

TOLEDO FREE★PRESS



STAR

Tent City marks 25 years of serving area's homeless

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Lavette Miller is not shy about telling her story. She tells it straight: She abused drugs, gambled and prostituted herself.

She was homeless on and off. In 1997, a man shot her, the bullet hitting her spine, confining her to a wheelchair.

She said she was an angry person for a long time, but she wasn't raised in a neglectful or abusive home; she just made bad choices.

Today, Miller is clean and sober, has a job and pays rent on time. The 45-year-old will be the honorary mayor of Tent City 2014 on Oct. 24-26 at the Civic Center Mall Downtown.

"Now I'm not 'Where can I get my next fix?'" Miller said. "I'm not about what I can get and I can spend my money on other stuff. I like it and I'm

honored that I have gone from a guest to a '1Matters King.' They don't try to bombard you or 'fire and brimstone' you with things; they simply wait for you. They stay in your life and help you and do whatever they can until you are ready to change. 1Matters holds their hands out and we just mold ourselves into a better version of ourself and 1Matters is there to love and embrace us through the process."

Founded in 1990 by Ken Leslie who was homeless himself for a time, Tent City brings together people of compassion who value hard work and one-on-one relationships to honor the homeless and the work being done to house them.

In 2006 the event was restarted after a six-year hiatus and in 2007 singer John Mellencamp visited Tent City while in Toledo; the event was the impetus for Leslie to found 1Matters, the group that now



Tent City Mayor Lavette Miller. Photo by Robin Charney.

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organizes Tent City. This year, Tent City celebrates 25 years.

"It's the power of [Tent City] that recognizes that everybody matters," Leslie said. "For 25 years, it's been a community of compassion. Another one of our slogans is 'Don't be behind us all the way; be with us all the way.'"

The kickoff to the event will be the Walk to End Veteran Homelessness sponsored by Veterans Matter. New this year, organizers are asking participants to walk in a veteran's name. Those doing so will wear T-shirts with the veteran's name on the back. The walk starts at Promenade Park at 6 p.m. and will go to the Civic Center Mall. To register for the walk go to www.1matters.org/walk.

Veterans Matters housed 458 veterans last year in six states. Locally they housed 77. The program just opened up operations in Washington, D.C., and is working on establishing services in Georgia, Leslie said. Their goal is to house 1,000 veterans this year. Celebrities Susan Sarandon and Katy Perry have both joined the campaign.

Leslie is expecting 300 at the walk and another 200 who will come out for the entertainment. Among others, Pat Lewandowski, who has been at every Tent City for the past 25 years, will perform.

There will be an expanded medical tent this year with dentists, cardiologists, podiatrists, ophthalmologists, mental health providers and a women's center. Haircuts and birth certificate service will be offered. There will also be a complete Veterans Services Tent staffed by the Veterans Administration and Lucas County Veterans Services Commission.

Volunteer spots are filling up fast, Leslie said, which is usually the case every year. So far, the event is ahead of last year with 538 spots filled, or 73 percent, he said.

Cherry Street Mission Ministries is a main sponsor of Tent City and has been since the event was "reimagined" after its hiatus ended in 2006, said Dan Rogers, CEO of Cherry Street Mission Ministries. Rogers said the event has gone beyond making people aware of homelessness and now makes people aware that they are part of the solution.

"It an awareness project," Rogers said. "It's really started off as a homeless awareness project, but as we reimagined it in 2006, it's really a people awareness project because when you come down to Tent City it is a convergence of everybody getting help. When you give you get given to as well, and it's that but magnified 100 times. It's a three-day convergence of a demographic of people that normally wouldn't be in the same space."

Miller is now a part of the 1Matters team. In order to join the team, you have to be nominated and endorsed by five others in the organization who determine whether you have consistent compassion.

"I lived in a motel for a year," Miller said. "In 2008, I looked into an apartment and haven't been homeless since. I pay my rent early if I can because I refuse to be homeless again. If I don't change no one can help me to change."

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