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TOP STORY

EDITOR'S PICK

Lovely Village housing to build on Jesus Said Love's 20-year legacy

Kourtney David

Jun 3, 2023



Jesus Said Love Founder Emily Mills and CEO Brett Mills stand in front of apartments that will form part of Love sexual exploitation, trafficking and trauma.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

Kourtney David

Emily and Brett Mills turned heads 20 years ago when they started their ministry with the slogan “Jesus Loves Strippers” pasted on the front of their T-shirts. The power couple have delivered on their mission of ministering to sex workers in the last two decades, beginning with outreach, moving to enterprise and now embarking on a new venture.

Lovely Village, a \$7.7 million project in progress, is the culmination of Jesus Said Love’s work in the community, meant to further the ministry’s mission of spreading faith to people the church left behind.

“It truly is a village concept,” CEO Brett Mills said. “It is healing in the context of community. It’s continuing on 20 years of the work that we’ve done here today.”



Lovely Village, a \$7.7 million project, is Jesus Said Love’s first housing installment, offering two years of rent-free housing in Waco to victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation and trauma.

Lovely Village is Jesus Said Love’s first housing installment, offering two years of rent-free housing to victims of trafficking, sexual exploitation and trauma, and their children, looking to get back on their feet. The community will consist of a four-unit

apartment complex for women with children — a place where “moms could really mom together,” Founder Emily Mills said — as well as six neighboring units and group living arrangements nearby.

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The village is expected to house 22 women for two years at a time, keep families together, create jobs for survivors and save taxpayer money by keeping women out of jails.

“All your needs are met, and you also get a livable wage on top of that,” she said. “So that creates this two-year, really an on-ramp into building that nest egg.”

The existing apartments to be renovated and the lot space for fresh construction were a gift from Magnolia. Mills said her ministry has been looking for years to add a residential component to its work, and the plot in close proximity to Jesus Said Love’s headquarters creates a walkable path for survivors.

The nonprofit’s work began as an outreach mission, going to strip clubs to hear the wants and needs of women in the industry and developing a strategy to help survivors of sexual exploitation, Mills said.

“When I started outreaches, I absolutely had unchecked bias and unconscious bias, no doubt,” Emily Mills said. “What I learned in getting there is that most of the women that we serve are impoverished women, that the sex industry specifically is a

result of targeting and preying upon women who are lacking in agency and monetary resources. ... Upwards of 90%, if not all, were sexually abused as children.”
“What we’ve learned in 20 years is it’s chosen them, it truly has,” Brett Mills said.
“We’ve had folks who are fourth-generation sex workers.”

After interviewing women in the industry it became clear they wanted jobs. The ministry found its headquarters at Columbus Avenue and 15th Street and began helping women find employment.

Through the ministry’s Lovely Enterprises women were given jobs producing products and working retail in-house, or building out their own businesses using microloans or equity investments from Jesus Said Love.



Waffle Chic owner Shamica Evans poses in her food truck with employees Funmi Adubi, left, and Jaylin Elliott, center.

Kourtney David, Tribune-Herald

One success story coming from the nonprofit is Shamica Evans, former lead baker of Lovely Enterprises' first product, Lovely Buns, and owner of the Waffle Chic food truck.

Evans began as a volunteer with Jesus Said Love in 2016, working with the enterprise and doing some outreach. She said after losing a job due to circumstances that come with being a single mother, Emily Mills was the first person she told about her personal involvement with human trafficking and stripping, and that the outreach work was triggering feelings from her past.

Mills helped her get back on track, and Evans went through Jesus Said Love's programs to first process her trauma and then start her own business out of Lovely Enterprises. Evans said she thought people would always view her as a victim rather than a business owner, but thanks to support from many Waco organizations, area chambers of commerce and Jesus Said Love, she rose from her struggle.

"God's grace, Jesus' love, made it possible for me to transition and become what God ordained for me to be," Evans said. "It takes so many giants to build another giant."

