

Austin

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concrete work, they took on other construction jobs — always talking about God while they worked. Paul advised: “Take a year and focus on Jesus.”

Gradually, a craving for faith and service replaced Jacob’s craving for drugs. Wanting to shed parts of his old image, he quit smoking and began wearing false teeth.

He and Paul formally joined the Church of the New Covenant, where Paul asked Jacob to lead a Bible study.

The two helped add a kitchen, bathrooms and a huge closet for donated clothing to the church’s youth center. People often interrupted them to ask for food, clothes or a prayer. Paul got annoyed until he realized that building community was more important than building that addition.

Jacob didn’t mind the interruptions. Paul watched as he effortlessly connected with people in need, including those struggling with addiction. Jacob met them with compassion, not judgment, giving hugs and telling them God loved them. In the church and on the street, he offered impromptu prayers.

One Sunday, Jacob testified to the congregation about his own struggle with drugs.

Paul heard the stirrings of a pastor. “I felt in my spirit that he had the potential and the enthusiasm and the desire” to preach, Paul said. “As a Christian, you’ve got to love people where they’re at.”

With the encouragement of Paul and Harold, Jacob began preaching every couple of months, joining Paul as a junior pastor.

And just as Paul served and guided him, he began serving and guiding others.

Brian Lafever met Jacob at the church in late summer 2017, during the depths of his struggle with meth. Jacob asked if Brian wanted to accept Jesus as his savior and led him to the altar when he said yes. Later in the service, Jacob baptized him.

After church, the two got to know each other. Jacob shared his story and asked Brian if he wanted to help him and Paul with some work around the church.

From that day on, Brian vowed to get

sober. He’d been to court-ordered recovery meetings before and had gone with no intention of quitting. But at that point, he was ready to commit. He’s been clean, and coming to the church, ever since.

“The Lord put us together for a reason,” the 54-year-old said. “He saved my life.”

Harry Clark said much the same. Harry, 44, used drugs for 25 years — weed, meth, “whatever I could get” during his darkest times. On Thursdays he went to Food 4R Souls for free meals and got to know Jacob. To his surprise, Jacob didn’t judge him like other people did; “he was just on my side ... somebody I could talk to.

“... I knew he understood because he did go through that life.”

One day about eight months ago, Harry confided he was ready to get well but didn’t have money or a ride to Todd’s Place, the men’s transitional recovery housing in nearby Seymour. Jacob had connections there, so he got Harry in. He found a friend to drive and accompanied them to drop Harry off at Todd’s Place. He’s been living there, sober, ever since, working in a factory and hoping to regain custody of his son.

“Without Jacob’s help, I’d probably still be doing what I was doing,” Harry said. “He’s helped me get my life on track.”

Paul saw God acting through Jacob. So when he was asked if he wanted to be the senior pastor, Paul said he’d rather “push my brother to the front.” Jacob replaced Harold when he retired in late October.

Jacob now gives sermons every other Sunday, trading off with Paul. He vacuums the church and cleans the windows, too. And he still builds whatever needs building.

Faith, family, future

For Jacob’s wedding, the community transformed the youth center gym. Tables covered with blue cloth and gold runners filled the basketball court, facing a regal head table beneath one of the hoops. Bunches of shiny, star-shaped balloons hovered above tables and chairs.

Guests streamed in with potluck dishes, then lined up to write notes of love and congratulations on a wooden cross. Jacob rushed to Paul and Becky, pulling Becky close and announcing:

“This wedding wouldn’t have happened without you.”

In the church next door, Tiffanie balanced on a stool as friends fixed her hair and makeup. She marveled at how everyone pitched in to give them the perfect wedding.

“We’re simple people,” she said. “I just didn’t think we mattered. People really care.”

Tiffanie met Jacob as a young girl, while visiting an aunt in Austin. Jacob, who lived across the street, would chase the girl from Florida around a tree and try to kiss her.

They met again three years ago at her cousin’s funeral. They connected instantly. Both were single parents. Tiffanie was divorced with four kids. Both were trying to overcome addiction. Tiffanie had struggled with the anti-anxiety drug Xanax. A romance blossomed as they traded Facebook messages and leaned on each other. They took things slow.

Last New Year’s Eve, before preaching a service, Jacob got on one knee and proposed in front of 35 parishioners.

Nine months later, Tiffanie walked down the aisle in Jacob’s stepmom’s white gown to Carrie Underwood’s “Look at Me.” Jacob wore his dad’s suit and a blue shirt from the church clothes pantry. They promised to love, honor and obey. They lit one candle from two.

At the reception, Jacob’s aunt Donna Barger, Wanda Sue’s daughter, teared up watching them. “My mom’s looking down today,” she said.

Inevitably, wedding bliss gave way to the hectic balance of work and family — and the challenges of sobriety and faith.

One of the first things Jacob does every day is to ask God for help.

Less than a week after the wedding, he arrived at the church for an 8 a.m. prayer group, wearing overalls and a T-shirt from the city’s recent Overdose Awareness Day Fed Up! march.

“I am sorry for all the things I did that were wrong. God, I’m asking you to help us recognize the darkness around us. Let us not be distracted by the things of the world — whether it’s drugs or anything else ...” he said, closing his eyes.

“Thank you for my church. I’m glad to be back here in the trenches. I’m ready to do this work that you have set before me.”

Later Jacob rounded up his kids to help clean their new, rented house. Jacob’s son Colten and stepdaughter, 9-

year-old Adylin, mostly played as the older kids made their way from room to room with garbage bags, throwing out trash and figuring out where to put the belongings piled in the living room. Tiffanie returned home from work at CVS and pitched in.

Just as Paul and Wanda Sue guided him toward God, Jacob and Tiffanie hope to do the same for their kids. Jacob already sees encouraging signs. Little Adylin has adopted his practice of impromptu prayers, once asking God to lift “our pain” when Jacob’s lymphedema flared up. Fifteen-year-old Tristen sings with the church band, and said his dad’s relationships with parishioners “show me how to think about others.”

Jacob nurtures those relationships through all his roles at the church: ministering and praying wherever he’s needed, whether in church, on the streets, even occasionally in homes. Giving out clothes or food to those who need them. Running the youth center used for sports teams, a school gym class, community events and funerals.

And every Thursday, Jacob helps plan and run a crucial service in Austin, the Food 4R Souls dinners. Between helping serve food when needed, he weaves among the tables, serving prayers.

One evening he stopped at a table where young, tired-looking men hunched over their plates. He knew them. They were living the life he once did. Jacob shared a little of his own story, invited them to church on Sunday and began speaking to God as they bowed their heads.

Another evening he prayed with an ill, elderly woman. She slumped over the table, then collapsed as he helped lead her outside. So he carried her to a couch, praying as they waited for an ambulance. Again he was there when he was needed.

Each day Jacob grows more hopeful that the revival his grandmother once predicted will come to pass in Austin — that faith will pull people out of addiction and pain.

Jacob heard echoes of his grandmother’s prophecy when an older woman walked into the church in late October, crying.

“I haven’t been in a church building in 10 years,” she said. “Something told me to come here.”

Jacob prayed with her in the sanctuary. And he wept when she told him her name: Wanda Sue.



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