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living

The Harrelson Center

*Unlocking Hope,
Changing Lives*



**Vicki and
Ken Dull**



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The Harrelson Center

*Unlocking
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**Vicki and
Ken Dull**

BY TERRY LANE AND GEORGE CLARKE, PHOTOS BY MARK STEELMAN PHOTOGRAPHY, JULIE REHDER, AND COURTESY OF VICKI DULL

Lots of lives have been changed in the downtown building that was once a jail. Many who walk through the doors of the Harrelson Center are desperate for help. And true to form, they often find it there.

But it's not just the desperate and downtrodden who have had their lives bettered at the Harrelson Center. Even the life of former Executive Director Vicki Dull has been impacted by what's happened at the Harrelson Center.

"It changed my life. For me, it opened my eyes to see that one person can make a difference," Vicki said. "And it's not just about money, it's about being there. People come in from everywhere and sometimes just need to visit and talk with someone."

Under the previous leadership of Vicki Dull, a Wrightsville Beach resident, the Harrelson Center's budget and membership has nearly tripled since opening. That means more charities in Wilmington are able to operate. That means more people in Wilmington have a place to be helped. And that's one reason that the center's latest project - a major expansion of their downtown Fourth Street location -- will be named the Vicki Dull Annex.

At this annex, which is currently under construction, more of what was once a jail is being converted into office space to be used by the Harrelson Center. "It will open up even more opportunities to help people," Vicki said.



The Center's "Help Hub" provides a one-stop location for people with a variety of needs.

"Usually people come here for a short-term need, like paying an electric bill. But once they are here, they can walk from door to door, without having to go to separate locations, to find the help they need," she said.

What was once a place of imprisonment is now becoming a place of freedom, as the facility's purpose has been flipped on its side, turning cell doors into ladders that help the needy climb out of despair. It's the central mission of the Harrelson Center, an organization that provides key support to many of the vital charities serving New Hanover County.

"It's a place of incarceration that's now a place of transformation," New Hanover County District Attorney Ben David said of the Harrelson Center.

Helping Those Who Help

The main function of the Harrelson Center is not to provide services directly to those in need, but instead, to provide key administrative support for the nonprofits that provide humanitarian aid to individuals and groups in the region. For the 18 "member" nonprofits that are located at the center's campus at 20 N. Fourth Street in Wilmington, the support includes providing rent at a reduced rate, as well as key administrative support.

The Harrelson Center's support is strictly for nonprofits that provide humanitarian aid, as opposed to supporting arts or other endeavors. These nonprofits focus on people's basic needs, including housing, employment, workforce development, education, entrepreneurship, addiction and recovery, disaster recovery, food stability and family provisions.



One recent example of how the Harrelson Center assists its member organizations is through the administration of the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program, which was instituted at the outset of the coronavirus lockdown. To help its members apply for the program, which helped small businesses meet their payroll obligations, the Harrelson Center staff acquired the knowledge, then helped the staff of its nonprofits go through the process to receive whatever funds are available.

But with so many organizations under one roof, the Harrelson Center has become a place where people come who need help. And its central Wilmington location makes it easy to reach for many who are in need.

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'Hope Abounds'

In October, one of the programs that Vicki Dull ushered in will turn five-years-old. Located on the center's downtown campus, the Help Hub allows needy individuals to get the most from the services available to them, establishing a one-stop location that assists people to find help with a variety of problems. The "hub" has the support of 19 area churches and several other local nonprofits.

Over the course of the past five years, nearly 9,000 people have walked through the doors of the Help Hub, seeking a solution for their crisis. There, they've been able to find assistance with housing, utilities, food and disaster assistance. The hub can find help for a variety of problems, including domestic violence support, employment, legal services and medical services.

In fact, the hub's recent growth has included the addition of a nurse, who is available to help the uninsured, underinsured and low-income clients with health resources and medical referrals through telehealth appointments.

