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Women find comfort, support at The River

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When you have no place to live, a shower is a luxury, as are clean clothes. Since 2004, The River ministry in downtown Johnson City has been a refuge for women in need. For a quarter, women may wash two loads of laundry a day and shower for free, with all supplies provided.

A project of First Presbyterian Church, The River has become a safe, welcoming place to find friendship, comfort, support, spiritual guidance, song and art.

River patrons have formed The Joyful Noise choir, which performs at area nursing homes and churches. Recently the choir was asked to sing at the East Tennessee Foundation's annual meeting in Knoxville.

"They got to go eat a fancy meal and mingle with all the folks," River director Stacy Larsen said. "It was a big deal for them."

And it was a big deal for the members of the foundation, which helps fund The River through its Harris Family Fund. They got to meet the women they help and see they have more in common than they might have thought.

"Homelessness happens to normal people, people who have worked all their lives," said Annie Banaszak, Stacy's assistant. "So many intelligent working women are living in their cars, or are 'couch homeless,' staying with friends and families. Some go out every day and put in applications. It's very



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Assistant Annie Banaszak, left, and director Stacy Larsen in The River ministry on West Main Street downtown.

competitive, even for fast food (jobs). There are a lot of folks right now who are homeless."

The River operates out of a small space, but the services it offers have a big impact. In the summer, there is a vegetable garden to help supplement food supplies, referrals to support services, classes, free hair cut days, daily devotions at 9:30 a.m., sewing machines and snacks. "Some come specifically to get prayer," Stacy said, and

those are gladly offered.

This year, The River is partnering with Milligan business school to provide free tax preparation for those in need, including men. The service will be offered on Monday from 1-3 p.m. Call 926-8111 to make an appointment.

The women of The River give back through their singing — and their quarters. The money received from the washers and dryers goes to a scholarship

fund for First Presbyterian's pre-school program, which has received Tennessee's highest rating for pre-schools. Donations have provided scholarships for six children.

"The ladies love knowing their quarters are going to help the children," Larsen said. "The program really gives the children a head start."

For those who want to help support The River, there are several ways to pitch in:

■ **Volunteer.** The River is open from 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Volunteers perform a number of tasks, but forming relationships and just being there for the patrons is important.

■ **Give money.** Larsen said those who pledge and give something every month are a great boon to the program, but any amount is appreciated.

■ **Give supplies.** Detergent, bleach, fabric softeners and stain removers are always needed.

■ **Give socks, underwear and bras.** New clean socks and new underwear are appreciated. Socks should be white because some patrons are diabetic and white socks are best for them to wear. Gently used bras and new bras can be donated for "Over the shoulder boulder holder" days. All sizes are needed.

■ **Give umbrellas.** With the springs rains upon us, the patrons need umbrellas.

Note: The River does not accept clothes donations. They do not have the space to store them.

For more information, call 926-8111 or visit www.fpcjc.org and click on The River.