

NEWS

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→ MINISTRY UPDATE ←

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UPDATE

Politically, it's hard to get anything done this time of year. Businesses strive to keep production churning. People's minds are all on traditional things. Charities are trying to wrap up their giving before Christmas Day. Then nothing is supposed to happen until after New Year's Day. But, some things remain the same day after day with no breaks.

Let's take homelessness for instance. If you have to live in a tent or under a bridge, the only thing new is the weather and being beat up and robbed of what little you scrape together by another homeless person too lazy to earn anything. It's a rough life most are forced into, and then it's extremely hard to find a way out. And, there's the snow and the rain and cold temperatures that you can't escape.

Where did life and liberty go? Why Lord am I in a grave with no way out without help? And, who would care enough to help me. Some church people will give me a meal or some clothes, but who will help get me back into life? I only know of one place, but they seldom have any empty beds. They make me get out of bed and go to work at a full-time job. They provide what I need to EARN my own food. They make me pay my fair share and help pay a little for the next guy coming in. Those people make me start having hope again. They make me see there is a better way in life.

They actually practice what Christ taught, which is unusual nowadays. They make me see that life is better without the drugs and alcohol. And, they have the nerve to actually put me back out in a tent if I don't stay clean. They even make me attend an accountability group of seven men like myself. I have to really



try if I want to fail.

I must say here that religious Christians cannot understand that they could ever be like THESE people. Pride is spiritual and holds one in bondage and makes it impossible to forgive and accept we are all dependent on God's grace in our life. In Luke 10:33, the Samaritan was hated just like sex offenders. Yet, it was he who had compassion on the man in need and did a part of what we do — did everything the beaten man couldn't do. HE didn't judge the man in need first. The man could have been any one of us — bad or good. Jesus didn't just die for the good. He died for ALL. He was born for that purpose. We are no better than Christ. If we are righteous, then we are to suffer with Him. We are not our own. We were bought with a price. So, let God's purpose shine in your life — give.

We have about 20 men coming in before January 15. We have six or seven beds, but, we will manage to help them as God provides. I suffer a lot doing this ministry, but I reap what others don't. Our dollars go farther than any other ministry I know of. So join me and let's rejoice together. And, we have just begun.



Be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

James 1:22.

— David Nichols,
Executive Director

TIS THE SEASON!

We hear this expression every year about this time. Sometimes, it's used as a positive

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reminder of the holidays and Christmas, and sometimes, it's used sarcastically to point out something peculiar or derogatory about Christmas. I personally love this time of the year. That's strange because I don't like cold weather, but, regardless of the weather, I still enjoy these holidays. Obviously, decorations are beautiful and help boost one's spirits, and some people, like me, are more joyous and fun to be around than usual.

I think it's deeper than that for me. Because of Jesus' willingness to step into this world as an infant and fulfill the Father's plan of salvation and redemption of mankind. Christmas is a time that it is easiest for me to be grateful for God in my life. Because of that gratefulness it is easier to help other people. The opportunities seem to be endless during this time of year. It is more obvious that some have very little, and I find many opportunities to help other people and their needs.

Also, because it is a time of year when many become depressed or down-hearted, it provides the opportunities for us to see those and to assist through friendship and good deeds. At Hand Up Ministries, we are seeing fewer men turn to alcohol or drugs in this season because of depression or anxiety than in the past. We have launched a full out effort through our Chaplains and staff to offer support and counsel for those at risk, because of their past.

Someone said to me recently, "the number one way to tell if we are truly believers, is to ask ourselves if we love people." Think about it. That was Jesus' number one prayer for his followers. Ask yourself this season, do I love people? And if so, how will I show it in my life this Christmas season.



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*— Ray Riddle,
Oklahoma Director*

TESTIMONIES

To be perfectly honest, religion or faith has never been important to my family or me growing up. It was hard to imagine how God could allow me to be abused or unloved by my family. I felt it was unfair that he made me deaf. People treated me like I was deaf and dumb. In the past, I tended to avoid church or people who believed in God. I did try to read the Bible to explain why I went through the things I went through. I was searching for a better life than what I went through as a child. I always admired the people who tried to live by the Bible's teachings. Still, it was easier said than done, and I found it difficult to let go of the past or even forgive people who had wronged me. Basically, I was angry at God for allowing all the bad things that happened to me.

