

Emma Grager
April 11, 2014

Hope with a Side of Fries

On an ordinary Tuesday night, the Cookery would be open for business, serving dinner to the hungry, hungry hipsters that flock to Nashville's trendy 12 South neighborhood. March 11, 2014, was not an ordinary Tuesday night.

Friends, family members, and committed customers packed into the modest, freshly painted dining room of the small restaurant to view the graduation ceremony of the Cookery's two newest staff members, James Jones and Wiley Walker. This was an event that these two men, along with their mentor, restaurant owner Brett Swain, patiently awaited. Though the Cookery operates primarily as a culinary institute aimed at transforming the lives of homeless people, graduation from the Cookery does not mark a change in physical circumstance as much as it marks a change of heart. This is less of an academic ritual and more of a church service.

Brett briefly turned the restaurant counter into a pulpit, preaching the good news of recovery and hope to the audience. He invites James and Wiley up to testify to the transformative experience the Cookery had given them and receive their certificates.

James Jones moved to the front of the room with a quiet demeanor mismatched with his tall, slender figure. A modest smile snuck across face as he turned to face the audience in his new uniform. In his youth, James had been

Sergeant Jones of the United States Army, a man of rank with a powerful voice. Years of alcohol and drug abuse had cost James his position in the military, his subsequent employment as a carpenter, and, eventually, his financial security. Now in his fifties, after a long season of homelessness, James did not expect to find himself here, in front of a group of people celebrating his accomplishments.

Wiley Walker shortly joined James at the counter. Wiley wore his nicest clothes for the occasion. The collar of his white button down peeked out from underneath his new Cookery logo emblazoned chef's coat. For a man in his mid-forties, Wiley has more than his fair share of wrinkles. His face bears equal shares of lines shaped by hard living and weather and etched by laughter and smiling.

"It was like this almost magical kind of moment where all these people were coming to celebrate James and me," Wiley said. "All these prominent people coming to celebrate us and celebrate *with* us and we were just thinking, 'Who are we? We were homeless.' I would have had trouble getting my family to come just a while back." Wiley's mom and sisters were in the audience for his graduation. It was a night he will never forget.

The next day, the Cookery was back to business, filling lunch orders and restocking supplies. Wiley sat across from me at a table in the corner of the restaurant.

"So what can I do for you?" he asked, his drawl slowing his speech.

"Tell me how you got here. Who were you before the Cookery and how has it changed you?" I inquired. He adjusted his apron and unrolled his sleeves, a sign that he was taking a break from his kitchen duties.

“James, I’ll switch with you when I’m done talking, but it might be a bit before I’m back in there!” he hollered toward the kitchen.

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Just three years ago, Wiley was flunking rehab, James was a year sober but living on the streets, and Brett Swayn and the late Terry Kemper, co-founders of the Cookery, began work on their vision toward ending homelessness in Nashville. From people who knew her, Terry was a kindhearted woman with a difficult past and a passion for embracing society’s marginalized peoples. Brett is an Australian native with a story of hardship and recovery and a love of cooking. Terry and Brett had each been homeless at one point in their lives and found their way to the same community at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Green Hills. Though they both were employed and housed when they first met, the two quickly bonded over their shared experience and expressed a desire to help others living in a state of homelessness in their community.

Together they founded Lambscroft Ministries, an outreach organization, of which the Cookery is just one branch, with the mission “to bring the poor, spiritually bankrupt, and/or financially destitute into a safe environment, providing immediate shelter, while entering earnestly into learning skills necessary for the restoration of their entire being.” The name of the organization is a compilation of the concept of Jesus as the Lamb of God and the notion of a “croft,” which in British English refers to a plot of ground adjacent to the kitchen of a house that was to be worked by the tenants of the house. So, Lambscroft is a place where followers of Jesus connect in order to cultivate that which God has given them. Lambscroft sponsors a service

called the Upper Room where homeless individuals are invited to have a meal, fellowship in church community, and spend the night on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Lambscroft also runs a Sunday ministry called C.I.T.Y. (“Church In The Yard”), which provides a place of worship and a meal to the homeless community. Terry and Brett wanted to break the cycle of hopelessness that homelessness instills in a person through practical training and spiritual training. Of all of the Lambscroft projects, its mission is most evident in the Cookery.

Brett was trained in culinary arts and had been working at Fleming’s for a while, and Terry had been searching for a place to start a new ministry of a then undecided focus, “a place on the hill” according to a vision that she said God gave her.

“And, you know, this is kind of on the hill!” James said, pointing out the window at the hilltop location of the restaurant. “[She and Brett] were driving by one day, I guess three years ago, and she said, ‘Stop right here! This is the place on the hill!’ And what they saw then didn’t look anything like this now.”

