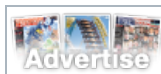


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TENT CITY

Tent City puts focus on Toledo's 'unhoused'

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When David Smith was diagnosed with prostate cancer after showing signs of it during a free medical screening last fall at Tent City, he was stunned.

"In my wildest dreams, I did not imagine that," Smith said. "The doctor said cancer and I wasn't registering that yet. I was thinking positive up to that moment ... I started crying at that moment. But luckily it was caught early."

The 47-year-old was one of the hundreds of Toledoans who visited Tent City's Project Homeless Connect last year to obtain free medical services, meals, showers, haircuts, clothing, flu shots, IDs and other services.

After his exam showed an enlarged prostate, Smith had a biopsy, which revealed stage-two cancer.

When Smith first visited Tent City five years ago, he was homeless and addicted to drugs and alcohol. Thanks to the help and encouragement he received there and from other local organizations, Smith has been sober and living in his own apartment for two years. Since his surgery earlier this year, he can add cancer-free and employed to the list.

"I just have to be thankful that Tent City was there," Smith said. "I've had a lot of bad days, but ... my health is getting better. I'm so grateful, I really am."

Organizers said this year's Tent City will be bigger and better than ever.

"The campus is expanding, services are expanding, I think it just keeps getting better every year," said Pastor Steve North, founder of LifeLine Ministries.

Tent City founder Ken Leslie said volunteer response has been huge as usual and nearly all slots have been filled.

The weekend-long event will kick off with a



Ken Leslie

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cookout at 5 p.m. Oct.

29, at the Civic Center Mall in Downtown Toledo. Project Homeless Connect will be followed by a barbecue dinner and entertainment. On Oct. 31, a pancake breakfast followed by a worship service will wrap up the weekend.

Tent City, an all-volunteer event founded in 1990 and restarted in 2006 after a six-year hiatus, is sponsored by Cherry Street Mission Ministries, Mildred Bayer Clinic for the Homeless, Mercy Health Partners and Toledo Area Ministries. In 2007, singer John Mellencamp visited Tent City while in Toledo; the event was the impetus for Leslie to found 1Matters, the group that organizes Tent City.

Leslie, a longtime advocate for the unhoused, said there are a lot of misconceptions about homelessness.

"When you say homeless, you think of those people you see in the street," Leslie said. "Those are the chronically homeless. They only represent 15 percent of the homeless in America, but they represent 100 percent in our mind."

Only when you include people like those who are doubled- or tripled-up in one home because they can't afford housing on their own do you start to realize the full scope of the problem, Leslie said.

Success stories like Smith's are what keep Tent City's organizers going in the face of discouraging statistics, like a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report that found that the number of families with children homeless due to foreclosure and job loss rose 30 percent between 2007 and 2009.



Tent City

North and Leslie, both of whom were once homeless themselves, said Tent City is about building relationships and challenging perceptions.

"Tent City is important to me because this is the group of people I came here for, this is the issue that makes my heart beat fast and keeps my adrenaline pumping through long days and short nights," North said. "In the end, everything we do is revolved around relationships, especially those who are isolated, neglected, kicked to the curb, stereotyped.

"This is a way of injecting dignity back into people from whom it's been stripped, a way of recognizing the value of every person and engaging people in not just a shove a tray across a counter or a professional way, this is about really engaging and spending time and getting to know other people and letting them get to know you and having a genuine relationship where trust can be built and where help can be given and accepted."

For information, visit the website www.1matters.org.

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