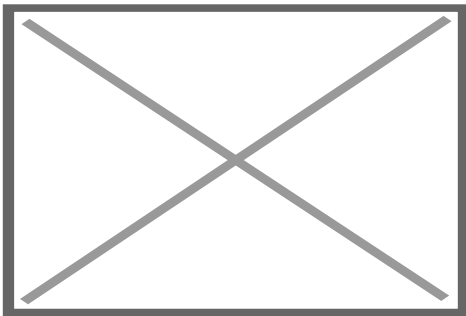


Lahaina Outpost: We're a family

Homeless fill pews, reach out to others

by Sue Schumann Warner –



Envoy Vidella Nagasaki leads a Bible study class before the Holiness meeting.



It's a warm summer morning in Lahaina...and in an older neighborhood not far from the tourists and trendy shops and watering holes that line downtown's historic Front Street, a "family" gathers to worship and praise the One who has given them new life.

Today, the praise band leads the congregation in exuberant singing: percussions, ukuleles and an electric guitar provide a rhythm and tunes. Moms, dads, seniors and children, along with Envoys Kevin and Videlia Nagasaki, all join in making "a joyful noise."

It's a typical Salvation Army Sunday at the Lahaina Outpost.

Some are neatly dressed in casual attire, the norm for this island community: shorts, sandals and T-shirts. Others are immaculate in lovely white muumuus or white tropical shirts, many wearing brown kokoa nut leis. A few wear crisp white shirts with blue soldier's trim.

Almost all, says Envoy Kevin Nagaski, are homeless. "Most live in the bushes," he explains. "A few live in a nearby shelter—and we've had some sleep under vehicles or on the tennis courts—but most live in the bushes." That includes their children as well.

Unique ministry to homeless

The outpost has a unique ministry: its congregation is almost exclusively homeless. While it runs typical Salvation Army programs, including Home League, youth activities, Bible studies, and social

services, it also offers unusual practical assistance: A bank of battered brown lockers lines the driveway—vital for keeping personal items safe; a washing machine sits in the patio, a godsend for maintaining a degree of personal cleanliness; two showers enable people, who otherwise have no access to bathing facilities, to tend to personal hygiene; and on Sunday, clean clothes—the white muumuus and shirts for adults and children—hang from a clothesline, ready to be put on before the church service begins. Afterwards, they are returned. A nourishing breakfast is served on Sunday morning and after the service, a family-style meal provides nutrition along with fellowship.

The Lahaina Outpost, after all, is more than “just church.”

“This is a family,” explains Duke Olson, 69, who is employed by the Army as a case manager.

Duke’s life was changed in Lahaina. The soft-spoken, pony tailed corps sergeant major recalls, “I lived in Chicago and New York, and had a pretty wild life. At 55 I realized I needed a change in my life and environment, and came to Maui.” While he had money at the time, he chose to become homeless.

The Army touched Duke through a simple ministry, says Envoy Videla Nagasaki. “We started giving coffee and doughnuts out our front door; Duke and his friend Robert Dickenson would stand and talk with me. Duke became our first [homeless] client; he had lost everything to drugs and alcohol.” In 1998 the former atheist and award winning interior designer became a soldier. “I love working for Jesus the Lord,” he said.

In time, Robert started attending their Bible studies. “For years I had a hedonistic, selfish lifestyle,” he admits. Tanned and burly, his shock of white hair tucked under a baseball cap, he leans forward and declares with a smile, “I came to learn that life is all about Jesus...I had to surrender—give him ‘all of my marbles’ ...and God has given me a new life—everything is new!”

“Shep” and Vidella

Without a doubt, the compassion—and life experiences—of the Envoys has done much to create the outpost’s welcoming climate. Vidella has a long history in Lahaina—her family soldiered there and her mother, Inez Lively, had once been the Home League secretary.

Kevin was serving as corps sergeant major and Vidella as Home League secretary in 1998 when Majors Ralph and Ivy Hood, then Hawaii and Pacific Islands divisional leaders, charged them with the outpost’s leadership.

Their lives center on the homeless. Vidella notes Kevin’s concern for their congregation: “They call him ‘shep,’ for shepherd. He takes the men to the beach at night where they go fishing. The men just grow when Kevin has a one on one relationship with them. It’s awesome.”

His concern for each individual—even in something so simple as remembering names—reflects a depth of understanding: “By the time people get to us, their self-esteem is gone. If you remember their name, it’s a big deal,” he states with a smile, his brown eyes twinkling.

Vidella, who had spent years as a biker, has been homeless herself. Intent—and spirited—she runs a tight, but compassionate ship. “Their [the homeless] transition back to society comes through these pews,” she explains, noting that people who attend services must be suitably attired and use no foul language. “I tell everyone, this is all God’s house, and they *will* be respectful.”