Addressing health concerns is often a key to helping people who are in a desperate position from sliding even further, said the Harrelson Center's current executive director, Meade Van Pelt.

People have basic needs. "We saw a lot of sick people, people who were living in poverty, and that kind of stress can bring on a lot of other health issues," she said. "We like to say that this is a place where needs are met, dreams are fostered and hope abounds, and if those can be met, we can relieve some anxiety and suffering. Then we can start to rethink what their dreams are, and we can work on those getting met with some real programming."

The New Town Square

The transformation from a jail to a humanitarian aid center symbolizes the growth of this organization, which started out as a project of Wilmington's First Baptist Church, when Pastor Jim Everett realized that nonprofits couldn't afford to pay rent downtown, near the people they most needed to serve.

"It's a place of second chances," said Tom Barber, a Landfall resident and incoming chairman of the Harrelson Center's board of directors. "They come out of the jail system and we help them."

The center's location isn't just central to Wilmington, it's also central to its mission. It's literally between justice and faith, flanked



Ken and Vicki inspect a remnant of the old city jail.



The Center is flanked by the courthouse and a church.

on one side by the county courthouse, and on the other, the First Baptist Church, which founded the center.

District Attorney Ben David, another key advocate of the center, has termed it "the new town square."

"The Pilgrims, long before they built their own houses, built a church and a court in the town square," David said. "Traditionally, there are two sides to the town square. The church on one side; and a courthouse on the other. Today in Wilmington, it's the courts and The Harrelson Center."

Ben David first got involved with The Harrelson Center in 2004, which is just around the time the old city jail on Fourth Street was being moved to Blue Clay Road.



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He joined the faith-based effort, supported by First Baptist Church, and others in the community, including David's congregation at First Presbyterian, "to take our faith outside the walls of the church and put it into action."

They wanted to end the cycle of poverty, addiction, and violence that was typical of many of the defendants in his courtroom, many of whom were caught up in this cycle of poverty and despair and became repeat offenders.

David said the Harrelson Center's model of being a one-stop-shop and the success it's had, has others visiting. He mentioned that the Mayor of Atlanta recently visited the Harrelson Center and after touring it, remarked: "We need to make our jail into something like this."

David explains that, "Where once it was a place of conflict, now there is collaboration. Where once it was a place of despair, now there is hope."

Which One Will You Feed?

Wrightsville Beach resident, Claude Arnold, served on a team with three other members of First Baptist Church to pursue the acquisition of the county's Law Enforcement Center. Following the successful acquisition of the former jail and conversion to the Harrelson Center, Claude served on the first board of directors and until 2015. He then became one of the first members inducted into the Harrelson Center Honorary Board and currently serves on the advisory committee overseeing construction of the new annex.

Vicki calls Claude "one of the original dream team for the Harrelson Center, who came up with their slogan.

Arnold recalls "as clear as day" a phrase that came to him while praying: "a place where needs are met, dreams are fostered, and hope abounds. That's the tag line for the JoAnn Carter Harrelson Center and you need only look at the amazing collaborative work of the partners housed in the center to realize it is such a place," he said.

"Vicki was literally a Godsend. Through her faith, vision, influence and with the support of her husband Ken (and others) she was able to steer and advance the mission of the center to an entirely new level. And I will add that she could not have identified a better successor than Meade Van Pelt!"

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Meade Van Pelt and Tom Barber at "A Day in the Country" fundraiser.

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During an interview with *Intracoastal Living's* publisher, he shared a simple but poignant Native American story about a battle between two wolves.

An old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people and explained, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealous, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

As Arnold wrote, "the grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

"The Harrelson Center does this in spades, and I can think of no better way of contributing to the community than supporting and being involved with this organization," said Arnold.

Thankful Hearts, Compelling Stories

The Harrelson Center nearly tripled both the budget and the number of member nonprofits under the leadership of Vicki Dull from 2010-2016.

Vicki continues to help organize the annual Thankful Hearts luncheon, where people who have been helped by the Harrelson Center come to share their stories. It raises approximately \$150,000 each year.

