

This couple gives everything to help addicts: 2021 Progress-Index Newsmakers, The McReynolds

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Gary and Tracy McReynolds have helped many people in the Tri-Cities transform their lives through Regenesiis, an organization they founded to help people out of addiction. The name signifies the rebirthing and the new beginnings they hope people will experience as they complete the recovery program.

In addition to giving men and women housing and mentorship, Regenesiis also employs them through the other businesses that they own. They work in their two thrift stores in Colonial Heights and Chester, and the men also work alongside Gary doing renovations on the dilapidated homes that he's bought and flipped.

They make sure their physical needs are met by providing them food and transportation. But they also give them spiritual food by guiding them through scripture and inviting them to the church that Gary pastors. Some addicts have found faith and credit God for being the reason they have new-found purpose in life.

"You know what I would do if I had a million dollars? I would give it away to the poor."

The McReynolds didn't set out to start a ministry helping addicts. When they moved to Petersburg in 1992 due to Tracy's army assignment, Gary simply wanted to be involved in the community and find a way to help those down and out. On Saturdays, he volunteered at the men's shelter and on Sundays he went to Riverside Regional where he preached and built relationships with the prisoners and the chaplains.

"He jokes and he says I learned how to preach in jails," Tracy said with a smile.

Helping the poor was a dream Gary had since he was a child.

"I remember saying, 'You know what I would do if I had a million dollars? I would give it away to the poor.'"

His upbringing had a tremendous impact on shaping the man he is. Growing up, his parents were also heavily involved in the community and in the church.

His mother helped the people in prisons. He learned by absorbing his environment, where his parents set the example of how to live and serve others.

There was one family, a single mother with four children, that they were particularly invested in.

"Her husband went to jail for murder, and she was a heroin addict. And we just adopted this family," Gary said.

Even though his parents had little themselves, anything they had extra of, they would give to her family, including one of their cars.

"We worked with them all the way up to where she got her paralegal degree and got off welfare."

"I was raised to help people," Gary said. "I didn't even realize what I was being exposed to. That was my normal, so it's just ingrained in me."

The beginnings of Regenesiis

Because of Gary's involvement with the prison, chaplains would reach out to him when someone getting out of prison was looking for work. In the late 1990s, Gary started running a home improvement company. He took those getting out of prison under his wing, mentoring them and teaching them the trade.

But employing formerly incarcerated people proved to be a difficult feat. Many did not understand what it was like to have work ethic, being locked up for years. Others were dealing with addictions. Others were still stuck in their toxic habits of lying, stealing, or abuse. "So when they relapsed, it was it was all very personal. They their relapse would affect my business," said Gary.

People that the McReynolds allowed to stay in their house or at their rental properties would steal their things, including money, the washer and dryer, guitars, and jewelry. At one point, someone even stole their car. Time after time again, the couple kept choosing to forgive, opening their hearts, and pouring their time, money and energy into helping them.

"I've never done drugs or alcohol and he hasn't either," said Tracy. "I think that because we haven't been addicts, maybe we're able to past a lot of stuff."

The McReynolds realized that if their ministry was going to be sustainable, then they had to address the root of the issue. They needed to create a system that provided the support the addicts needed to break out of their destructive lifestyles.

Overcoming a rocky few years

In 2007, Gary found a successful model that he framed Regenesiis on. He saw that a Richmond church had shelter homes that were helping people out of addiction. The leaders were able to keep these homes running with the revenue they received from their thrift stores.

Since the McReynolds already had rental properties, they took one of their homes in Petersburg and dedicated it to housing men with addiction. In May of 2008, they leased a space and turned it into a thrift store. Thus, Regenesiis was birthed.

The first few years were tumultuous. That following fall, the housing market crashed. Their main source of income was through flipping houses, but that had come to a screeching halt. With no money coming in, the McReynolds gave up their most valuable possessions to keep Regenesiis going.

They sold Gary's classic cars, equipment from the lawn mower business, and other their rentals properties. They even chose to put their beautiful home on Walnut Hill on foreclosure so that they could keep paying rent for the thrift store.

"We didn't take any money for three years from the ministry. We were putting it in to keep it going. So any money that we brought in, we kept the ministry going because we already had people," she said.

Their challenges weren't just monetary. Working with the prison population meant that they were dealing with difficult personalities, since many of them also came from broken homes. Some never had an experience of what a normal life looked like.

"It's hard to rehabilitate someone who's never been habilitated," said Gary. "They don't have support systems. If from childhood, it's been dysfunction, and all they've had is bad habits, then how do you rehabilitate? There's nothing to go back to. You're creating something from scratch and it takes a long time."

Regenesiis' nine-month program was built to help these people start the process of habilitation. Good habits get reinforced, like doing their dishes, making their beds, cooking, cleaning, and they pick up life skills through working at the thrift stores. Every morning, they do a devotional and go through certain books and courses designed to help them change their mindsets and destructive patterns.

Years later, the McReynolds have not only been able to sustain their organization but they've also been able to expand it, opening a women's home in Colonial Heights and building a second thrift store. They also are in the community providing meals for the food-insecure on a daily basis.

They've touched many lives over the past 13 years through their housing and recovery program, including Kelly Souther's.

"I never knew that I could have a life that wasn't a drug addict"

Souther had been addicted to heroin for 30 years and was selling her body on Jefferson Davis while staying in the hotels. She got blood infections from using dirty needles, causing her to be hospitalized multiple times.

"I just couldn't do it anymore because I was going to die," she said. "So I called Regenesiis and they took me immediately. I didn't have the money for my fees. I didn't have anything except for the clothes on my back and they accepted me just like I was."

She went through the women's recovery program in 2018, where she received mentorship and counseling while working at the thrift store.

"At first it was really hard, and I struggled for months with wanting to run. And if it were not for the hands on, everyone being right here with me noticing my struggles, I probably would have ran."

By choosing to stay in the program, taking in the McReynolds' counsel, and having her spirituality reawakened, she began to reverse her dependency on drugs.

"I started seeing what real happiness and joy was like. And through the process, I just started to transform."

After graduating from the then-six month program (they've now extended it to be a nine month program), she continued to stay in the women's home and work at the thrift store. She's now been promoted to be the store manager. On top of being drug free, her relationships have been restored with her adult children and she's now allowed to interact with her teenage son.

"I never knew that I could have a life that wasn't a drug addict. They introduced something different to me that I've never known before. They're my spiritual mother and father. They give me all that I never had growing up. It's just amazing."

"I honestly know this is not by chance. I know it's God."

Continuing the dream

Seeing lives like Souther's be transformed is why the McReynolds what they do. It's why they've poured themselves out and keep sacrificing their time, money, and lives to help those in need.

But they're not stopping at just that.

Gary says that he's already planning new ventures on the horizon. That includes building a Regenesiis café, a bible school, low-income housing, an art gallery, and a home for mothers and children. The possibilities for them are endless.

"The neat thing about it now is we've weathered all of those early storms and we've built the foundation," he said.

"So what's exciting now for us, is for me, I get to breathe a little bit and actually plan these things that have been in my heart. Continue the dream."

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