

# CommonCall: Ministry outside the box

March 9, 2017

HENDERSON—What does a job-training ministry do when most of the employment opportunities in the region evaporate?

An East Texas Christian Women’s Job Corps site responded to the challenge by following a micro-enterprise model that has worked in developing nations. The ministry in Henderson created an artisans’ group who make and sell their own jewelry and other crafts.



Christie Gambrell is executive director of Christian Women’s Job Corps of Rusk County. (Photo / Ken Camp)“I’ve never worked well within the box,” said Christie Gambrell, executive director of Christian Women’s Job Corps of Rusk County.

For a decade and a half, Gambrell has worked outside the box to meet the needs of women in her area.

CWJC—a nationwide ministry of Woman’s Missionary Union that marks its 20th anniversary this year—prepares unemployed or underemployed women for the workforce by teaching job skills and life skills in a Christian

context.

Texas Baptists have helped launch multiple CWJC sites around the state through their gifts to the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions.

Women from First Baptist Church in Henderson and London Baptist Church in New London started the CWJC site in Henderson, but they struggled to find someone to direct it.

A furloughing missionary who had befriended Gambrell and knew her background as a former Christian school administrator asked her at lunch one day if she would be interested in applying for what then was a volunteer position.

“I said: ‘I’ll only do it for a year. Then I need to find a real job,’” Gambrell recalled. “I’ve been here 15 years now.”

### **Big challenges in a small town**

Henderson has a population of less than 14,000, and more than one-fourth live below the poverty level.

“One of the biggest challenges here is that networking is a key element of Christian Women’s Job Corps, and we are about as rural as you can get,” Gambrell said.

For some services, the closest sources are 30 miles away in Longview or 45 minutes away in Tyler or Nacogdoches.

Soon after she arrived at CWJC, Gambrell conducted a community needs assessment. She discovered a significant number of Spanish-speaking women in Rusk County who needed English-as-a-Second-Language instruction. However, several people in Henderson told her others had tried to launch classes and failed.

“We found out they had only been offered at night,” she said. After a little investigation, she learned the Hispanic women would not participate in evening activities when their husbands were home from work, but they were eager to attend morning classes.

So, CWJC began offering morning ESL classes in 10-week semesters, along with ongoing literacy and high-school-equivalency classes and eight-week blocks of life-skills courses.

The site received a \$10,000 grant from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation to help support its adult literacy programs, and it also has received United Way funds earmarked for literacy initiatives.

In addition to classes offered at the site near First Baptist Church in downtown Henderson, the ministry also offers life-skills classes at the Son Shine Lighthouse, a transitional shelter for women near New London.

### **Balancing spiritual needs with physical needs**

“Scheduling is a huge challenge, especially since some of my teachers teach in more than one track,” Gambrell said. “Another challenge is keeping our focus on the great spiritual needs of our women rather than being caught up in their felt needs—physical, emotional, family, work, financial and so on.”

Gambrell uses a chronological Bible storying approach—first used by international missionaries among illiterate or preliterate people groups—to teach unchurched women in the Christian Women’s Job Corps-sponsored programs a comprehensive overview of Scripture.

“They ask questions that church people don’t ask,” she said. “I’m a pastor’s daughter, but when they ask some questions, I have to say, ‘I’ll need to check the Internet on that one and get back to you.’”

## Developing artisan groups

To help the women in the program learn more about other cultures and how Christians minister around the world, Gambrell introduced them to WorldCrafts, a WMU-affiliated fair trade endeavor that helps artisan groups around the world market their crafts.



Artisans at Christian Women’s Job Corps of Rusk County create jewelry sold by World Crafts, a free-trade program sponsored by Woman’s Missionary Union. (Photo / Ken Camp) About that time, the economy in Rusk County—which is dependent on the energy industry—took a serious downturn. Women who had worked hard in the Christian Women’s Job Corps programs faced difficulty finding meaningful employment, even after they developed what should have been marketable skills.

After CWJC of Rusk County launched its own artisans’ group, Gambrell thought about WorldCrafts.

“I wondered if they would accept us,” she said. “After all, we were doing a lot of the same kinds of things as groups overseas.”

Gambrell talked about marketing their products to a WorldCrafts representative who she asked to see a sample. Gambrell sent a Fruit of the Spirit bracelet, which features nine colorful stones representing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

control.

“It’s been our biggest seller” since WorldCrafts began carrying it, she said. The artisans have created four other products WorldCrafts markets. All the proceeds from the sale of WorldCrafts items go directly to the artisans.

### **Selling handiwork at a local boutique**

Locally, the artisans sell their handiwork at Possibilities, a boutique in downtown Henderson.

After checking several potential locations, Janet Richardson—a CWJC graduate who volunteers with the ministry now—secured space at Possibilities. Initially, the shop’s owner told Richardson she had no space available and suggested other local shops.

Richardson told her: “No, that’s OK. God wants us to be here.”

The owner promptly made space for the artisans.



Teresa Belmarez (left) sells her crocheted creations at Possibilities, a boutique in downtown Henderson. Janet Richardson (right), a Christian Women’s Job Corps graduate who works as artisan coordinator, secured the space in the store when she told its owner, “God wants us to be here.” (Photo / Ken Camp) Richardson—who is Gambrell’s neighbor—enrolled at CWJC after spending more than 20 years as caregiver for her son, Nathan, who had Duchene Muscular Dystrophy. As a cancer survivor with other health issues, she found fulfillment serving with the ministry in computer tech support, as well as a designer and artisan coordinator.

Richardson also redecorated a room at Tabitha’s Closet, a clothing outlet for CWJC students and graduates, to create a crocheting corner and sewing room, where women meet every Friday morning to learn needlework, some of which they sell at Possibilities.

Artisans appreciate the supplemental income the sale of crafts provides, Gambrell said. Even more, the activity “boosts self-esteem” as the women discover other people value the work they do and find beauty in it, she

added.

*Read more articles like this in CommonCall magazine. CommonCall explores issues important to Christians and features inspiring stories about disciples of Jesus living out their faith. An annual subscription is only \$24 and comes with two complementary subscriptions to the Baptist Standard. To subscribe to CommonCall, click [here](#).*