Always held on the Thursday before Thanksgiving, loyal attendees kick off their holiday season with equal parts gratitude, compassion and revel in the community's good will.

"We have two or three people tell their story and how they've been helped by the Harrelson Center. Typically, it's people who've been helped through more than one organization," Vicki Dull said.

This year's event will share compelling stories from 2020 that led The Harrelson Center and its non-profit partners to help each other as they help their neighbors. Monies raised at this annual event help keep partner rents affordable and services efficient, ensuring operational stability and mission focus. Readers of *Intracoastal Living* may want to mark their calendars for Thursday, November 19th at noon to begin their holidays with a thankful heart. RSVP to Lindsay Prickett at 910-343-8212 or go online to: unlockhope@harrelsoncenter.org.

While Vicki has been leader at the center, she's also had the continued support of her husband Ken Dull, a Wrightsville Beach alderman and founder and owner of the McKinley Building Corporation.

"I'm as big an advocate as you can find of the Harrelson Center. I'm always trying to talk about it," Ken said.


As his McKinley Corporation has taken on the project of converting the jail into office space, helping grow the infrastructure of the organization was one of the ways he has tried to help.

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Image: Nicolette Johnson, *Introspection [Detail]*, 2019

Ken began the "A Day in the Country" fundraiser to support the center seven years ago. Many of the participating donors come from the building and construction trade businesses. This year's Day in the Country, held on September 24th at the 850-acre estate of Bobby Harrelson in Atkinson, NC included dozens of sponsoring companies..

These annual fundraisers have helped non-profits such as Habitat for Humanity. The donor companies recently launched a new initiative, called "Care Fair" and made a commitment to repair 10 homes that still remained damaged from Hurricane Florence.

"My mission is her mission. We're a team," Ken said of his wife. "My talents are different from her talents. That's what makes us a good team."

Their work at the center has earned praise from community leaders, including Ben David.

"The Dulls are fabulous and the perfect couple called to serve the center. Ken as a builder. Vicki as a dynamic executive director," Ben David said.



Meade Van Pelt was hired in 2017 as the Center's new executive director.

'Vocational Clarity'

As the growth accelerated year over year, Vicki decided it was time to step aside and bring in new leadership.

The Board of Directors hired Meade Van Pelt to be the center's new executive director in 2017. For Van Pelt, a Wilmington native who had worked in the New York City area, the position was a transition from the "commercial world" to the nonprofits. She had experience in sales, marketing, leasing and real estate, but had never had an executive director position.

After moving back to Wilmington, where she has family, Meade earned her MBA at UNCW, which helped prepare her for the role. Before taking the executive director position, she had some experience with nonprofits through volunteer work, but her experience at the Harrelson Center has given her a much different perspective.

She called it her moment of "vocational clarity."

"It's a great sense of purpose. It is so purpose driven," she said. "There will always be frustrations when running an operation, but here, they don't bother me because I have a bigger vision of what can be."

"We've played a great part in the life of the Center and we know it's in good hands now," said Ken in praise of Meade. "It's a family," said Vicki of the center staff. "They are incredible."

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Ken, Vicki and Meade discuss Nov. 19th "Thankful Hearts" luncheon.

Learning from Florence and Covid

Meade enthusiastically praises the center and its members and calls it a great place to work. "Every day there's an uplifting story. People care about people, no matter what your circumstances are," says Meade, who's proud to note the Harrelson Center supports over 5,000 families.

In her tenure, Van Pelt has been at the helm for two transformative events, Hurricane Florence and the Covid-19 pandemic. Both events have created great need in the community, she said, which have in turn increased the need and relevance of the Harrelson Center.

After Hurricane Florence, the center saw an increased desire to seek solutions from the civic entities, which include governmental support, the business community and the faith-based community.



Ginny Peterson, Volunteer Coordinator with NHDC, briefs the Dulls.

