

## 60-year-old mission aims to build women's facility

By [MICHELLE BEARDEN](#) | The Tampa Tribune

Hank Furr once had a view from the top. In 1978, at 31 years old, he was Florida's youngest bank president.

He was going places. The 1965 graduate of Jesuit High School, with two degrees from the University of Tampa, was on the fast track. He had the expensive toys, the six-figure income, the prestige of playing with big boys.

But beneath the surface was a restless, empty man. After his second marriage failed, he sought out prostitutes. One introduced him to crack cocaine. And just like that, he was an addict.

"You don't believe it can happen to anyone until it happens to you," he says. "It's humbling."

After several unsuccessful stints in insurance-paid treatment programs, Furr found his salvation through a local pastor. Surrender your life to Jesus, the minister said, and everything will change. A desperate Furr knew his options were running out. He made that commitment. The demons fled.

After participating in a Christian-based addiction program in Michigan, Furr was finally clean. He was a changed man, eager to share his story of redemption.

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**Furr's testimony** counts for something in the position he has held for 20 years, far from the world of finance, three-piece suits and two-cocktail lunches. He and his third wife, Allison, serve as senior pastors for Lighthouse Gospel Mission in Riverview.

There's a lot of work being done at this ministry, located on 20 acres surrounded by junkyards, a concrete plant and phosphate mines. Men and women with drug or alcohol addictions live here and take part in an 18-month faith-based program aimed at turning their lives around. A food program collects donations for distribution to 18 local ministries and for twice-monthly grocery giveaways for walk-ins. A free-standing church draws about 200 people every week. A thrift shop sells shirts for 25 cents, a dress for a dollar, to help the poor.

Staff members don't get paid much, but they can live free in mobile homes on the property. The Furr's live across the street in a house with a barn on 10 acres provided by a local company that owns the land.

"What we do, and other ministries like us, is plug the hole," says Furr, a straight-talker who leans toward jeans and cowboy boots these days. "For a lot of people, if it wasn't for us, they would just wind up in prison. Or probably wind up dead."

Like a lot of nonprofits, the ministry had to pare back its expenses, but not its services, Furr points out, when the economy tanked in 2008. At one point, its annual budget was climbing toward \$1 million. It now operates on \$700,000 a year, money that comes from donors.

"We're just doing the work of the Lord," Furr, 64, says. "The commission that Jesus set forth when he came. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give something to drink to those who are thirsty, visit the ones in jail, visit the ones who are sick. And yes, deliver them from darkness."

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**Lighthouse Gospel** hasn't wavered in its mission for 60 years. That's when J.A. Lennard, a zealous evangelist, began preaching from the back of his trailer in downtown Tampa's skid row. An influential lawyer named Albert D'Arpa was impressed with Lennard's outreach to the homeless and the outcast.

"You need your own building," he told him. So D'Arpa helped Lennard purchase a building for the street ministry in an old feedstore at Tampa and Fortune streets. Lighthouse Gospel Mission was born.

To Earl Lennard, Hillsborough County's supervisor of elections, J.A. was Uncle Bert, his father's youngest brother.

"He put all his energies into saving people in dire straits," he recalls. "He was a born-again Christian who was very strong in his convictions. He would provide the homeless a meal, but you had to hear his sermon if you got it. And his method did work on some of them."

In 1961, the preacher set up the Good Samaritan Home on 5 acres on 78th Street south of the causeway in Riverview. That would become the area's first rehabilitation farm for alcoholics. He declared it would be supported only by free-will offerings, no tax money. That way, he could keep his faith message.

In 1986, the mission closed its downtown operation and moved to the Riverview location. It has grown through the years, adding services and programs as needs arise. The men's residential facility has 40 beds.

In 2005, the mission added a faith home for women. The Hillsborough County fire marshal ordered it vacated in January after inspections showed it needed a new fire alarm and sprinkler system. It also didn't have enough emergency exits.

This isn't the kind of place that turns people back on the streets. So the dozen women who were living in the single-family residence moved into the men's facility, requiring the men to move into more cramped space and separating the dorms by a locked door.

This is not a permanent solution, Furr promises. With the kind of optimism one needs to

run a mission like this, he has a vision for a separate women's dorm with showers, kitchen and a gathering room to be built on the property.

He has the plans. Cost of the project: an estimated \$175,000. That's a low-ball figure for a 20-bed building, but some of the labor will be done by the men and women in the program. He's calling the fundraising campaign Raise the House.

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**It's the kind of** ambitious undertaking the late J.A. Lennard, who died in 1989 at age 72, would have heartily supported. He always believed that as long as humans needed deliverance from addictions and salvation for their souls, there would always be a place for Lighthouse Gospel Mission.

"I like how his legacy is still living on," says daughter Diane Stinson. "I think God sent Hank here to keep up the work that my dad started."

Furr says it really isn't man's doing. This is God's work, he claims. He sees little miracles every day in people who have sunk to the lowest depths, people with no faith and little hope for a future. Just the way he felt so many years ago.

"You can't change a person's behavior until you change the heart," he says. "We're a heart-changing ministry."

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