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The Dialogue with Tom Garner



This feature is a question-and-answer session with a new Blount County Chamber member. So here we go with our 43rd installment visiting

with Thomas D. Garner (Tom), Executive Director/Founder of [Harbours Gate](#), which bring programs of empowerment, hope and courage to make positive changes in the lives of those who struggle in substandard housing communities in Blount County. We lead those who daily battle with 'living life on life's terms' to find their true purpose in life. That true purpose is to take their experience, faith and hope and share with others. By helping put all of the 'broken pieces' of their past back together, they become stronger than ever before and help others rise up who are still dealing with the same challenges.

What does Harbours Gate do? We are a front line, first point of contact in housing communities that are often overlooked as areas of true need and assistance. Having sold all that we had-our finer homes, cars, worldly goods, etc.-we have moved in on site and live side by side with those we serve. We offer: High School Diploma; Alcohol/Drug Addiction Programs; Certified Peer Counseling; legal clinic; Harbours Gate Kids; Court approved anger management/parenting classes; employment assistance and more. We have been informed that since our presence on site in these ALL of the above are provided on site in our local neighborhoods. We come to those we serve and open up lines of communication and trust. This concept is ideal to use in other depressed and high crime/drug neighborhoods in Blount County. We left the ninety and nine to find the

ones who are willing to take a hand up (not out). Once they succeed they go tell the others and that brings them in our doors. We have been informed by local authorities that since we took up residence in one of these substandard communities crime rate has dropped dramatically.

How did you get started? I began in the alcohol/addiction side many years ago. After working with street gangs in Knoxville and addicts in Blount, I saw the broader calling of dealing with Life Issues. In every location we are at, we were invited in by those who live there. After operating my own successful corporation for many years, I realized that 'stuff and money' could not fill the hole in my heart: and that hole was the desire to serve and uplift others who felt their dreams could never be reached.

What is your background? I am a graduate of Maryville College. Major History with minor in Political Science. I have worked for a major national company as Director of Marketing and Business Development before starting my own business. Personally I have trained with Saddleback Ministries in the establishment of Celebrate Recoveries; have worked with KARM, Salvation Army, Child & Family Services and serve as a teacher at Crossville Mission Bible Training Center which is a life recovery treatment program.

Who is your mentor? Stan Grubb: who visited

my dilapidated trailer park project and believed in the vision I had. No one else for years saw it. We operate out of what once was a crack house where death and destruction occurred. Most of the major donors and organizations shunned me as being too primitive and in too dangerous of neighborhoods. Stan saw it and got it and helped me formulate many of our outreach programs. Stan is currently a counselor with WestCare in Roane County. Church of the Cove in Townsend, TN: gave me the opportunity years ago to work in establishing food and clothing banks and connections to work with many local people who were living in despair. David Shanks: came along at the right time. He observed and also became a believer. His tremendous support in so many areas, particularly with the Blount Chamber, is now taking us to the next level.

Describe those you help. Unemployed; disabled; very low income; many working two minimum wage jobs to just stay behind on their rent/bills; many live off disability checks; many do not have a high school diploma; many are living under court probation for prior criminal acts which limits their ability to find better employment; most do not have adequate transportation; ages range from newborns, single moms and dads to seniors. Veterans who have gotten lost in the bureaucratic shuffle.

What do you see as the biggest obstacles?

Legal: strict probation limits and cripples those who have proven that they have turned their

lives around. Environmental: with no zoning or regulation of mobile home parks there are many who are paying high rent for substandard housing conditions. Stigma (social): many in our working areas feel shunned or looked down because of their past or where they are living now. the phrase 'trailer park trash' still is heard and hurts many, especially our young children.

Name three things you wish you knew when you started. 1. How to attract/build a better board. (On track now but it was a learning process; especially to weed out the 'feel good' flag wavers and tourists' who weren't there for the ones we serve) 2. How to appeal to donors/volunteers. Right connections leading to the right doors. 3. Accounting organization. (Now in good hands with Whitlock & Company, CPA)

What do you enjoy most? The people. Seeing miracles of transformation in those who had given up-or had been written off by society. I have 70 year olds getting their High School Diplomas; some who were declared mentally insane now healed and getting jobs; addicts and drunks getting clean by finding true purpose in serving others. A former prostitute/gang empress fully clean-got her education-and now serves as a district attorney in another state. Yes...she came out of a Blount County mobile home park and graduated from Law School. Youth who were dropping out of school now being reinstated. We are a small group but the

individual miracles we are witnessing are often
stunning!

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