To help tackle the recovery from Florence, and be ready for the next storm, the Harrelson Center helped form the New Hanover Disaster Coalition, which brings many of these entities together.

"While government programs can take more time to deliver aid, nonprofits can be nimbler and more flexible," Van Pelt said.

"No matter the size of the nonprofit, each has knowledge to offer," she said. Even the smallest nonprofits have wisdom to share developed from their grass roots experience. And they, in turn, can learn from the larger nonprofits.

She said that she's also learned that investment in the emergency assistance should be viewed as investment back into the local economy. "Some refer to it as charity, but really it's \$850,000 reinvested back into the community," she said.

Barber's Vision for the Future

Tom Barber first learned about the Harrelson Center when he got Involved with the outreach committee, he co-chaired at his church.

"We came across Help Hub. And we had donated to the Crisis Center. Knowing the Help Hub and Crisis Center, I thought it was a perfect place downtown to provide services and it was something I wanted to get involved in."

As incoming chair, Barber said his top project is to complete the fundraising and construction for the expansion to the Harrelson Center, a \$5 million-dollar construction project.



Landfall resident, Tom Barber.

"We've raised \$3.5 million. We have a million and a half to go," he said. "The project is on its way to be fully funded."

Barber said another goal was to put together a speakers' bureau that would assemble a group of people to speak at community events, such as meetings of the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, and at corporate outings.

"It's doing a lot of effective things and I want to make sure it's being communicated effectively," said Barber. "The center has an entrepreneurial approach and is an incubator for nonprofits."



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'Know Their Story'

The Harrelson Center isn't just about helping get assistance to the needy in the most efficient way. It also serves as a sort-of matchmaker for people who are willing to donate their time or money to help the local community.

Some of the center's biggest successes come in rescuing people who are right on the edge. She said the center can provide crucial support at just the right moment, which often turns out to be the most economical way to help someone.

For instance, helping someone with rent assistance for a few months, and thus keeping them in a home, can produce better results than having to later try to help them if they become homeless.

One of Vicki's favorite success stories from the center is Robert Davis, who came to the center during a rough period in his life. He had recently lost his job and was raising four kids on his own. He went to what was then called the Phoenix Hometown Hires program -- now called Step Up Wilmington-- to find work. That's when Vicki noticed his efforts.

"I thought, you know, we have to practice what we preach, so we hired him," Vicki said.

The move has paid off many times over, as Robert, hired as a maintenance assistance and security guard, has become a go-to staffer, able to provide solutions to a variety of problems.

"I'm their problem solver. I'm always here to help," Robert said.

Solving problems is one thing that the Harrelson Center has been doing for more than 15 years. Just ask Ben David.

"At the Harrelson Center, they are not just giving a man a fish, they're not teaching that man to fish, they're a fisher of men," he said. "They are good Samaritans that have the answer. In the final chapter, love wins."

Family Life at the Beach

Ken and Vicki Dull have lived full-time at Wrightsville Beach now for over 10 years with their daughters, Madison Elizabeth and



Ken and Vicki Dull with their daughters, Catie and Madison.

Catherine (Catie) Leigh, two rescue dogs, Trixie and Bailey, and Catie's cat, "Little Guy." "We love our animals dearly," said Vicki.

"We live here for the quality of life it offers and love spending most of our time outdoors in or near the water. It's as close to heaven as you can be here on earth," she said.

According to Ken and Vicki: "Watching our girls grow up playing in the sand, boating and paddle boarding has been a joy. It has given them both a respect and love for the outdoors and all of God's amazing and beautiful work."

Ken serves on The Board of Alderman; Vicki is a member of The Harbor Island Garden Club and the Dulls support the Wrightsville Beach Foundation and Museum of History.

"We love spending time with their local friends any chance we get. We consider everyone that lives at Wrightsville Beach our neighbors," said Vicki, who added this note for their friends and neighbors: "Please support your local businesses during the upcoming holidays!" ~



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