I was born in Paradise, California on April 19, 1980. I was born about 80% deaf in both ears and wore hearing aids to help me hear and read lips to communicate. For the first ten years of my childhood, I grew up in an abusive home. My meth-addicted stepfather, was responsible for the horror I suffered as a child. He abused me in every way a person can imagine. I was beaten, molested, and psychologically abused and was always told I was worthless and never going to amount to anything. I also witnessed my mother get beaten and terrorized. My mother was abused by her own father and never felt like she was worth much herself. It was hard for my mother to show love to me or support me growing up. All I ever wanted was love and support, but, because I was deaf, she never thought I would be able to succeed or take care of myself. This left a hole in me, feeling like I was worthless.

I moved to Lee's Summit, Missouri at 11-years-old. I used my anger on the football field and while running track. I was being rewarded by taking my anger out on others in a positive way. Instead of getting in trouble with the law, I hit people on the football field as hard as I could and being rewarded for it. This resulted in 38 Division One NCAA sports scholarship offers across the country. When I was 13 years old, I saw a newspaper article about a deaf football player, named Kenny Walker. He played for the University of Nebraska and he was an All American. He also played professional football for the Denver Broncos. This gave me hope that one day I could play at the same level as him. All my life I was told I could not do this or that because I was deaf. When I read the article, I said to myself, if he can do it, then I can do it too. I decided to dedicate myself to football and do whatever it took to get to the next level. I made sure I got good grades and worked out three times a day. Still, along the way, many tried to derail my dreams and put me down every chance they could.

I used my anger and the power of believing in myself to find success and a better life. Many people kept telling me that I had a God-given-talent when it came to football and running track. It felt as God had both blessed me and cursed me at the same time. When I would play the game of my life, the media, fans, coaches, and college recruiters, all patted me on the back and said, "Great Job, Eric!" When I got back to my car the tears would fall from my face. Everyone who I loved and cared about did not even bother to come to my games. I spent many years feeling suicidal and worthless.

I came to the University of Oklahoma in 1999 as a member of Coach Bob Stoops first recruiting class. I was in awe of the rich history and tradition of the football program. I had a feeling that if I came to the University of Oklahoma we were going to do something great. Sure enough, we won the Big 12 Championship and the National Championship in 2000. I started out playing linebacker and was moved to defensive end. I was a backup but got a lot of playing time. During the OU-Texas game in 2000 at the Cotton Bowl, I was playing against an offensive lineman by the name of Leonard Davis. He was 6'10" and 378 lbs. Late in the third quarter was blindsided by Davis and felt a pop in my head. The medical staff thought I only had a concussion, but I felt something else was wrong. I started getting headaches, noisiness, dizziness, and spotty vision. As the season progressed, I had problems just making it through practice.

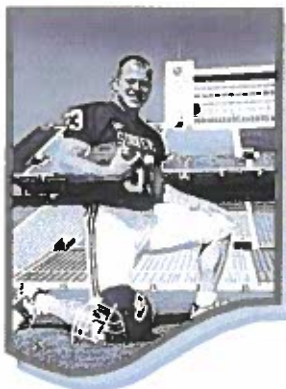
When the season ended, the doctors took an MRI of my head and found a hole in my ear canal. The doctors told me my football career was over. Now that my football career was over, I no longer had football to distract me from my past. I started to sink down the rabbit hole, into my depression and used drugs to ease the pain. Despite all the success in the world, I really didn't have a family to share it with. I had many friends that tried to fill that role, but I was still hung up over the past and pushed everyone away. I was throwing away a promised future and started making one bad choice after another. By some miracle, I still managed to graduate from college. I became a functioning addict and published an autobiography called "Silent Thunder" and traveled as a professional speaker to support my drug habit. I was inspiring other people, but I could not inspire myself.

As I started going down the wrong path, I started thinking and doing illegal things. I would be deeply ashamed and felt guilt for thinking and doing these things. Many times, I considered suicide because I never really wanted to hurt anyone. I was arrested with three counts of lewd conduct with a minor and one count of possession

of child pornography. To make matters worse, it was my best friend's underage daughter. I was so racked with guilt and remorse for my behavior, that I thought I should do the world a favor and end my life. I took responsibility for my actions and confessed to my sins. I was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 20 years of probation. I thought my life was over. I fell from the top to the bottom.

