying is pretty good," he said. "Most of the people are respectful. I have been told I snore."

Keith Bowen, a 51-year-old former Marine from Eastman, entered the shelter a month before the ceremony. He is self-employed, but after a roommate left an Atlanta apartment they shared, he could no longer afford the rent. He found Winder's shelter through an Internet search.

"I put in 'homeless veteran shelters near Lawrenceville,'" he said, noting that he found no such facilities in that city. "I

free stays for those men are limited to one week.

"We set aside 10 for indigents, and being a Christian organization there is no way in the world that I could say I can't provide you shelter," Lloyd said. "But we have to put a day limit of seven for those who are not veterans."

Because of the transient nature of all three populations using the shelter, there hasn't been a problem of the beds filling up.

"It's in and out," Lloyd said. Funding for the shelter's operations is very limited. Lloyd said the organization receives no funding for housing veterans. The state's re-entry program provides funding for

Among the community leaders at the ceremony were Winder mayor David Maynard, former mayor John Mobley, and Barrow County Chamber of Commerce president Tommy Jennings.

Also lending support were representatives of regional offices that provide other services to veterans. After the ceremony they stressed the value of the Winder facility in a region that has no other such facilities for homeless veterans.

"Great, great, great, great is all I can say," said Gladstone Everard, an employment representative who helps veterans find jobs and obtain training.

"I wish we had more like this specifically for veterans," he said. "There is someone here to help them. I think this is excellent."

Barry Burns, a case manager at the Georgia Department of Veterans Services office in Athens, said all he has to do to place a homeless vet at the Winder shelter is "make a phone call."

He also visits the shelter to assess the veterans' needs and to help them access services, he said.

On the day of flag-raising ceremony, the shelter housed five veterans. One, a 48-year-old Air Force veteran, had found his way there the previous night.

"What does it mean to be here?" he said. "It means I have hope. I feel like this is a very safe environment. It reminds me of when I lived in dorms on the base. Maybe I can get help finding a job opportunity. I have more hope now. It's good."

He said he had never applied for any veterans' benefits and

called here and was fortunate enough to get Pastor Fawn on the phone."

Bowen said Burns came to the shelter and told him about a \$1,500 Veterans Retraining Assistance Program grant. He applied in hopes of becoming a real estate agent.

While he expects to be able to relocate to more permanent housing in a couple of months, Bowen said his current environment is positive.

"It's very clean as far as a homeless shelter is concerned," he said. "It's structured so people can get back on their feet, find benefits and move forward."

Lloyd said having a mailing address is necessary for veterans to receive benefits.

"We have lived in a tradition of overlooking the homeless veterans," he said. "When they talk about a veterans' home like a Naval home, that's a regular home for them — like a hospital. But for the transient population you would have to come up with a homeless shelter. It's a shame it hasn't been done here before now in Barrow County. We are going to spearhead this effort."

While the shelter's top priority is to provide transitional housing for military veterans, the facility does continue to serve as a place where men recently released from Georgia prisons can re-enter society. Only those with no history of violent or sexual crimes are admitted. And since there is no other local homeless shelter for men in Winder, Lloyd said the board's policy is to allow non-military homeless men to occupy up to 10 of the shelter's 25 beds on any night, though

a maximum of three months for each of its participants. The board also raises money through grants, local fundraisers and from churches.

The organization is registered as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit and donations are tax deductible.

Alexander, an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Army with six years of service, said she is pleased with the new direction of the shelter that she opened in 2006.

"The words 'veteran' and 'homeless' should never be in the same sentence," she said.

"As we continue to build and understand available services to veterans, we foresee a larger number of them in our region coming here. There are a lot of homeless veterans in this region. They just don't know we're here yet. We need to get networked in so any homeless veterans in the Northeast Georgia area can tap into our services."

Board member Richard Kohus agreed.

"There should never be a homeless veteran in this country, and we're going to try our best to get it to go nationwide," he said. "Get these shelters built and get these people off the streets and out of the woods. They lived in tents when they were supporting this country. They shouldn't have to live in tents now."

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BOARD OF**
will hold their quarterly
Friclay, February 15,
the Barrow County Board
Conference