



Ricki Poppe waters strawberry plants in the garden at Sanctuary Women's Development Center.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY MCKEE, THE OKLAHOMAN

# Providing sanctuary

**SHELTER | PARTNERSHIP GIVES HOMELESS WOMEN REFUGE AT FORMER CHURCH**

## BY CARLA HINTON

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Ricki Poppe of Missouri had a misunderstanding with relatives and ended up at an Oklahoma City homeless shelter.

Poppe, 48, is a licensed truck driver but the shelter's curfew requirements prohibited her from working her shifts.

She needed help finding a permanent home so she could get back to work. She needed friends — someone to listen to her story, someone who cared about her journey.

Then "I heard about this place called the Sanctuary. I heard it was real quiet and nice," she said.

The outgoing trucker found aid and companions at Sanc-

tuary Women's Development Center, which Catholic Charities of Oklahoma City opened in April.

Nestled in an inner southwest Oklahoma City neighborhood, the development center is housed in the former Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, 2133 SW 11.



Josie Wakley sits on a pew in the Sanctuary Women's Development Center. Wakley, who is a volunteer, once used the faith-based center.

PHOTO BY ASHLEY MCKEE, THE OKLAHOMAN

Tim O'Connor, Catholic Charities executive director, said the church was used as a mission site for nearby Little Flower Catholic Church for Saturday evening services. He said leaders with the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City gave the OK to transform the house of worship into the women's sanctuary because the building still would be used for ministry.

"We had our eye on this church for a long time" mainly because it is close to other organizations that offer assistance to the city's homeless and neediest residents, O'Connor said.

He said Catholic Charities employs several staff members who run the center, but other church groups have

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## Relief: Center aids Women

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joined in the effort as well. He said the Southern Baptist-run Grace Rescue Mission, which is less than a block away, provides a security officer for the center. Women who come to the shelter are offered lunch at Grace Rescue Mission, plus access to its dental clinic, pharmacy and clothing room, O'Connor said.

He said other denominations such as the Oklahoma United Methodist Conference and the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma have been supportive as well and help round out the ecumenical partnership.

Poppe and center client-turned-volunteer Josie Wakley said the Sanctuary has thus far lived up to its name.

"The name is very appropriate," Wakley said. "When I began to come here, I felt it was my safe haven."

O'Connor and the center staff said the sense of community is one reason the Sanctuary continues to draw more women each day.

"Even though we say at Catholic Charities it's our place, it's really their place."

Kim Woods, Catholic Charities' homeless service coordinator, agreed.

"It's all about making the women feel spiritually safe, physically safe and emotionally safe," she said.

### Creating a sanctuary

Woods said Catholic Charities transports women living at City Rescue Mission homeless shelter to the center Monday through Friday.

She said some women come to the center through referrals from other agencies, while others find out about the center through other women who have visited there.

The center is bright and airy with pews used by the former church still used here and there. An area once used as a confessional houses several phones for clients' use. A small nook for children is filled with youth toys and books. One recent weekday, several women sat outside at picnic tables underneath

## MORE INFORMATION

### Sanctuary Women's Development Center

- > **When:** 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday through Friday
- > **Where:** 2133 SW 11
- > **Needs:** Monetary donations, small bottles of juice, fruit cups and other snack items, volunteers.
- > **Information:** 526-2321; e-mail: [sanctuaryokc@gmail.com](mailto:sanctuaryokc@gmail.com)

### DID YOU KNOW?

- The Sanctuary Women's Development Center:
  - > Has served 72 women since its April 20 debut.
  - > Fifty percent of the women have some kind of disability.
  - > Seventy percent of the women are being helped to get a job, housing or other needs met.
  - > Six women are veterans.
  - > Ten are chronically homeless.
  - > Thirty-three women have reported that they suffer from some mental illness.
  - > Fifteen have substance abuse problems.
  - > Eight have developmental disabilities.
  - > Twenty-five have physical disabilities.
  - > Thirty have experience domestic violence.
  - > Clients have made 498 visits to the center since its opening.

SOURCE: SANCTUARY WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT CENTER

trees behind the building, while others were inside on computers or talking with a staff member.

Woods said the center is ultimately a resource site for practical help for such things as crafting a resume and obtaining a decent job or finding appropriate housing.

However, the women also take life skills classes to discuss issues such as domestic violence, which Woods said is the leading cause of homelessness. They also work on computers, get books to read and participate in arts and crafts. The Sanctuary also is a place to get a simple cup of coffee and a friendly smile, Poppe said.

She said she often works in the center's community garden where strawberries, banana peppers and tomatoes grow. Poppe said she recently obtained household items and a deposit for her new apartment through the center.

"We're trying to find resources to get back on our feet," she said.

Wakley said she is a disabled veteran who stayed at City Rescue Mission for three weeks before she found housing. She said she has a degree in social

work and now comes to the center to give support to other women in similar situations.

### Goals for their life

She said most of them are not without a vision for their life. "They all have a goal; they just don't know how to get there".

Lisa Walker, 40, said she found out about the center when she visited a nearby public library. She said she is a cashier at a local truck stop, has a place to stay, and is going to school to work in medical administration. Walker said the center gave her funds to keep from getting evicted. She sometimes visits the former church to use the computers or to do her laundry when she cannot afford to go to the Laundromat.

Wood and the center's case manager, Amy Hampton, said the positive atmosphere and resource connections seem to keep women coming back.

"It's overwhelming when you don't know where to go to get the help you need" Hampton said.

Wakley agreed. "It's peaceful when you come here. Whatever you're looking for is here."

