

# Home-Less for the Holidays

Dan Nelson

2005

# Ojai Valley News

It was the day before Christmas, joy and giving were in the air. People's hearts were merry. I didn't know when I woke up that morning that this day I would learn such a lesson that would alter my view for the rest of my life.

I had been teaching a community Bible study since June 1998. We had been learning so much and desired to live all that we had learned. This Bible study group, which formed the early foundations of our church family today, felt inspired to reach out. After prayer and meditation on the subject, we had decided to "feed the homeless" on Christmas day. We knew things were being done already to help the homeless but we didn't know the full extent. We thought there might be a need.

I had never done anything like this before. Christmas Day was always a time for family. All of my life, every Christmas was the same. Wonderful, but the same; exchanging gifts by the tree in our "jammies", followed by the traditional testing of the "funniest toys" that had been given, and later the BIG family feast at one of the relatives' home. Christmas still is a time for family for us, but we have learned to broaden that definition.

It was almost the end of the millennium; fear of global doom was on some people's minds. I was about to meet some people that didn't waste any care on a potential worldwide computer disaster that could alter their course of living. That is because their lifestyle would hardly be altered; it was those living more comfortably that were seemingly at risk. I loaded my six year-old son Andrew into the truck and we went out to meet and invite "homeless people" to our Christmas dinner in the park. Now I have to be honest with you here. I did not always have compassion for homeless people. There was a time when I cared absolutely nothing for those on the street. I had the same "get a job" attitude that many hold today. However, God had been softening my heart for many years on many subjects. God had been teaching me how He sees people, and more importantly, through the example of Jesus, showing me how to love people myself.

We found ourselves in Oak View first where we met three people that really surprised me. They had a makeshift camp set up behind a building that they called their home. It was simple and quaint. As we walked up and introduced ourselves they graciously welcomed us. Our new friends Linda, Michael, and Fuzzy offered hospitality in the form of some pre-packaged snack food that they had. Of course we refused but they were quite insistent. Food and provisions are, no doubt, scarce for them and we had food at home. But they would not take no for an answer, at least for Andrew. They must have seen him eyeing their offer of cheese and crackers and knew that he wanted some. They accepted our invitation for the following day and we walked away with snacks in hand. As we got into the truck, I felt awkward that we had received from them but had not yet given anything. So far, things had not gone how I expected. But the real lesson was yet to come. I was not aware that the next hour would bring me more wisdom than some whole years in my previous experience.

Enter Vern Dugan. As we continued our quest to invite people to our Christmas outreach, we found ourselves walking in the back area of Libbey Park. We came face to face with two men. One of them introduced himself as Vern Dugan. He said he was a former engineer by trade. He had been living on the street for a while now. Alcohol helped him keep warm. Now, you might remember that the Christmas of 1999 was an unusually cold season and it was definitely chilled that morning. As we began to talk, Vern noticed

that my son had no gloves on his hands and was concerned that he might be uncomfortable. The Community Assistance Program (CAP), for which I am very grateful, had just given out gloves to help take the bite out of the dropping temperatures for those directly exposed to the weather. Vern gave them to my son. Again, we refused but so did he. He wouldn't take no for an answer. I explained that we had a truck waiting for us with a heater, and a home that we would return to with a furnace. We would soon be out of the cold, he wouldn't. Despite our retort he insisted, and we sheepishly accepted.

When we left, I felt confused. I did not expect generosity toward us and I knew it was given sacrificially. I thought of the contrast Jesus made comparing financial poverty and spiritual poverty. I remembered the story of the woman who gave more than the others because, while some give from their abundance, she had given freely from the little she had. I had gone out that day to bless; yet we were blessed. I thought I was going to minister and yet I was ministered to. We had set out to give but came home with gifts. How could I explain to Shelley that we received gifts from people that had almost nothing to give? And what we learned that day is that they had a lot to give.

When I told my mom what had happened she was extremely touched. During the following year, she made him a quilt to help keep him warm during cold nights. We presented it to Vern on Christmas 2000. It was later stolen. But Vern had something that could not be stolen; he had a heart of love. So many of us learned a lesson that year that opened our hearts for many more of the same. Vern has been a member of our church family ever since and I am honored to have called him friend. The lessons that God used him to teach us have affected our ministry approach greatly. I understand today that people like Vern are by no means "homeless" although they may be "houseless". There is a home, there is a family, and there is a lot of love among people like Vern. Vern Dugan died on November 21, 2005. We will be honoring him on Christmas day at Libbey Park from 1-3 pm in conjunction with our now annual Christmas Service in the Park. It is the anniversary of when we met and, for me, commemorates a real message of God's love at Christmas.

Dan Nelson is a frequent contributor to the Ojai Valley News and currently serves the Ojai Valley Ministerial Association and community as editor of the Religion Column. This article was published in 2005. Permission is freely granted to reprint the article in its entirety. Dan Nelson is pastor of Calvary Chapel Christian Church of the Ojai Valley.



P.O. Box 1443  
Ojai, CA 93024  
(805) 640-9498  
[www.calvaryojai.org](http://www.calvaryojai.org)

## **Sunday Worship:**

**9:00 & 10:30am**  
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley  
195 Mahoney Ave, Oak View

## **Mid-Week Study:**

**7:00pm Thursday**  
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley  
195 Mahoney Ave., Oak View