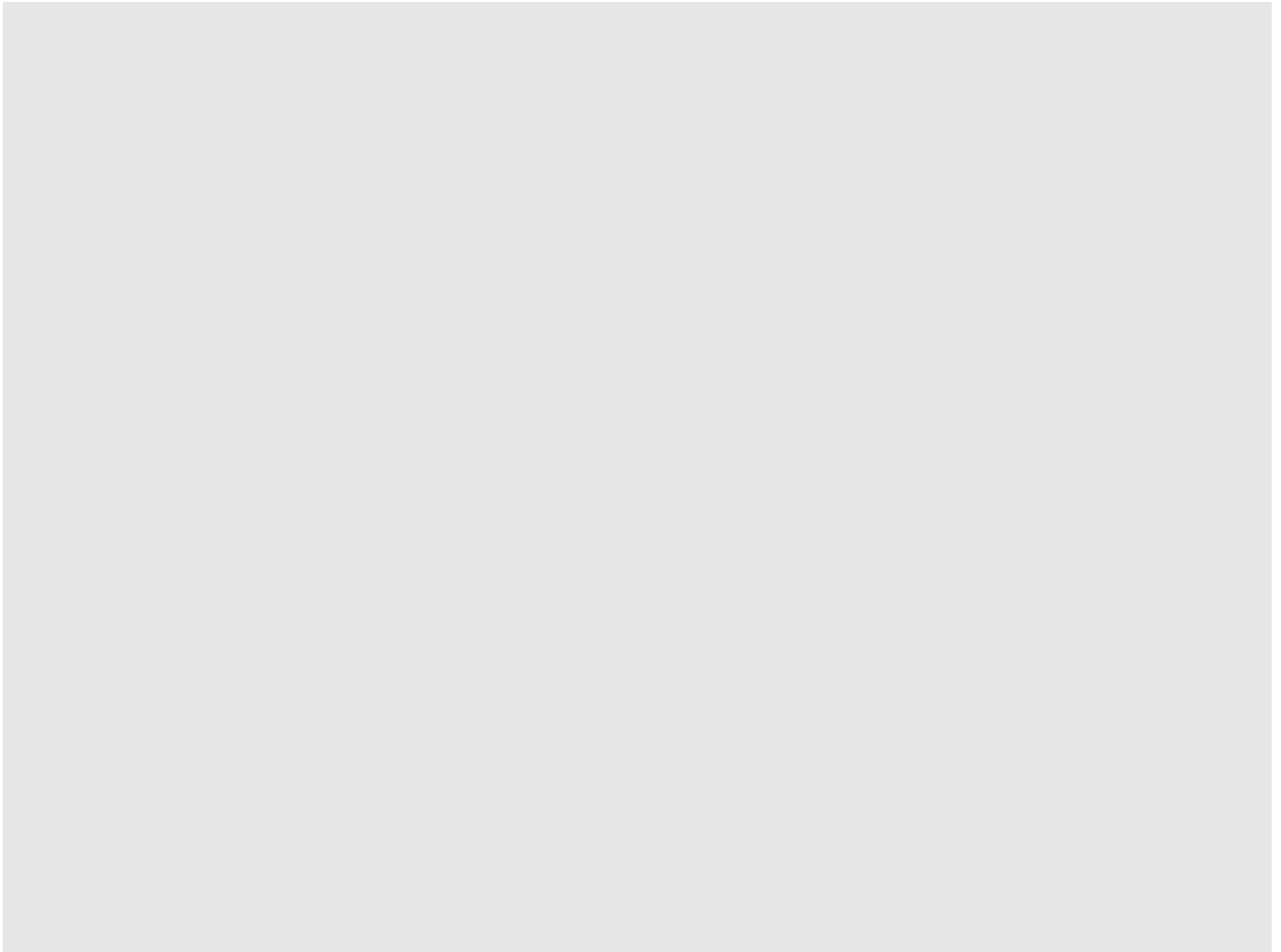
With outreach and retail under the organization's belt, Mills said housing was a gap in coverage for some women.