The Army’s aging stucco building sits next to the former palace grounds of the royal Hawaiian kingdom, now a community park and is, she explains, “from the ’20s or ’30s, and originally was a two bedroom house, with a garage. Our thrift store, next door, was the laundry facility for the U.S. Army.”

Its age is showing: a recent three-day storm caused six inches of water to come up through the chapel’s concrete floor, ruining the carpet, which had to be removed.

Sharing lives and testimonies

As in any family, those who attend the outpost share their struggles and the victories. This morning in the adult Sunday school class, Simeon, 38, explains some of the difficulties he’s faced: his father was murdered by someone he knew; his mother died when he was 13; and he is enrolled in a drug treatment program—and has gone from living in his car or on the beach with his wife and four children, to now living in a sheltered housing program.

Senior soldier and sergeant at arms Matt Kinser, 32, asked the congregation, “How has God been good to you?” as he opened up testimony time in the morning service. One woman thanked God for giving her more hours at work in a pretzel factory; Envoy Vidella thanked God that she has been sober for 18 years this month; one man said he was glad to be at The Salvation Army, a place where he could learn how to change. Prayer then focused on the needs of others who were less fortunate, and on those who needed to find Christ.

Kinser later gave his own testimony: “I used to live in a tree...I robbed people and tourists, and did a lot of bad things.” It was the persistence of a 12-year-old boy inviting him to church that got him to attend the Army. In time, he became a client at the drop-in center.

But it was his changed life that caused the biggest challenge. Knowing there was a warrant out for his arrest, and convinced he should pay for his crimes, he turned himself in to the police. “I went to the police department at 9 a.m., but they wouldn’t take me then—they didn’t know what to do when I said I was turning myself in. So they told me to come back the next morning at 6:30 a.m. and they would book me then.”

He ended up serving one year in jail, although he could have been sentenced for up to 10 years. “That’s when I learned to pray for my friends and those around me,” he says. “It was a growing opportunity and I learned my lesson. I was able to return here and was received with open arms.

“Society would have said, ‘You’re a felon.’ The Salvation Army said, ‘You’re a new person.’ That’s why I love The Salvation Army!”

Caring in word and deed

Lahaina’s Salvationists and employees provide for the bodies and souls of those with whom they

come in contact. At the outpost's Hale Palekana Homeless Drop-In Center, basic services to displaced and homeless individuals and families include hot meals, showers, laundry facilities, substance abuse counseling, and telephone facilities to help with job searches; 50-70 individuals are helped each day. Emergency assistance, including help with rent and utilities, is available for families.

Providing food is a vital part of their ministry. Recently, the 12 members of the discipleship class—all of whom are all homeless—made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and took them to Front Street, Lahaina's main street, to give to their homeless friends and invite them to church.

The Home League "aunties" prepare lunch at the outpost for those in need; breakfast and lunch are served four days a week, and serve 35-40 at each. On Wednesdays Duke and John McKee, employees at the drop-in center, take hygiene kits and food bags out to the homeless. "They both were homeless, so they know where go to—where the people are living in the bushes," explains Kevin.

The thrift store, located next to the outpost, often supplies clothing and other goods at no charge. "The last Friday of the month is clothes day," notes Vidella with a smile. "At 9 a.m., people can get as many clothes as they want or need—and the thrift store has really nice clothes that have been donated, including labels like Tommy Bahama. If someone gets a job, they can get a voucher for work clothes. Thirty-one of our people will be going to family camp, and will be getting a voucher to get a suitcase and clothes."

Sales from the thrift store pay for the outpost's day-to-day expenses, Kevin explains. "State and federal grants just cover food, paper goods, and employee benefits. Community donations and in-kind donations from food stores help as well." Many of the donations come from restaurants and hotels, food banks, and stores such as Safeway and Starbucks.

Alliances with community business have proven a plus. Cheeseburgers in Paradise, for example needed a place to put its dumpster; arrangements were made with the outpost to put it on the Army's property. "We're saving \$1,000 a month," Nagasaki says "because we can put our trash in it also."

Programs and assistance run seven days a week, with 12-step on Monday; Home League and a "heavy duty" discipleship class on Tuesday; a music-filled service and dinner on Wednesday; a sewing class and a men's Bible study on Thursday; and a family movie night on Friday.

Life skills courses provide much needed experience and training: working in the kitchen as a cook, in the thrift store, or as a truck driver all give practical experience. "When they are looking for work, they use us as a reference," Vidella says. "I just wrote a reference for someone who wanted to enter the U.S. Army."

After all, it's family.