

CATHOLIC FAITHFUL DEMAND CHANGE AFTER SCANDALS. 12A



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VOLUNTEERS BLOSSOM AFTER WEATHER DELAY. 1C

MOONLIGHT MILE RAISES MONEY FOR COMMUNITY. 1B



Altar'd State grows, focuses on more than bottom line

BY MELANIE TUCKER
melt@thedailytimes.com

Proffitt's and Goody's Family Clothing no longer exist, but for Altar'd State President and Chief Oper-

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TOM SHERLIN | THE DAILY TIMES

WORKERS FROM ALTAR'D STATE and Habitat for Humanity raise one of the walls of the new habitat home on Wright Road.

Building hope

Altar'd State gives back to community

BY MELANIE TUCKER
melt@thedailytimes.com

"This is everybody's home," an emotional Nyadeng Kuot told those present Friday afternoon as the keys to her Habitat for Humanity home were handed to her on the front porch in Alcoa.

Kuot, a refugee from Sudan, now will live in the Wright Road home with her young daughter once all work is completed. With tears in her eyes and a grateful heart, Kuot said she considers all those who worked on this home as

family, not just friends. "You are welcome anytime," she told them with a huge smile.

She acknowledged the sacrifices each Habitat volunteer made under the hot summer sun over the past several weeks.

"I hope all of you will be blessed like I have been," she said.

Brian Mason, cofounder and president of Altar'd State, presented the new homeowner with the keys. Altar'd State associates volunteered 1,000 hours to bring this project to completion. Altar'd

State also is providing a lawn mower and outdoor playground set to this family.

Kuot was presented with several other housewarming gifts from community members and organizations.

This represents the 158th Habitat home built in Blount County since the organization started here in 1992. The national organization dates back to the 1970s.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It's 90 degrees and no shade in sight on Day 2 (June 19) of this build, but for a group of volun-

teers, there's no reason to complain.

The volunteers on this project are the usual dedicated Habitat for Humanity volunteers who no matter the time, place or date, simply show up. They have been joined on this build by associates of Altar'd State, a retail clothing chain of boutique stores whose corporate office moved to Maryville in 2017.

The project got underway on June 18. Altar'd State's Kelsey Lawrence was on-site and ready

SEE GIVES, 3A

BY MELANIE TUCKER
melt@thedailytimes.com

Proffitt's and Goody's Family Clothing no longer exist, but for Altar'd State President and Chief Operating Officer Brian Mason, employment there was training ground for building his own successful retail business.

Mason and Aaron Walters cofounded Altar'd State in 2009, just seven months after Goody's filed for bankruptcy in Knoxville and closed its stores. Both men were working there at the time. Over the years they had talked about what it would look like to go into business together.

Losing their jobs helped move those ideas into action.

The sagging economy was against them. Goody's wasn't the only business that didn't make it out of that grave period, but Mason and Walters proceeded anyway.

"It was a tough time to open a business," Mason said. "For us, it was probably one of the best times

to start because we had to learn to be lean, we had to learn to make sure things were getting done. It forced us to have a better beginning and a better foundation."

AN IDEA TAKES SHAPE

Mason and Walters opened the first Altar'd State store in Turkey Creek in Knoxville. That was almost 10 years ago. Today, the company has 100 stores in 28 states. A second store in Knoxville is at West Town Mall. It's moving to a larger space in the mall soon.

The headquarters moved to Maryville back in March 2017 in the downtown building that previously served as the corporate offices for Ruby Tuesday.

Some noticeable changes have been made, including the landscaping. Altar'd State also has built a dog walking area for its associates, who are encouraged to bring their four-legged friends to work.

The headquarters office

SEE GROWS, 3A



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

AN ALTAR'D STATE STORE is seen in St. Louis. There are now 100 stores in 28 states, with the headquarters in Maryville.

GROWS: Altar'd State makes an effort to give back to communities

FROM 1A

has about 100 employees. Companywide, there are 1,500 associates.

Mason said what started out as a primarily Southeast focus had definitely expanded Northeast and the Midwest into New Jersey and Chicago. Stores have popped up in Denver, Albuquerque and Minneapolis, too.

"We are going to continue to grow and make our way to the West Coast," Mason said.

MORE THAN SHIRTS, DRESSES

The women's retail fashion stores sell what you would expect — dresses, tops, jumpsuits, jackets, shorts, shoes, belts, hats, handbags and scarves. Home decor items like candles, frames and artwork line the shelves as well.

But the business model isn't what you find just anywhere. Altar'd State has made a conscious effort to partner with its local communities to give back financially and also with its associates' own two hands.

Since back in June, close to 100 local associates have been working on a Habitat for Humanity home that was dedicated Friday. Mason said they are allowed to

great give-back partner," the company president said.

Which has some asking when this retail business will open a store here in Blount County now that its headquarters are here. Mason said no decision has been made at this point, but he said he would like to see something here.

A GLOBAL PRESENCE

In addition to the projects in cities where Altar'd State has a presence, the company has also partnered with an organization called Coprodeli, to help the poverty-stricken areas of Peru. Altar'd State cofounder Walters traveled there back in 2013. The building of a local high school had stalled.

Walters came back from that trip wanting to remedy that, so Altar'd State teamed up with Coprodeli, completing the project.

"We have been off to the races with that organization ever since," Mason said.

Now each Altar'd State store sponsors a child in Peru.

"We decided to become part of that community with a goal of giving these kids a first-class education," Mason said. "To give them the opportunity to get out of poverty to change their families forever."



NYADENG KUOT WITH HER daughter Adut holds up the keys to her new Habitat for Humanity home as Rev. Nathan Irwin looks on. TOM SHERLIN | THE DAILY TIMES

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Since back in June, close to 100 local associates have been working on a Habitat for Humanity home that was dedicated Friday. Mason said they are allowed to participate on the project during work hours.

