

A voice for others: Area residents help those in need

BY WENDY NUGENT
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Thea Nietfeld became concerned about poverty after seeing how the criminal justice system can contribute to it.

"I have been working for Offender Victim Ministries the last two years in Newton," she said. "So I work with a lot of offenders who are also often poor. I've come to see I've had the wrong story between the relationship between incarceration and poor people."

Her job gave her a different perspective.

"What I came to see from my work is about people going to jail or prison is that it makes them poor," she said. "That's not what I thought before."

She learned that only three days in jail can result in a person losing his or her job, home and family. If the person loses their job, that can create a ripple effect leading to losing one's home and then possibly his or her family.

"So, for me, I have come to identify with people who are in that position because I have been sitting with them a lot," she said, adding that since it's not her personal story, she can't express the experience for them, but she can back up their stories.

Nietfeld and three other Newton women, Myrna Krehbiel, Jan Swartzendruber and Roberta Hickman, have been meeting at Mojo's in North Newton to talk.

"The four of us met in January of 2017 when we were at the Kansas People's Agenda Rally that kicked off the legislative session that year," Nietfeld said.

"Ever since that January, we have been meeting at Mojo's and asking each other what we're doing politically," Hickman said. "For me, that kind of kept my attention on I can do something."

She said that support helps keep her involved and active.

All four are involved in the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, and all but Krehbiel plan to attend the group's first action in Kansas, which will be on Monday, May 14, in Topeka. They'll be four in a group of about 12 attending from the Hesston/Newton area.

That group has received trainings in "nonviolent moral fusion direct action" through the Wichita Poor People's Campaign, and they expect the first action to involve some kind of civil disobedience in the state capital but haven't been told exactly how it will unfold.

The movement is mod-



Wayne Valentine, right, of Newton stands with a Silver Haired Legislature Personal Service Group comprising people from Butler, Harvey and Sedgwick counties.

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eled after Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign of 1967, and people who wish to take part in direct actions go through the training, which includes role playing and addressing some of the possible emotions participants might go through when under the pressure of being arrested.

The training is called Nonviolent Moral Fusion Direct Action Training—"moral" because it's based on an ethical stance and "fusion" because it brings together people who have a passion in one of a broad range of issue areas.

The four women, Krehbiel, Swartzendruber, Hickman and Nietfeld, went to hear the organizers of the national PPC movement speak in Topeka last August in a mass meeting at which the Rev. Dr. William Barber and the Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis were guest speakers.

After a rousing service, the national leaders invited everyone attending to participate in the new Poor People's Campaign. During that visit to Kansas, the national team chose Kansans to be trained and be leaders of the statewide Poor People's Campaign.

In line with Dr. King's original targets, the new PPC also targets militarism, poverty, and racism but adds a fourth evil, environmental degradation.

"It's the moral part that attracts me," Nietfeld said. "All of this is one system."

The four women each had their own reasons for getting involved.

"As part of the movement, we all came with [our] areas of [concern],"

Hickman said. "I came in with concerns of poverty—systemic causes of keeping women in poverty." She added they accept they're going to support people with other concerns, as well. "We will participate in those issues and support them. It's all about our humanity and our world."

Education is her concern, as well.

"I got concerned when I saw what the State of Kansas was doing to our public education system," Hickman said. "When I saw this being damaged and dismantled, I decided it was time for me to step up and do something."

So she joined Central Kansas Progressives in McPherson County with the idea of changing the political course of the state.

After attending the People's Rally, Hickman said she met Nietfeld and decided to go the social activism route, as opposed to the political route.

"Because I don't want my grandchildren to be marching for the same things that I saw being asked for when I was a child and what we're asking for now, and I want to be sure they're educated," Hickman said.

Swartzendruber said activism isn't new for her, as she's been an activist since 2012. In 2015, she said she transitioned from political activism into "building bridges" between faiths and cultures, when she coordinated an art exhibition called "Building Bridges" for the Wichita clergy-lay group People of Faith for Peace.

The exhibition in a series of galleries showed and sold paintings by pro-



From left, Thea Nietfeld, Roberta Hickman and Jan Swartzendruber talk recently at Mojo's Coffee in North Newton.

fessional artists trained in Baghdad, Iraq. Showing the refugee art was aimed at defeating stereotypes and supporting the Iraqi painters.

Swartzendruber has an international view, since she's lived in Africa, Asia and Haiti, but her roots are in Hesston, and now she resides in Newton.

