

CommonCall: Offer the ministry of hospitality

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GATESVILLE—Martha Parrish bakes brownies and sets out snacks on the kitchen counter. Her husband, James, sweeps the floor and turns on the front porch light.



Guest and visitors at the Central Texas Hospitality House receive a warm welcome from James Parrish. (Photo / Nan Dickson)After all, it's Friday afternoon, and the Parrishes always expect weekend guests at the Central Texas Hospitality House.

Late in the afternoon, an anticipated guest calls to say his truck won't start, and he can't make the drive from South Texas, but count on him for the next weekend.

The first couple enters the living room about 6 p.m., exhausted after

driving more than 300 miles from Corpus Christi to Gatesville. Others arrive later Friday night. The Parrishes anticipate a greater number the next day.

At the Central Texas Hospitality House, a weekend home-away-from-home for families who visit inmates in Gatesville-area state prisons, “every weekend is different,” Martha said.

Most guests make the journey from South Texas or West Texas. Many others travel from Oklahoma or New Mexico. Since the Parrishes arrived at the Central Texas Hospitality House in fall 2015, they have welcomed guests from 33 states and four foreign countries.

“We had one visitor from Denmark,” James recalled. “Another guest led her to Christ while she was here. She went back home a different person.”

The Parrishes’ houseguests trek to Gatesville to visit family members incarcerated at any of the 10 prisons in Gatesville, Marlin or Burnett. Those facilities house more than 10,000 inmates, and they draw about 100,000 visitors a year.

About 80 percent of the female inmates in Texas Department of Criminal Justice units are housed in the region, and about 3,000 male inmates are in nearby prisons.

“We have a lot of grandparents bringing kids,” James said. “We have husbands and fiancés who come to see women in the units.”



Martha Parrish serves breakfast at the Central Texas Hospitality House. Her husband, James, said, “She keeps track of the number of guests by the number of biscuits she bakes.” (Photo / Nan Dickson) Guests are welcome to spend Friday night, Saturday night or both nights at no cost. In addition to free lodging, Martha prepares breakfast early every Saturday morning, and area churches provide the Saturday evening meal, which volunteers from the congregations enjoy alongside the guests.

Fellowship around the table gives church members an opportunity to see the guests as people not that different than themselves, James said.

“Almost all the people who come here (as overnight guests) felt insulated from the prison population,” he said. “They thought, ‘That’s not something that could happen to us.’ But no one is immune. It can happen to anyone—any family. It could be someone they love.”



Martha Parrish (right) welcomes Cyndy Smith, a guest from Oklahoma, to breakfast at the Central Texas Hospitality House. (Photo / Nan Dickson)The Parrishes have rejoiced with families who have been reunited—incarcerated parents who have the opportunity to see a son or daughter for the first time. They also spend a lot of time sitting with guests who pour out their hearts and shed tears—eager to talk with someone who listens without judging.

The Parrishes understand heartache. On July 4, 1988, when they were serving as Southern Baptist missionaries to Ecuador, James stopped at a gas station in Esmeraldas to fill up before meeting another missionary family to enjoy a day at the beach.



Barbara Hood (left) appreciates the safe and welcoming atmosphere she and her granddaughter, Gabriella McDaniel, enjoy at the Central Texas Hospitality House. (Photo / Nan Dickson)As he stood beside his truck while an attendant primed the gas pump, he saw a spark. An explosion and fire claimed the life of the Parrishes' 3-year-old son, John Martin, and seriously burned his 7-year-old brother, Stephen. James also sustained serious injuries when he struggled to pull the boys from the burning truck.

The Parrishes served one term on the foreign mission field. James—who was born in Gatesville and grew up in Hamilton and Grand Saline—spent 27 years in pastoral ministry, serving churches in Texas and Tennessee, before he and Martha moved to Hamilton to be near his aging mother.

That's when they met Charles and Mary Alice Wise, longtime members of Trinity Baptist Church in Gatesville. The Wises worked more than four

decades as volunteers in prison ministry, and they helped launch the Central Texas Hospitality House.

For 16 years, Baptist associational leaders and volunteers like the Wises dreamed of a place where they could offer free overnight lodging to the visiting families of inmates. For seven years, volunteers staffed a small house in Gatesville that served as a welcome center for Saturday visitors to prisons in the area.

After years of praying, planning and fund-raising, and with help from the Baptist General Convention of Texas, they finally opened the Central Texas Hospitality House in September 2014. One year later, the Parrishes accepted the role as directors.



Gail Mills (right), a Central Texas Hospitality House guest from Oklahoma, embraces Martha Parrish. (Photo / Nan Dickson) “We’ve learned a lot, and we’ve made a lot of friends,” Martha said.

Friends include volunteers who help with the ministry, such as the “Monday Morning Angels”—senior adults who arrive every week to mop the floor, help wash laundry and reset the 10 guest rooms after they have been used over the weekend.

She also numbers among those friends guests she and her husband welcome each weekend—and for whom she cooks biscuits and gravy each Saturday morning.

“She keeps track of the number of guests by the number of biscuits she bakes,” James said.

Count Armando and Lucy from Corpus Christi among those friends. They were two of the first guests the Parrishes welcomed one year ago, and they continue to make an every-other-month trip to Gatesville to visit their incarcerated daughter. Before they discovered the Hospitality House, the couple made the exhausting trip to and from Corpus Christi in one day.

“It’s so peaceful here,” Lucy said as she relaxed in a chair in front of the fireplace in the Hospitality House living room. “When we get here, I feel like all my worries are gone for a little while. We just love it.”

She and her husband appreciate the warm welcome they receive from the Parrishes, as well as the friendships they have developed with other guests.

“We are all going through the same thing,” Armando said.

Many guests would have to sleep in their cars or drive all night if the Hospitality House did not provide free lodging, the Parrishes noted. Others could afford a motel room, but they eagerly offer donations equal to the cost of lodging because they prefer the atmosphere the ministry provides.

“Many of them are carrying a heavy load, and it can be overwhelming,” James said. “There’s a lot of clamor in their lives. We provide a place of

peace. ... In many of their lives, there is a lot of noise and disorder. Here it is quiet, and they can find some peace.”

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