

God Bless Us, Everyone.

One Life Changing Christmas at Webster Cantrell Hall



A few months ago I was invited to join a local organization called the Christian Ministers' Alliance.

Pastors from several area churches meet once a month to encourage one another, share ideas, have lunch, and to hear how together we can help other local agencies with their ministries. In October Robin Crowe, the Chief Executive Officer, invited us to lunch at Webster-Cantrell Hall.

I remember my sister had volunteered there for a short period of time in the late 1960's and I had driven by the facility hundreds of times over the years. But I have to admit, I had never set foot inside the building. Perhaps it was a preconceived notion that it was a place where troubled kids were sent when no one else could deal with them. As a child that kind of information can be quite daunting. I read a lot as a child and as I tried to imagine what was inside the building I had visions of both *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens and *Tiny Tim* from "A Christmas Carol." What I learned during that meeting would not only dispel those myths, but change my heart.

After a delightful and very tasty lunch, Robin shared a bit of the history and mission of Webster-Cantrell Hall.

For nearly 95 years, Webster-Cantrell Hall has served children and families in the Macon County area. Over the years the agency has touched thousands of lives and helped many children overcome difficult problems. From its humble beginnings as an orphanage, to the child welfare agency it is today, Webster-Cantrell Hall has a history rich in loving and caring for the underprivileged.

It is the descendent of two separate, yet similar, entities which merged together to better serve children and families. Although the face and name of the agency has changed through the years, its commitment to providing children and families with a loving, nurturing environment has never changed.

In the early 1900's there was a tremendous need in the community to provide a place for children to live who had lost their parents or whose parents could not care for them. These children were orphans and had nowhere to go. It wasn't until November, 1916 that the Home opened with prayers and a concert by the Conklin Mandolin Orchestra. This was a huge event, due mainly to the tremendous undertaking of the citizens of the community to provide a place for "...75 friendless and deserving girls." The ages of the girls ranged from babies to teenagers.

The Home, which later became known as the Girl's Welfare Home and finally Webster Hall, was located in a huge, beautiful, four story building on the corner of South Broadway (which is now Martin Luther King) and Cantrell Streets. It was originally built as a German athletic hall.

A few years after the opening of the Girls' Home, the Decatur/Macon County Opportunity Home for Boys was formed. This was in response to the need of a place for orphaned boys. A September 1921 newspaper account recalled, "...Only this week two lads were sent to the poor farm because they were underfed, practically homeless, and because there was no other place to send them..."

Two months after the newspaper article, a nine room farmhouse and five acres of land located at 1942 East Cantrell Street was donated. The house did not have running water or indoor bathrooms, but it did have a furnace and electricity. Many years later it would become known as Cantrell Hall and was often referred to as "the Boys' Home."

In October 1923, in a place really too small, the Home housed 21 boys, with the youngest being 5 years old. The original farmhouse was replaced in 1927 with what is now used as the current administration building of Webster-Cantrell Hall.

House parents lived at the respective homes and cared for the children as they would their own. One of the original house mothers, "Mother Armstrong," was forced to leave her position after she broke her hip. Despite leaving her position, she maintained contact throughout the years with 85 of her "adopted sons," even corresponding with them while they were away in the service.

As time went by, both agencies witnessed the turning tide in social services with the phasing out of orphanages. The type of children coming into both Homes began to change in the late 1960's. The typical orphan was going into foster care and the children's homes received kids with emotional and behavioral problems.

As demands for old style children's homes dwindled, Webster Hall and Cantrell Hall pooled resources and merged in 1974. This merger created Webster-Cantrell Hall.



The “new” home would house both boys and girls. Because the old Girls’ Home needed so much work to bring it up to local fire codes, the agency would be located at the Cantrell Street location.

After the merger, Webster-Cantrell Hall began housing children who were identified as dependent and neglected children. These children came from abusive homes, having emotional and behavioral problems. Their placement at the agency was in lieu of putting them in the old Juvenile Detention Center. Also at that time, a Youth Services Program began with 25 boys and girls to satisfy the needs for upgraded services. Five years later, the agency’s Foster Care Program began.

Today, Webster-Cantrell Hall continues to serve children and families in the Macon County area. The agency is still located at the original Boys’ Home location on Cantrell Street. The services provided by the agency have expanded tremendously, with 16 different programs currently being offered.