When researching program models that do housing and reentry well, Mills said she and Brett found that many programs were not sustainable or formatted in a way that empowered the women.

"A lot of the old-school safe house model is like move women out into the country, take away their phone, take away cigarettes, take away drinking and let them sit and contemplate on their purpose in life, and that is isolation," she said. "And that's exactly what traffickers do."

For women who are groomed to have their power taken away, it is uncomfortable to be given a choice, but that freedom and humanizing experience could be the factor that produces long-lasting independence, she said.

The team eventually found Thistle Farms, a Nashville social enterprise founded by Becca Stevens, and learned through a two-year interviewing process that working in a dignified way, making livable wages, having accountability and being seen in a community are all important aspects of recovery, Mills said.



Jesus Said Love Founder Emily Mills and CEO Brett Mills stand in front of apartments that will form part of Lovely Village, a housing development for victims of sexual exploitation, trafficking and trauma.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

Lovely Village will mirror the Thistle Farms model in many ways, adding a live-in rehabilitation component to Jesus Said Love's current job-centered model. Women staying at the village will have the opportunity to work for Lovely Enterprises, creating candles, body oils and more in the shop, or to start their own business.

The program will differ from others in housing children with their mothers, as preventing their separation is a main priority, Mills said.

“What we know to be true is that 90% of the women that we reach are mothers,” Mills said. “Of that 90%, over half have encountered cases with Child Protective Services, and so we are trying to prevent that rupture because mom does better in her recovery when she has her kids cared for in her custody.”

The nonprofit is in the process of raising funds through its Love Your Neighbor Capital Campaign that will fund the project for three years. The \$7.7 million funding goal will cover renovations and building, personnel, facilities and any other costs that may come with the new housing program through 2025.

“It is expensive to rehabilitate women who are coming out of poverty, but it’s less expensive the way that we do it, in contradiction to the prison system,” Mills said. “We can do it cheaper and we can do it more effectively.”

According to Jesus Said Love’s online comparison, a woman’s stay in a state prison costs about \$62.34 per day with an average stay of 4.2 years. The average stay drops to 5.4 months for jails, still costing \$52.46 per day at a state jail, and \$33.83 per day at a private jail. At Lovely Village, a woman can stay for 2 years at \$25.56 per day, with no cost to taxpayers.

Brett Mills said when he first looked into Thistle Farms’ \$9 million budget it seemed like a lot of money for the 26 women the program can house at once. However, after looking at prison and child protective systems, how their costs can spiral and how they do not produce positive outcomes, the rehabilitation program seems like the better option, he said.

“After five years graduating that program 78% of them are still in sustainable success,” he said. “They’ve gained the rights to their children back. They have stable housing. They have a living wage job. They’ve maintained sobriety. ... So this kind of work is expensive ... but when you look on the back end of that, it’s like if we’ve been able to help rehabilitate 26 women and it cost us \$9 million, I think they’re worth it.”

The organization has started gutting the old apartments and hopes to start construction this month with the help of Whyte Oak Homes, Emily Mills said. They have also applied for HOME-American Rescue Plan Program funding from the city and are engaged in private conversations with donors, she said.

Unbound Now CEO Susan Peters, a partner in the Waco anti-trafficking circle, said Brett and Emily are experts in their field, and the housing will give residents a fair chance at a healthy life.

“Housing for survivors is a huge need,” Peters said in an email. “Lovely Village is a wonderful and much needed resource in our community. It is especially valuable that people like the Mills who are trauma informed are doing it.”

Evans said the development will be a valuable tool for women looking to get back into the workforce and continue their education. It will be a safe place, especially for single moms, to recover from abuse, alcoholism or whatever else ails them, she said.

Updated: The original version of this story has been corrected to indicate Magnolia was the only donor of real estate for the project.

By Kourtney David