With his commanding military voice tempered by humility that he said grew in his recovery, James recounts Brett’s initial uncertainty about the place. There were holes in the walls and there were more spaces than boards in the floor. But Terry was sure this was the place. “God gave her this vision and they both got in it together and wanted to get homeless guys off the street and give them hope again. And that’s what it’s done for me. It’s given me a vision of hope and happiness again with God.”

Terry passed away only three weeks ago after battling cancer; fortunately, she lived to see her dreams culminate in the successful opening of the Cookery last September.

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From the outside, the Cookery operates like any other restaurant. It is perched on the visible socio-economic fault line that divides the old 12th South from the new, a few blocks south of what is colloquially known as “the Murder Mart” (because of the number of violent crime incidents in the nearby area) and several blocks north of the hip Imogene and Willie designer denim boutique. The southern door to the Cookery opens into the kitchen, the back of the building where the homeless men in the program spend their days learning culinary techniques. The north door swings open and closed in rhythm with the constant stream of hungry customers. Yet, inside the Cookery itself, the line between south and north, cook and customer, homeless and housed, disappears.

“We work solely on volunteer power,” said Chalaini Flanigan, the twenty-five-year-old front of house manager. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she wore jeans and a Cookery t-shirt that swallowed her petite frame as her uniform. She pushed her glasses back into their proper place and explained the financial system on which the Cookery operates. “One other girl and I are actually hired staff. But because we are considered a non-profit, none of the rest of the money circulates; it goes straight back into the program. Only Brett, myself, and the other manager are paid. So people needing service learning hours, people needing volunteer hours for school, or even people in the community have come in

and helped out.” It seems there is no shortage of help. Even as I sat at a tall table in the corner sipping a cup of coffee (the cheapest cup in town, I might add – a bonus point for any true Nashvillian coffee addict), I saw several of these volunteers stop by.

One carried bouquets of flowers in from Brett’s car.

“For me?!” joked Chalaini, with an expression of jovial disbelief and a flip of her brown locks. The volunteer smiled, rolled his eyes, and shook his head. He doubled back to the car and returned with a load of tomato sauce cans, each larger than his head.

As the volunteers unloaded the groceries, Chalaini expressed how she relates to the transitioning homeless men she works with: “Though I’ve never been homeless myself, we’ve all hit times where we feel like there’s no second chance or we’re not worth a second chance, and that’s what we do.” To the Cookery, it is foundational that everyone is broken and in need of healing and help. In this way, the volunteers are not so different from the kitchen staff.

Amidst the bustle in the center of the room, John, the current intern, took notes from Brett in one of their weekly meetings. John is a junior Social Entrepreneurship at Belmont University and is observing the Cookery to understand how to integrate business strategy with ministry vision. He has spent time in the kitchen washing dishes and cutting vegetables, talking with Wiley and James, and training under Brett just like they have.

Another young man in a bright red Belmont sweatshirt entered the restaurant. He joined Brett at a table near me. He hoped that the Cookery would like

his pitch and consider joining the Belmont student discount system. Brett tugs at his greying hair and slumps a little deeper into his chair. His eyes widen and his brow furrows. The student discount membership requires what must be a pretty steep buy-in.

Chalaini explained that while she and Brett both have restaurant experience and they want the Cookery to reach as many customers and train as many chefs as possible, they have very opposite approaches to fulfilling this goal. While Brett is more focused on the homeless ministry aspect of the non-profit, Chalaini is more business-minded. The Cookery recently received a donation of four 15x30 plots at Woodmont Hills Church; Chalaini is interested in permaculture and self-sustainability and has been placed in charge of cultivating the land and producing a crop for the restaurant to help lower the cost of running the business. "It's four times as big as I've ever done it. I'm kind of freaking out about that," she said. "But in this community, we have regulars who are like, 'I do that for a living. I'll come help out!'" Chalaini is currently looking to get the land approved for use for the restaurant so that they can cook and serve what they harvest. Additionally, she hopes the food reaped can be given away to those in need and that the gardening can be used instructively for troubled kids. Chalaini is one semester away from finishing her degree in special education, focusing on vulnerable populations, and she has a heart for coupling food with teaching. "Hopefully it'll be a big community effort to be able to do something with your hands, and to make something grow. To be able to know that 'I did that!' can be pretty empowering." Indeed, empowering is the best word I can think of for the Cookery. While some individuals simply throw

money at the homeless crisis and other organizations only treat its symptoms, the Cookery gets at the heart of the issue.

“It ain’t always easy, but God has always got me through it,” Wiley asserted. He spoke slowly, choosing each word carefully and steeping it in thought. “I’m just really grateful for everything God has done and that there’s a place like the Cookery where they’re trying to actually *teach* people. Instead of just giving somebody a place to stay and feeding them, [they are] teaching them something that they can take with them. They help us fix the broken stuff inside that keeps on bringing people down.”

