

More than a place to stay; a path to restoration

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ABILENE—After the six-hour drive from Lufkin to Abilene, Roseanne Welch was thankful for the warm welcome she received as she walked in the door of the Eunice Chambless Hospitality House.

“I felt like I was coming to visit my family,” Welch said. “Everyone was so kind and welcoming from the moment we arrived. It felt like home.”

This was the first trip Welch made to visit her son—who is incarcerated in the French Robertson Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice—since he was transferred from Huntsville to Abilene.

Burden lifted, able to relax



Eunice Chambless Hospitality House in Abilene. (Photo: Jordan Parker, Texas Baptist Communications)As a single mom with one son still at home, Welch’s budget was tight. Before hearing about the hospitality house, which provides housing to the families of inmates at little to no cost, she was unsure how she would be able to make frequent visits to see her son.

“With that off my mind—the financial burden lifted—I can relax and enjoy the visit,” Welch said. “I won’t have to worry about the budget when I get home. It takes a huge weight off your mind. It makes it something where

you can plan the next visit—you don't have to wait for the budget to clear up.”

Established in 1999 and located across the street from the Abilene prison system, the Eunice Chambless Hospitality House ministers to the physical and spiritual needs of all who pass through. The 7,000-square-foot facility features single- and family-sized rooms, a community kitchen and a large gathering room.

It is open every weekend for visitors to the Robertson and Middleton Units of TDCJ. It is funded by support from the Abilene Baptist Association, local churches, individual donors and gifts from Texas Baptists Christian Life Commission community care grants.

“More than housing”

“ECHH is much more than housing. It's much more than having a place to stay. It's an opportunity to minister to families,” said Toby Hensen, pastor of First Baptist Church of Clyde and the house's treasurer.

Tim and Yogi Christesson have served as the house's directors since 2008, providing care and love to all who stay. The Christessons have countless stories of relationships developed through the ministry. And they have ministered to families traveling from Houston and El Paso, even as far as England.

“You know when they are here, they are going to be loved on,” said Jacob West, pastor of First Baptist Church of Stamford and chair of the house's board. “Our directors are going to do everything they can to show the love of Christ to everybody that walks through the door.”

The namesake, Eunice Chambless, desired a place for families to come and hear about the love of Jesus. She saw the house as way to live out the gospel, according to Phil Christopher, her pastor at First Baptist Church of

Abilene.

Loving neighbors

West sees the ministry as a continuation of Chambless' vision.

“This ministry at the Eunice Chambless Hospitality House is about loving your neighbor as yourself,” he said. “Jesus said the people who inherit the kingdom of God are those who go and check on people in prison. He said, ‘I was in prison, and you came to see me.’ We want to minister to the people who are going to the prisons, seeing their families, seeing their friends and encouraging them in their effort to love their family and follow Jesus Christ.”

For Welch, the two-day visit with her son was necessary to keep his spirits up and to remind him he has family.

“Where he’s at right now is not where he will always be,” she said. “I am visiting so he doesn’t lose heart, to keep that hope alive.”

The safety, warmth and proximity to the prison provided Welch the support she needed. She looks forward to more visits with her son and returning to the Eunice Chambless Hospitality House soon.