I never really had much of a relationship with my biological father who never saw me play sports and was an alcoholic. He was in and out of prison all my childhood. When I was arrested, he reached out to me while he was in prison and said he still loved me. We were both locked up at the same time. For five years, we wrote to each other and mended fences. He died from cancer in 2015. Before he died, he told me on the phone that he was ready to meet his maker and was at peace. He made me promise to give God a chance. After he passed, I was using drugs in prison. One day I was tired of being a slave to my addiction and started thinking about what my father told me before he passed. I asked myself who I wanted to be when I walked out of that gate. I knew if I didn't change I might as well turn around and go back through the gates. I began to think some more and realized that all my life I was trying to do everything on my own. At this moment, I also realized that I can't do everything on my own. Two years ago, I gave myself to Jesus Christ. It felt as if the weight of the world lifted off my shoulders. I no longer felt depressed and stopped my medication. I forgave everyone who hurt me when I was younger, freeing me from my anger. I was finally able to break free from addiction. My head injury started to feel better to the point that I started working out again.

God turned my life around for the better. Despite the challenges of being labeled as a sex offender, I am optimistic and hopeful for the future. Hand Up Ministries is a wonderful place to come to, and they have a great staff of Christian brothers. Today, I will walk the path that God wants me to walk. All things are possible through Christ. God Bless.



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— Eric Thunander

I was born in Las Vegas in December of 1992, and I am the youngest of four children. We moved to Oklahoma eight months after I was born. My parents didn't go to church. I went to a Baptist church with my grandmother, and this is how I was introduced to Christianity. As a child, I didn't take my faith too seriously, but a friend invited me to church when I was in high school. I really got into this church, and I was truly seeking the Lord. However, this church's legalism affected my relationship with God. I had bitterness toward my family, and this affected my relationship with members of the church. I began to withdraw and isolate myself, but I was still participating in church activities.

I wanted to surrender myself completely to the Lord, but I was still holding onto hurts and pains. I wasn't studying the Bible daily, nor was I praying like I should. I was just going through the motions, and I began making bad decisions. I felt condemnation and shame all of the time. All of this emotional turmoil and my struggle with lust led to me committing my crime.

I turned myself into the police, which is what my pastor recommended. I spent five days in the county jail, and then I bonded out of jail. I fought my case for a year and a half. I took a blind plea, and I received a sentence of five years in prison and fifteen years of probation. I started attending a Bible study in prison, and my whole view on Christianity transformed. I began to see my identity in Christ and know I am forgiven. My relationship with God found depth.

My case manager told me about Hand Up Ministries, and I came to Hand Up immediately after I left prison. I am grateful for a place to live, and I am grateful for the strong, lifelong friendships I have made here. I appreciate the church services and the fellowship with the men here. I have grown in God at Hand Up. The church services and the godly leadership have helped me in my relationship with God. I have had the same job for two years, and I was able to save money for a car. I participate in the worship team at Hand Up, and I have twice gone to Arkansas to perform praise music and testify at the church pastored by David Nichols' brother.



There are many challenges ahead, but I know with accountability and faith I will be alright.

— Joseph Dodge

I was raised in a Christian home. We went to church every Sunday and every Wednesday. I liked going to church until I started losing my hearing. My parents sent me to the Oklahoma School for the Deaf in Sulphur, Oklahoma. My twin brother, who was totally deaf, was already there. He was glad I came there. My brother and I had always gone to church together, and I only saw him in the summers during his first two years at the school in Sulphur.

When I arrived at the school, I didn't know which church I should attend. I tried different churches during my first year, and I finally picked a church I liked. That church also had a congregation in Oklahoma City, plus they had a summer camp. I stayed with that church till I graduated.

I got married after I graduated. I helped at my church, and I started helping with the offering. Later, I became the church treasurer and did the bookkeeping. I also mowed the lawn and built cabinets and countertops. I went astray because I associated with people who didn't go to church, and I committed a crime and went to prison.

My counselor told me about Hand Up Ministries. I applied to Hand Up, and I was accepted. I want to walk the straight and narrow path and not have any more victims. Hand Up has given me a place to live and an opportunity to serve the Lord. God watched over me when I was in prison. I could have died when I lost a lot of blood. This happened again after I came to Hand Up. I have been in and out of the hospital during my time at Hand Up, and God has answered my prayers. I attend a church for the deaf, and I also attend church at Hand Up. I will serve the Lord till the day I die.

— Doug Carnes



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