With so many busy people involved, the CMA always strives to stay on schedule and our time together had expired, But before we left, Robin introduced us to Holly Newbon, the Director of Marketing and Kevin Otis, the Director of Development. Kevin offered to conduct a tour of the facility for those who were able to adjust their schedule. I took that as a sign I should go on the tour.



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The facility is quite remarkable with well maintained housing units where five or six residents have their own rooms and share a common area, much like one of the dorms I lived in at college. The classrooms were first rate and the gym was specifically built so other schools could participate in athletic events. There is also a special room with four kitchens used to teach the kids not only how to cook, but to learn about food costs, budgeting, and preparing a nutritional meal.

But it was when I returned to the reception area and visited with Holly that God started working on my heart.

“We are so blessed to have several sponsors for Christmas this year. Many of them have sponsored a child’s Christmas for the past several years and actually look forward to our contacting them. The only problem is, I’m not sure if we have a sponsor for every child this year, yet,” confided Holly. “It really doesn’t take much to have a huge impact on these kids. Just recently a young man who was a resident of Webster-Cantrell came to one of our functions as a guest speaker. His story touched the heart of everyone in the room that night. It helped me understand how important the smallest things can be to someone who is hurting, lost, or alone.”

Holly was referring to a young man, we’ll call Roy. For security and privacy reasons, we are not to using his real name.

Roy came to live at Webster-Cantrell Hall’s residential facility when he was 13. His mother had been addicted to drugs most of his life and was being admitted into a rehabilitation program. Due to the mother’s addiction, Roy and his younger brother lived in extremely poor conditions, often with very little food and virtually no supervision.

“Roy paused during his speech,” Holly shared, “as he remembered the times when he, his brother, and his mom were living in a car. He recounted spending several nights sleeping in houses where he did not know anyone and all the adults were using drugs. The room was silent as each one of us tried to imagine what Roy had experienced.”

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Then Roy's face brightened a bit as he recounted when he first came to live at Webster-Cantrell Hall. "It was very scary not knowing anyone, but I somehow felt very safe," Roy says humbly. "One thing that really stands out in my memory is that it was the first time in my life I ever had new clothes. It was the first time I knew I would receive three meals a day, and the first time I knew where I would be sleeping each night."

Roy did an excellent job in Webster-Cantrell Hall's programs. The Hall has three specific programs, each designed to help the child adjust to their new environment and begin to rebuild their life. After living in the residential facility, Roy moved to the Group Home which offers a less restrictive environment, then moved to a foster home. While in foster care, Roy completed high school and continued to work toward his independence.


"We are so proud of Roy," says Holly. "Today, Roy is a successful, hard-working adult. He has been married for over 10 years and is an excellent father to three children."

"At this point in his speech Roy told us what he remembered about each Christmas at Webster-Cantrell Hall and how much it meant to him that individuals from the community donated gifts", Holly said softly. "He said, 'I know now it was that small act of kindness that helped me realize someone really cared about me.'"

Today, as an adult, Roy remembers how important this time of year is to those who are residents of his former "home." Roy, and a group of individuals he works with, collects money and purchases gifts for children in Webster-Cantrell Hall's foster care program. Roy told Holly, "It is important to me to be able to give another child the feeling that they are special and important."

Standing there in the entry way, with a huge lump in my throat, I asked Holly, "How can I help?" "Pray for us and for the kids here. I know God will provide, He always does," she said with a smile.

Merry Christmas!



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The last time I visited with Holly there were still a few residents who needed to have someone sponsor them this Christmas. If you would like more information about sponsoring a child, how to volunteer, or how to make a donation to Webster-Cantrell Hall contact Holly Newbon. She can be reached at (217) 423-6961 ext. 189. You can also send her an e-mail at: hnewbon@webstercantrell.org

I encourage you to stop by for a tour as well. The staff is very welcoming and eager to share their time. For the safety of the residents and staff, security is very tight so it's good idea to call in advance.

I have a whole new perspective now as I pass Webster-Cantrell Hall. No longer do I imagine Little Orphan Annie scrubbing the floor with a brush or picture Oliver lifting his bowl and asking, "More please." Now I see loving, caring people reaching out to those in need. I see a place that would have been at the top of Jesus' list of places to visit.

I guess I still see a bit of Tiny Tim, however. I now know of a child whose life was changed because someone cared enough to get involved. I see someone who, by giving, was as blessed, if not more so, as the person receiving. And I can't help but imagine the children and staff of Webster-Cantrell Hall having dinner together around a large table. And, dare I say it? A small voice in my heart whispers, "God Bless us, everyone."

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