

David J. Shearin, pastor/executive director of Street Life Ministries, addresses the guests at the "street church" event.

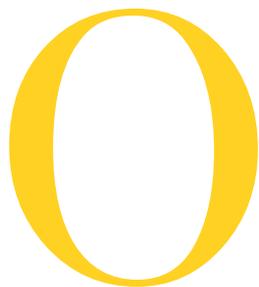


# EAT, PRAY & LOVE

Through Street Life Ministries

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—By MONICA HO EHLERS, contributing writer



n a Monday evening, across from Tapestry Church on Middlefield Road, tables are set, lights are glowing and music gently sets the scene as people enjoy a meal together. It appears to be quite a soiree with some 80 to 100 attendees. But it's not a momentous occasion — not a birthday

party or a national holiday, unless it happens to coincide with one. Nevertheless, it is a celebration — one of the human spirit — and Street Life Ministries is the tireless host.

Founded in Menlo Park 15 years ago by Pastor Tony Gapastione of Peninsula Covenant Church, the program expanded to Redwood City six years ago. Dinner is offered every Monday and Wednesday in Redwood City and every Tuesday and Thursday in Menlo Park to anyone in need of a hot meal, clothing, friendship and perhaps a little nondenominational prayer.

According to 2015 census data from the San Mateo County Human Services Agency's Center on Homelessness, it was determined that there were 1,772 homeless people in San Mateo County on the night of Jan. 22, 2015, comprising 775 unsheltered homeless people (living on streets, in vehicles and in homeless encampments) and 997 sheltered homeless people (in emergency shelters, transitional housing, motel voucher programs, residential treatment, jails and hospitals).

The 1,772 homeless people counted comprised 1,387 households as follows: 1,240 (89 percent) "adults only" households (i.e., without dependent children) and 147 (11 percent) "family" households (i.e., with dependent children).

In Redwood City the census showed a total of 537 homeless: 223 unsheltered and 314 sheltered.

David Shearin, pastor and executive director for the nonprofit Street Life Ministries, explained how he got involved. "I met Tony in 2006 at 'street church.' I had been in recovery for a year when we became friends and I just fell in love with the ministry. I attended often and enjoyed the spiritual part of it but started to think to myself, 'Where's the outreach?' I wanted to know what we could do to get people off the streets."

As a pastor, Shearin visits homeless encampments to let them know about Street Life Ministries. "I tell them, 'I love you. I care about you.'" When I was at the lowest point in my life, tons of people told me I was going to die and that I was going down the wrong road. They kept telling me that I needed to change and wouldn't stop talking when I didn't



Volunteers serve visitors a healthy meal with smiles! Below left: Pastor Michael Harvey leads the worship for the evening.

## “PEOPLE SAY WE DON’T SEE THE HOMELESS. I SEE THEM MORE NOW. I SEE THEM ALL OVER.”

listen. But they were the first people I went back to when I did get clean. In the same way, I want others to know we are here for them.”

Shearin, his wife, Shawn, who is the lead outreach for women, and a dedicated team of volunteers serve dinner in the rain and cold, sunny days, holidays — pretty much any Monday through Thursday. “If the four nights a week land on any of those, we are there. The folks on the street accept us because they know they can count on us to show up. They check in,” he added.

to take care of business first. But once that's done, we try to look for long-term solutions to see how we can further help them.”

“They give their time off duty to help serve dinner,” explained Shearin about his law enforcement counterparts. “They show up plainclothed and bring their kids with them. It has sent a powerful message to the homeless community. These are the same officers who would arrest them if a law was broken, yet they come and break bread with them on their day off.”

At 7 p.m. the gates open and people gather for prayer, or not. “We are a church and have a church service, but if you don't feel comfortable, show up at 8 when dinner is served. We don't judge you or anyone. Everyone gets a plate of food and a backpack. All are welcomed back,” said Shearin.

“Our servers are trained to make eye contact with the community so that there's an interaction. While everyone is seated and eating, the outreach team gets to know people and finds out what's going on so we know who and what to address in order to assist them with their situation.

“We put a real story behind what we preach because many of us have been through recovery and have faced destitute times. Yes, most of our talks are inspired by the Bible, but a lot is from real life experience too.