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The Cookery training program promises to provide for all of the needs of the culinary students. They are invited to live in what Lambcroft calls the Disciple House and they study a scripture passage from the Bible as a group every morning. They are provided with clothing, tools of the trade, and whatever else they might need such as hygienic products and medicine. James said, “Since I’ve gotten here I haven’t wanted for anything. [Brett] said he’d provide anything for us and he’s provided more than enough for me.” The cost of the five-month program on which the Cookery operates is \$3,015 per student, a low price for the provisions and the life-changing experience. By graduation, students like Wiley and James are “Safe Serve Certified,” meaning that they know the federal and state standards for safe food handling, to what temperature certain food should be cooked, how to properly present and serve a dish, and the cleanliness standards and organization of an industrial kitchen. Accordingly, Safe Serve is a certification that many restaurants

recognize and honor in the hiring process as an indication of just preparation and knowledge.

Currently, the Cookery is only accepting homeless men into the program. The business-ministry hybrid hopes to expand into multiple locations and, when they do, they plan begin to accommodate women as well. Chalaini told me that training both men and women would require “two different disciple houses, obviously, and two different restaurants – one entirely women and one entirely men.” She said this is “because people are dealing with very foundational emotional and spiritual issues and adding other complications and dynamics besides getting back on their feet would be a little too much. But that’s the hope!” Expansion is a very real dream for the Cookery, especially considering the success both the restaurant and the individuals who have gone through the program have seen since the grand opening. One of members who went through the program and would have graduated with Wiley and James left a little bit early to take a full time, salaried job in the kitchen at the Tennessee Nissan car factory.

When I asked Wiley and James what their big dreams were, they both responded that they had a desire to give back to the homeless community in the same measure and way that they have received. James hopes to become a sous chef and thinks he is “already well on that road.” Perhaps the fact that he likes building a part of some whole is left over from his days as a carpenter. Wiley wants to stay on at the Cookery until they expand and then maybe run his own Cookery location someday. He still has a lot of years left to give back, as he sees it, and wants to train other individuals and give them the second chance that Brett gave him.

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Both Wiley and James told me that God led them to the Cookery in a way.

Wiley got sober to join the program since being clean is the culinary program's one requirement. "He had probably smoked something the day before he came in here," remarked James of Wiley. Still, Wiley followed Brett's instructions and met him at the Cookery every day for two weeks. During this time, Wiley recounts, he endured the withdrawal symptoms associated with his drug and alcohol abuse that had started on his 21st birthday with his first drink in New Orleans. Though addiction is never truly over, Wiley had completed the initial step toward recovery by choosing sobriety.

Finally, Brett and James brought him back into the kitchen to begin washing dishes. "I look back on it and I really see God working," explained Wiley. "I was to the point where I just really wanted to change. I was tired of living in the streets, being in the streets, living that life. When I got here, I put it in my mind to do my best to make it work. Even though it was hard at times, I kept reminding myself of where I was and where I am now. I guess other people see it more than I do. But they say they've seen a big change in me since I came here July the tenth of 2013."

Brett had hounded James for months about joining the culinary program he was just starting up. James was determined not to cook for a living and would have preferred to continue to seek carpentry work. Finally, after a long while of being out of work, James turned to God for clarity. He agreed to join Brett at the restaurant on a trial basis and within the first week was astonished that he had learned the entire menu. "I went to God and I said, 'If this is what you want me to do, instill all of this in

me at once, then okay. Bring it on!’ And he did.” James had been a carpenter all his life and originally came to Nashville to work construction on the new convention center downtown. After that project ended, he was sober, but he was now homeless. Cooking wasn’t entirely new to James, though he admits he initially lied and told Brett he had never cooked before. “I think I did that because I just wanted to learn to do everything Brett’s way. I wanted to see his vision for this place and follow it,” James confessed. James was not alone in his reluctance to put faith in the Cookery’s owner and his methods.

“I just didn’t trust anybody, really,” Wiley explained. He looked out the window to the cars passing by. “I guess that’s what the streets do to you. I had a survivalist mentality.”

Still, both men swore that they would not trade their experience in the Cookery program for anything. It has been equally spiritual and practical; a program equipping them through skilled labor and through Christian encouragement.

“When we walk in here, we’re in the mindset that we’re pretty much in church. This is a holy place,” Wiley said. James echoed Wiley’s words: “This is a restaurant, but if we don’t involve God in it, what’s the point? We’re very big on that here. I love that part. And I love this place.”

“You should love this place too,” he added. “And tell your friends to love this place. Stop by again, won’t you? Thanks for listening to us.”

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I did stop by again. That Friday evening, a friend and I drove over the line between the old and new in 12th South and opened the door to the place where

social and economic boundaries are blurred in the name of God, love, and good burgers. I waved to Chalaini who promptly came over to the table to take our order. Wiley peered out from the kitchen and smiled his wide grin. James was tucked in the back, undoubtedly manning the patties I could hear sizzling on the grill. *This is my kind of church*, I thought.

“How can we help you?” Chalaini asked.