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Our Community Place Goes Back To The Basics Center Reopens, Focus On Original Mission

JEREMY HUNT, Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG - Ron Copeland doesn't see Our Community Place's reincarnation as a change so much as a refocusing on its original mission.

The founder and former executive director of the organization said the community center's staff and volunteers became overworked by one aspect of OCP's mission - serving as a day homeless shelter - leading to the decision by the group's board of directors to temporarily close up shop on Sept. 1.

"We didn't just want to be a place for homeless people to be able to have a day shelter or whatever and serve people food. That's not all we did," he said. "[It's] just that was so overwhelming, it was hard to develop programming aligned with our vision, which is to bring people of different walks of life together."

Our Community Place, which opened in August 2008, reopens today at 17 E. Johnson St. after taking its five-week hiatus. The organization hosted a reopening celebration on Saturday.

At Saturday's event, which included a meal in true OCP form, officials discussed how the organization would move forward.

The nonprofit runs the Johnson Street community center of the same name, but it has other programs, including a New Market-area farm that aims to help alcoholics and people with other addictions.

Hours Reduced

Two notable deviations from previous operations are a reduction in community center hours and a change in guard in which Copeland will only serve as pastor and president of the board of directors, relinquishing his responsibilities as OCP's executive director and director of the community center on Johnson and Main streets.

"I had three full-time jobs, and I gave up two of them. And that's pretty cool," Copeland said. "I'm very excited to begin focusing on the work of the church ... I'm a pastor of."

Copeland, 43, leads Early Church, a Mennonite congregation that meets at OCP.

Philip Fisher Rhodes took over as executive director on Sept. 1.

The 28-year-old central Valley native first got involved with Our Community Place about three and a half years ago.

"I loved what OCP was doing," he said. "It was pretty much always an eclectic group [of people]."

Fisher Rhodes and his wife, Betsy, lived and worked in Israel for about a year until July, when he got a call asking him to head up OCP. Serendipitously, Fisher Rhodes was looking for a new job because he and his wife were moving back to the United States.

"As soon as [Copeland] told me, I was like, 'no way,'" he said.

Fisher Rhodes said he will focus on his staff of about 10 and make sure they're "healthy," rather than overworked and stretched thin as they had been.

That previous straining of staff members led to the decision to cut back on hours, officials say.

OCP will no longer serve three meals a day, 365 days a year, as it had been.

The community center will be open Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m. Lunch will be provided Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and dinner will be offered on

Thursdays.

Hours may be expanded in the future, Copeland said, but for now, the organization will focus on doing fewer things better.

"The dominant vibe was just a place for people to hang out and eat. The numbers just maybe got away from us. It was just too much to set out to do," he said. "We want to grow healthy ... We want to be inviting and safe and fun and cool."

Contact Jeremy Hunt at 574-6273 or jhunt@dnronline.com

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