### Mentoring and giving back

Jason Kastenedieck can attest to that firsthand. Four years ago, he observed “street church” a dozen times but never thought to join. One night, however, he was having chest pains as he walked by while people were

### To protect and serve

The Redwood City Police Department also plays an integral role in Street Life Ministries, thanks to a liaison Shearin established nearly 10 years ago. Officer Bill Cagno runs the downtown unit and works with the underserved on many different levels. “We see them on and off duty through Street Life Ministries and have been able to help many individuals get into a shelter or a resource program,” Cagno explained. “We want them to know that we are not out here to make things worse for them. Of course if we are called to do our job, we have



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## “WE PUT A REAL STORY BEHIND WHAT WE PREACH.”

### All denominations work and are welcome

Pastor Paul McGirk speaks once a month to those gathered at the Redwood City site. “I always walk away from there feeling better than when I arrived. It’s absolutely energizing to be with this community. Volunteers come from all over and are of different faiths. To see all these churches put aside any theological differences and work together is incredible.

“For me it’s changed my ministry and my perspective on the homeless and those who live on the margins. People say we don’t see the homeless. I see them more now. I see them all over. Of course some struggle with addiction but let’s face it, the Bay Area is expensive and if you fall out it can be really difficult to pay the rent or mortgage. This situation can happen to anyone very quickly. They are just like any of us.

“Even if they have a place to stay or are receiving assistance, they still need a good meal. We feel like our calling is to help them make ends meet and to offer them resources.”

Every Monday, a pastor from a different denominational background addresses the crowd. McGirk reiterated that people from all walks of faith or those with none at all are welcome. “There are no strings attached to the meal service. For some folks, this is their only church, so it’s not about recruiting them to come to one of ours.”

On a typical night, people show up after 7 p.m. Some group members will pray. Another church will cook the meal, and at 7:30 a van will pick it up. Then members from another religious affinity or youth group will serve. “Seeing this and being a part of it makes an impact on those involved. How could it not?” McGirk continued.

He and his wife, Kris, serve every Monday night. “One of the things I really enjoy about Street Life is that my husband and I get to know the folks who

attend,” said Kris McGirk. “As important as serving delicious meals is, we also have a chance to sit and eat with men, women and families. Building relationships and sharing our faith is a two-way conversation that we enjoy and look forward to. We owe this opportunity in no small part to an awesome team of volunteers who faithfully handle their responsibilities so that we can do what we love best — share God’s love. When I think about it, that’s what we’re all doing there. Just being servants and the hands and feet of God.”

### Now for the “fund” part

Serving dinner to 80 to 100 people four nights a week, every week of the year, is no small task. In addition to orchestrating and coordinating volunteers and pastors, cooking and delivering the meals, Street Life gives out sleeping bags, coats, clothing and backpacks. They are fortunate enough to know someone with a wholesale license so they can purchase things like sleeping bags, socks and shoes. The agency also accepts donations of any clothing items. A changing wish list of requested inventory appears every month in their newsletter.

“As far as monetary support, we are always in need of new donors,” Shearin explained. “We are so appreciative of the local churches who have been as supportive as they can be, but we are a little short right now. We are trying to attain some grants, but it is a slow process.”

For more information about donation or volunteering opportunities, visit [streetlifeministries.org](http://streetlifeministries.org) or call 650-241-8865.

*Editor’s note: We would like to welcome Monica Ho Ehlers to our team of contributing writers. She has been writing for 25 years. Her work has appeared in Parenting on the Peninsula, Bay Area Parent, The Independent, Examiner.com and Livinlime.com.*

praying. “My heart was literally telling me I could not continue in such a negative way. I had nowhere to live and finances were so low that I couldn’t even afford food. I did anything it took so that I could eat and just survive, and I knew it wasn’t right. I was hungry, so I stopped there for dinner. I missed having family connections and saw that people were happy and interacting.”

Kastenedieck met Shearin that evening and explained his story. “He never pushed the church on me. He said if I wanted to, next time I could come back and help with the service and with setting up chairs. I returned every week. Although I knew there were people who were troubled and faced issues, I didn’t realize how much they struggled. It has been a very emotional and humbling experience and I can’t imagine where I would be now if I hadn’t met David.

“Street Life Ministries is a place that respects the unfortunate and the homeless with no judgments. When I see people on the street, I tell them, ‘You can come and get a hot meal and warm clothing.’ I am happy to explain it to people because it was explained to me.”

Since that time, Kastenedieck has stayed involved. He opens the gates, making sure to greet every single person who walks through them. Then he goes about doing everything else required to set up. “I feel good about it because one of these people could be headed down the same path as I was when I first joined. I love that I can interact and connect with others because I came from a similar situation. I am proud that we can learn from our mistakes.”