"I naturally build intercultural bridges," she said, adding she even has an e-mail newsletter called Building Bridges.

"The point is we shouldn't be in our own silos—we should know what it's like for people in other groups and hear their stories. Hearing those stories, you can empathize."

One of Swartzendruber's best friends is a Syrian-American woman living in Wichita who helped plan the Building Bridges Exhibition. "Even though she has a different religion, it makes no difference, because I know what's in her heart," Swartzendruber said.

Swartzendruber has noticed many commonalities between the teachings of Christianity and Islam, as her friend will quote from the Koran, and Swartzendruber will think, "There's something just like that in the Bible."

"That's the fusion part," she said. "I feel we should listen to each other's stories and get out of our comfort zone."

The people involved with the PPC aren't the only local ones trying to help others in this way.

For instance, Wayne Valentine of Newton is a member of the Silver Haired Legislature, who was elected to his two-year term of serving Harvey County in March 2017.

"The Kansas Silver Haired Legislature (SHL) is a unicameral legislature composed of 125 representatives," according

to cpaaa.org. "All are over 60 and are elected from their county residence. Wyandotte, Johnson, Shawnee and Sedgwick Counties have five additional delegates."

The voting for the position is handled by the Area Agencies on Aging, said Valentine of Newton. He said he became involved after the local director of the department on aging asked him if he had considered applying for the SHL.

"All I heard was 'legislature,'" Valentine said, and then it sunk in what the director meant.

He said he called a woman in Hesston who'd done it for many years.

"She told me all about it," Valentine said.

The SHL, which is a lobby group, meets the first week in October for three days in Topeka.

"Silver Haired Legislature is really responsible for representing seniors in the State of Kansas," Valentine said, adding there are a half million senior citizens in the state and that there are 8,000 in Harvey County.

"This is more of a countywide thing," Valentine said. "I get involved with issues from Sedgwick to Walton to Burrton."

He said he's been to all of the senior centers in the county, talking with other senior citizens, and also has visited such a group that meets at a

restaurant in Walton.

"I like to volunteer," he said. "I like to serve people. I enjoy serving. We get our ideas, our issues from people."

During the SHL meetings in Topeka, they pass "legislation," which they then bring to state legislators, and they vote just like the Kansas House and Senate do, meeting on the House floor.

When SHL members get a concern from the people, they take it to a SHL area group. For Valentine, the group consists of reps from Butler and Harvey counties, as well as Wichita. That group meets once a month.

Valentine said he brought up the issue of the property tax lid of 2015, which sets a lid on the mill levy that public entities can raise not higher than the cost of living. He wanted that law removed.

"If counties have to cut funds, that's going to affect everybody," Valentine said. "That affects seniors."

His concern was on the SHL docket to be discussed last October.

"It got passed by the majority of legislators there," he said, adding it then went to the state legislature. "We presented it, and at this point, it still has not been repealed," Valentine said.

NEWS BRIEFS

DUI, marijuana charges for teen who hit rock with a truck

A Burrton teen ended up in jail on a bevy of charges after running and high centering his vehicle on a rock located at the Old Mill Plaza.

Around 12:38 a.m., May 4, Newton Police Lt. Scott Powell said police received multiple reports of a reckless driver.

They went out looking for the driver and found an accident scene at the Old Mill Plaza. Powell said witnesses said the saw a truck hit a rock, high center on the rock and then tear up the lawn at the plaza.

The police department located a vehicle that was bouncing and wobbling as it drove in the 100 Block of W Broadway. The vehicle was pulled over. Police arrested Jacen Spragg, 18, of Burrton, on charges of driving under the influence, possession of drug paraphernalia, criminal damage and leaving the scene of the accident.

—Newton Now staff

Mother's Day concert at Bethel to feature women's a cappella voices

NORTH NEWTON—This year, the small a cappella women's ensemble at Bethel College, Woven, gets the Mother's Day concert slot.

The nine-woman group will sing their end-of-year concert at 7 p.m. Sunday, May 13, in Memorial Hall on the Bethel campus. Note that the date is different from some previously printed calendars.

The concert is free and open to the public, with a freewill offering taken.

The offering usually goes to help pay for music, permissions and travel expenses. However, this year both Woven and Open Road, the men's a cappella ensemble, are donating their offerings to a scholarship fund newly established with the Bethel College Concert Choir in honor of retiring Professor of German Merle Schlaubaugh.

—For Newton Now

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