

Donna Jean's Place Women's Shelter at St. Mark's Cathedral
by Deacon Frank DiGirolamo, Executive Director of Operation Nightwatch

St. Mark's continues to welcome the stranger.

An emergency overnight shelter for women is opening in the St. Nicholas building. A collaboration with Operation Nightwatch (seattlenightwatch.org), it will shelter 20 women per night and is projected to help more than 100 women annually on their path to stability. It will offer showers & storage lockers and include amenities such as case management and basic medical. Perhaps the greatest amenity is the opportunity for the women and us to grow in loving relationship.

To tell the story of the development of Donna Jean's Place Women's Shelter is to articulate a timeline of inspiration, recognized needs, and compassionate responses by numerous people.

We begin with an introduction to Donna Jean Palmberg, the widow of Nightwatch's founder, Pastor Bud Palmberg. Donna Jean is a long-time Christ follower and a loving advocate for those in need. When the fledgling shelter was started in the Spring of 2024 her name was the obvious choice.

The Donna Jean's Place effort began when we met "Aimee" on a rainy night last winter. She had walked across town to Nightwatch – shivering, alone, and desperate for shelter. We could find nothing. She slept around the corner on a sidewalk. Our memory of Aimee has influenced our decisions. We are increasingly aware of the great lack of women's shelter. More than half the women experiencing homelessness report stalking, harassment and worse. It is a common practice to walk all night to stay safe. And, when you walk all night, you sleep during the day. It's difficult to make progress.

Tonette Winston, Nightwatch's director of shelter and housing, quickly suggested that we budget to shelter ladies at our meal center on at least the coldest nights. The Nightwatch Board of Directors quickly built on that idea, releasing funds from our reserves to start a part-time shelter.

St. Mary's Catholic Church opened their doors for us to start a humble operation within a loving parish community. Nine mats on the floor, two nights per week, from 9pm-7am. We slowly expanded to three nights. Our guests told us this was "the best place ever!"

The St. Joseph Foundation, part of the Catholic Archdiocese, provided a generous grant to help us keep our fledgling shelter going. We expanded to four nights, and then five.

This summer, Reverend Steve Thomason came out to look at Nightwatch's little operation. He suggested the possible multi-year use of a soon-to-be-vacant space in the St. Nicholas building. It will eventually become low-income housing, but we would be welcome to use it until then. Nightwatch's leadership team fell in love with the space. It allows us to more than double in size, and it's in the midst of a very active parish community, known for compassion.

Schultz-Miller, a local construction company and a long-time support of Nightwatch, offered to be the contractor. How amazing that a builder of high-end custom homes is building a domicile for people who currently live on the streets. It is a divine thing! The Salvation Army donated 20 bunk beds. No more sleeping on the floor!

And the donations. Wow! Individuals have been pitching-in. Epiphany Parish and the St. Mark's community have been incredibly generous. Other churches want to help. It is a response of the broader faith community. A great thing for the city to see. There has been media coverage.

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We are excited to see the finishing touches. Volunteers are assembling welcome kits and hygiene items. Donna Jean's friends have knit colorful quilts and pillowcases. A St. Mark's parishioner is donating edifying artwork.

We give thanks to you, Lord, for your inspiration to open our doors and our hearts to welcome the stranger. You remind us that we welcome you in the process of loving each other.