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Helping homeless, one ride at a time



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Kar Woo's service, Artists Helping the Homeless, grew from the days when he invited inhabitants of Mill Creek Park into his Plaza art gallery.

Besides transportation, Kar Woo offers support and a link to services that can get people off the street.

By EDWARD M. EVELD
The Kansas City Star

She was thin and blond, and the van driver, Kar Woo, locked in on her multicolored socks and stylish sandals. "Cool socks."

About an hour before midnight, she'd emerged from a dark pocket near 75th and Monrovia streets in Lenexa. She climbed in with an overnight bag and confirmed she had a reservation at City Union Mission's family shelter.

Woo got her basic information, but little else. She wasn't a talker, and he didn't push. She needed a ride, and he was there. That was the first and main

thing. That was a start.

The Dodge pulled onto 75th Street. Next stop, Prospect Avenue deep in the city, safety.

Every night, Woo pilots his van, with its eye-catching wrap, to hospitals, shelters, treatment centers and group homes across the metro, giving rides to people – hundreds of people – most of us never see. Or don't notice.

A free taxi for the homeless? No. More like a nightly voyage into homeless intervention.

Remarkably, it's working. St. Luke's

Hospital credited Woo's work – he has two minivans now, with the second mostly for daytime – with cutting the number of homeless in its emergency room by 85 percent. The ER is where many homeless seek food and shelter even when they don't need medical care.

University researchers plan to shadow Woo this summer to find out how he's doing what he's doing, to assess his nonprofit as a model for homeless intervention elsewhere. The title of their research project is "Dynamic Case Management and Grassroots Service Coordination."

Woo, former owner of an art gallery and interior design store, calls it Artists Helping the Homeless. In big let-

HOMELESS: Artist expands services to community through emergency shelter

ters on the side of his colorful vans are the words "Be the change."

Next, after he escorted the woman into the shelter that Thursday night in late April, there was a 20-year-old Job Corps graduate who needed to catch a 1:15 a.m. bus out of town. A cement masonry job awaited him in Sioux City, Iowa.

The rider looked uneasy as Woo said goodbye to him. Woo handed over a business card: "You can call me if you need anything."

Also that night, a pick-up at Liberty Hospital. Woo had found an opening for the guy at an inpatient drug and alcohol treatment center.

Before that, a youth with no place to go once Synergy Services' youth center on Parvin Road closed for the night at 7 p.m. He'd gotten Woo's "hotline" number from the staff.

Woo carries an iPad to log calls and enter client histories, plus three cell-phones. One is the hotline, another is his non-emergency business phone, and the third is his personal cell.

"That one never rings," Woo joked, pointing to the third phone.

The other two ring constantly.

Woo sat down with the 19-year-old inside the youth center. Dressed in sweat pants and a bright yellow T-shirt, the client was well-spoken. But he had no phone, no ID, no Social Security card and no family members who would retrieve him. At 7:01, he would be on the street.

He mentioned conflicts with step-parents, getting kicked out several times. He'd earned his GED diploma, but growing up he had attended 18 schools. His work life was sketchy.

"I need to get a job first of all and save some money," he told Woo.

"You have no place you can stay tonight?" Woo asked. Maybe on a friend's couch?

"No, nobody," came the answer. "That's why I've been out on the highway. My family won't come for me. This is the end of the road."

Woo made call after call. No one seemed to have an empty bed that night. But there was still one place.



Woo remembered when he, too, didn't notice these people.

His business, J.M. Porters, had been in Overland Park and Leawood for more than two decades. About six years ago, he moved the high-end gallery and design store to the Country Club Plaza, across from Mill Creek Park.

Woo walked his Dalmatian, Kato, in the park, where tourists are drawn to the J.C. Nichols Fountain and homeless people to park benches. Woo has shoulder-length hair, black with a tinge of silver, but he is slight. He cuts a non-threatening figure.

Park inhabitants were drawn to him and to his Dalmatian. Seeing a need, Woo invited them to his store for respite from the weather or for something to eat. He handed out blankets.

"In hindsight, I realized I had turned the store into a drop-in center, 10 to 6 every day," Woo said.

Soon he had teamed up with a group of Mid-America Nazarene University students to serve Sunday meals in the park.

Staff members at nearby St. Luke's heard about this "Mr. Woo" from the homeless. Liz Cessor, a St. Luke's vice president, introduced herself one Sunday in the park. She told him he might be able to help the homeless even more. He wanted to know how.

Discussions with service providers led to an answer: transportation. Without rides, the homeless lost opportunities for openings at shelters, rehab centers and health clinics. They couldn't get to government offices and missed court dates. The holes many had dug for themselves got deeper and deeper.

