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Jackson Park community receives life-changing truth

Inner-city ministry brings spiritual, physical help to struggling families

By: Zachary Chadwick

CHARLOTTE --- "Receiving a biblical view of life really changed our family," says Michelle Jones with husband Ronnie, and two children sitting beside her.

"Jackson Park Ministry gave me my life and family back by bringing the truth of Christ to my life," Ronnie Jones said. This is testimony from one of the many families receiving help from Charlotte's Jackson Park Ministries off Airport Drive.

In 1985, Kelvin Smith, now pastor of Steele Creek Church of Charlotte, founded the ministry based on a desire to share Jesus with people in need. Wherever that would take him and whatever it would lead him to do he was willing. After visiting the Baptist Association and asking them to send him to the neediest place in Charlotte, without hesitation they sent him to Jackson Park.

Just like many inner-city communities where there's poverty, crimes and drugs are rampant, as is the case in Jackson Park. The buildings are old apartments and duplexes built in the 40s. Many children live there, and when not in school, they have plenty of spare time. Made up of a high percentage of single parent families, the community can be a transient home. For some families, circumstances improve, allowing them to move out. For others, circumstances get worse, which can lead to homelessness. At times violence results due to the stress of such an environment.

So, the first organized meeting to be held at Jackson Park was a Wednesday Night meal meant to gather people and find out their needs. Everyone in the community was invited, but only 50 children showed up, and no adults. The ministry started with youth, but after earning the trust of the community, it now has multiple buildings to serve people of all ages and races.

Early in the ministry a majority of the energy was spent on providing for the community's physical needs. However, as God led Smith to John 6 in which Jesus calls Himself the Bread of Life, the focus of ministry shifted. Smith realized he shouldn't meet physical needs only, but should permeate all the outward help with the message that Jesus Christ is life.

"Everything we do is based on biblical principles and sharing the Gospel," said Dale Shields, executive director of Jackson Park. "We believe Jesus is the answer, and we uphold that to everyone who comes to us."

With only six full-time staff members, Jackson Park helps people with their basic needs by providing a food pantry, children's clothes, and rent and utility assistance. Jackson Park also relies on volunteers, who come from different denominations. They help with summer basketball camps, an open gymnasium for activities, discipleship and mentoring programs, and mission trips.

The most unique service Jackson Park provides is called Transitional Housing designed to support families struggling with debt, unemployment, housing and transportation needs, drug abuse, and more.

Interested families or single mothers go through an interview process where their needs, condition, and desire to be helped are assessed. Once approved, they are provided with biblically based assistance to meet their needs.

"We walk alongside people supporting them here at Jackson Park, loving them enough to do what it takes to really help," says Shields.

Ronnie and Michelle Jones came to Jackson Park with mustard-seed faith, believing He is the answer to all their needs. They've been married five years, have two children, and they came wanting help with their family, which at the time was in complete disorder. "The offer of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was the most attractive thing for me when deciding to get help from Jackson Park," Michelle said. "Through their ministry, God became a close friend to me instead of a distant help in times of trouble."

Ronnie came to know Christ while attending a program to help those with drug and alcohol problems, U-Turn for Christ. He says Alcoholics Anonymous didn't work. "I had to get Christ totally and Christ only to change."

The couple is also receiving help in formulating a budget. "I had no idea God did not want us to be in debt," Michelle said. "I used to think I had arrived when getting approval for credit cards. The financial classes totally changed the way I thought about debt and finances."

They also attend "Raising Children God's Way," and through their journey at Jackson Park, their son has come to know Jesus as Lord. In addition, Ronnie says in the marriage class, he's learning "how to be a man, father, husband, and head of the household, after years of not knowing."

The Jackson Park family meets Tuesday nights at the Fellowship Center to break bread together, worship, hear a message, and share their burdens. The group is diverse in age, race, and gender, but they're unified in their love for God.

Victoria Pierce, a single mother, is grateful for this family of believers because "there is always someone there to talk to." Arriving at Jackson Park with financial, housing, transportation, and job needs, Pierce is thankful to receive help. "Jackson Park has taught me how to put God first, and by putting God first you can't lose."

The ministry also offers an after-school program to help children with their homework, and a summer camp includes basketball, swimming, camping, and more. During these programs, the Gospel is shared and the young people receive discipleship. Jackson Park's next endeavor is to build a soccer field because it is the favored sport of the large Hispanic population nearby.