Woo started the van service while continuing to operate his store, but he realized he couldn't do both well. He isn't married and has no children, so the person he most needed to consult was his accountant, who told him it was feasible for him to focus on the nonprofit and close the store.

"You have the opportunity to do another thing you love," his accountant

told him.

St. Luke's secured a large grant from the Bank of America Homer McWilliams Memorial Hospital Trust, which turned the green light even greener. Almost three years into it, Woo's work with the homeless has broadened.

"The No. 1 need was transportation, but I quickly learned that just getting them to a safe place was not enough," he said.

Woo marshaled resources available to the poor and then identified gaps to fill. Many times the lack of a birth certificate or Social Security card, for instance, stymied them, he said. He partnered with hospitals and clinics and their case managers. He hired a former client, Jay Parrott, to drive the day van.

The 2012 budget for Artists Helping the Homeless is \$310,250. The funds come from corporate, religious and individual donors, grants from St. Luke's Foundation and the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City and art events.

As of March, Woo and Parrott have logged 11,309 trips and worked with 1,789 people. (The vans together cover 6,600 miles a month.) They have helped 1,419 find shelter and enrolled 245 in detox and rehabilitation services. The estimated savings to the community: \$2.8 million in ambulance, hospital, police and judicial costs.

Woo encounters a few riders only once, and some repeatedly. Many he follows up on for months. There are successes and plenty of frustrations.

One too-often client in his early 50s counts as a frustration. Between rides one night, Woo visited him at a Salvation Army detox center, where Woo had placed him the night before. The fellow repeatedly leaves the centers to get drunk again.

"You've burned almost all your bridges," said Woo, who's helped him several times. "No one wants to take you in."

"You're right, Mr. Woo," the client admitted. "I'm going to try."

Then there's a brighter prospect, a guy in his 40s who's been in a group

home after rehab. Woo stopped by one night to firm up details for his move to his father's house in another state.

"He's been sober now for seven months," Woo said. "That's really amazing. I think he's ready."

Woo's latest project is Kato House. It's named for his dog, who died in 2009.

Often Woo has needed an emergency bed, particularly at night, but had no options. Last year he received funding to buy a midtown building. He plans to turn it into a 30-bed emergency shelter when he can secure more funds. Until then, he has space for up to 10.



Woo's desire to do more does not surprise Cessor at St. Luke's.

"This started as a way to help out in the area around St. Luke's, and now Kar is everywhere, and everyone calls him for help," she said.

"United Way calls him. The police call him. QuikTrips call him. Kar finds out what's making the person homeless and concentrates on fixing that thing."

Jason Wasserman, assistant professor of bioethics at Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences, will lead the research examination of Artists Helping the Homeless this summer. Woo's presence as an "on-the-street case manager" seems to be

both effective and efficient, Wasserman said.

"He's the connective tissue that puts people where they need to be in these massive systems," he said.

An immigrant from Hong Kong, Woo has certainly found a niche. He came to the United States in the early 1970s for college. His immigrant experience, he said, was a window into the lives of the homeless. He knows what it's like to feel outside the system, sometimes struggling for resources.

"I was a typical first-generation immigrant," Woo said. "I came here at 19 with 50 bucks. I was scared. I knew from that time on I was on my own."

Woo graduated a semester early from a two-year college program in Iowa. He washed dishes, flipped burgers and worked in an RV factory to pay his way. He didn't have much money to travel, but he visited the coasts and decided the Midwest suited him.

"I felt that the people here are more forgiving," he said. "They're more willing to pick you up, to give you a second chance."

Woo had moved on to retail jobs, one of which transferred him to a new store in Kansas City. He got his first driver's license on the morning he drove here. Woo worked in Overland Park while attending the University of Kansas, eventually earning degrees in psychology and counseling. One night

there was a fire at his apartment complex. He had no insurance.

"I became homeless overnight, and everything I had was gone," he said.

The Salvation Army helped him. The shopping center where he worked, Metcalf South, collected change from the mall fountain and presented him a check for \$300.

That was a couple of lifetimes ago for Woo, but not that different from the experiences of the people he met that Thursday night in April.

As it turned out, the woman with the cool socks, spent just that evening at the shelter. Woo took her back to Lenexa the next day. He didn't learn much about her situation. He might hear from her again.

The Job Corps grad hasn't called from Iowa, and that's a good sign, Woo said.

The client from Liberty Hospital stayed at Kato House one night, and the next morning he was driven to a rehab center, where he'll stay for 30 days of treatment.

Woo took the 19-year-old from the Synergy center to Kato House that night. The next day Parrott drove him to get a state ID and a Social Security card. The young man has been a good fit with the other house members, Woo said. He hopes to help him find a job and perhaps get him enrolled in college courses.

Woo has high hopes that everyone will find the thing they're good at:

"I tell the kids at the house, 'Do what you love because that will last.'"

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