This is the third Habitat home that Altar'd State has built from the ground up.

"It becomes not just a give-back opportunity but a fellowship opportunity," Mason said. "It's great to be out there with your team to raise a wall and hammer sheetrock and do whatever needs doing."

But even before Altar'd State opened its first store, Mason said the company came up with Mission Mondays. Every Monday in the calendar year, Altar'd State takes 10 percent of its gross profit and donates it to local communities.

That might be financial assistance for a cancer treatment center or helping the homeless.

In some cities where Altar'd State has stores, they have paired up with animal shelters or provided backpacks for school children.

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"We decided to become part of that community with a goal of giving these kids a first-class education," Mason said. "To give them the opportunity to get out of poverty to change their families forever."

He said he never had real intentions of staying in retail decades ago when he landed his first job. That was back when he was just a teenager.

Mason is from a small town in Alabama; Walters also has small-town roots in Texas.

"My story is I got started in retail as a summer job, literally for gas money," he said. "Aaron and I both started in stock rooms and unloading trucks. We broke down cardboard and did customer carryouts. We both worked for different companies."

When the two began looking for a place to relocate their corporate office, Blount County did have a leg up on the competition. Mason lived here back in the late 1990s as he worked for Proffitt's.

His daughter was born at Blount Memorial Hospital.

"I love Blount County," he said. "There are such great people. We hope to be good for downtown and help it grow."

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for work. She's been with the company for one year.

"This is my first time on a Habitat house," she said as early work began. "Yesterday, we helped put up these two walls. We are finishing up the outside frame. The cranes will be coming." Nearby were Lauren Childress and Jamie Clemens, also with Altar'd State. Childress is an assistant buyer while Clemens is a visual designer.

"This is our third Habitat house," Childress said. "We do one every year."

Altar'd State has completed houses in Knox and Loudon counties before taking on this Blount County project, they explained. A tent provided the only relief from the excessive heat, as workers like Angela Selvage took a quick break. She manages Altar'd State's website for e-commerce. She has multiple reasons for wanting to be here.

"Habitat is close to my heart," she said. "I worked for Habitat for Humanity before coming to Altar'd State. It is a great program." Selvage added that she loves the team-building that's going on. "I don't get to work with all of these people closely," she said. "We are in different departments that don't see each other. This way, we get to know one another better."

WHEN SUPPORT SHOWS UP

And while it's been a hot, humid summer, Casey Perfetto said the work has been made bearable by lots of support. Sullivan's Downtown came one day and grilled out for the volunteers, Perfetto said. There are plenty of wet rags for cooling



ALTAR'D STATE AND HABITAT for Humanity are joining to build a new habitat home on Wright Road.

Vanhoy was on the site, helping someone she doesn't even know become a homeowner. Vanhoy will be the recipient of one of the next Habitat homes to be built. Those receiving the homes must work on someone else's and their own.

"I have been trimming trees for the past six Mondays," she said. "A little bit of everything. Whatever they need me to do."

Her house, which will be in Alcoa, will be home to Vanhoy and her two children, ages 11 and 13. Jason Harrison, an Altar'd State employee, was keeping up with his assignment on a busy work day at the Habitat site. He works in store design and construction. He said no one's arm had to be twisted to get them here. "A big part of what we do at Altar'd State is giving back," Harrison said. "We do work in Peru. This is how we give back locally."

Doug Jenkins is construction supervisor for Blount County Habitat for Humanity. He said he has a dedicated group of volunteers who are mostly retired

After he retired, he started with Habitat. "I worked on the very first house here," he said. "I reckon I haven't missed more than about 20 of them. I've put in a little time."

There are two other Habitat houses under construction, said Kathy Jackson, executive director. Most of these homeowners will end up with mortgages of 23 to 30 years. The program has room for more applicants.

DOING HER PART

As Mueller was busy sawing lumber, the homeowner for this house showed up, ready to work. She has been at the site multiple times. On this day, Nyadeng Kuot was busy watering the trees on what will be her property.

She came to Blount County from Sudan 18 years ago with help from Maryville First United Methodist Church. She said the road to homeownership is one she could have never dreamed possible.

"I can't even explain it," she said. "I thank God and all of





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ALTAR'D STATE PRESIDENT AND co-founder Brian Mason speaks to the crowd before handing over the keys to the Habitat for Humanity house to Nyadeng Kuot Friday.

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WHEN SUPPORT SHOWS UP

And while it's been a hot, humid summer, Casey Perfetto said the work has been made bearable by lots of support. Sullivan's Downtown came one day and grilled out for the volunteers, Perfetto said. There are plenty of wet rags for cooling off, water to stay hydrated and professionals leading the way.

"My job is making overhangs for the roof," Perfetto said. "Yesterday I was cutting the boards for the porch. I used the circular saw for the first time. It went well."

A few days later, Miranda

keeping up with his assignment on a busy work day at the Habitat site. He works in store design and construction. He said no one's arm had to be twisted to get them here. "A big part of what we do at Altar'd State is giving back," Harrison said. "We do work in Peru. This is how we give back locally."

Doug Jenkins is construction supervisor for Blount County Habitat for Humanity. He said he has a dedicated group of volunteers who are mostly retired. They have worked on this site hand-in-hand with the Altar'd State workers. He has all ages, the oldest being Bill Mueller, who turns 91 this month. He's been a Habitat volunteer since 1994.

Mueller came to East Tennessee from Davenport, Iowa, to work for what is now Arconic.

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She came to Blount County from Sudan 18 years ago with help from Maryville First United Methodist Church. She said the road to homeownership is one she could have never dreamed possible.

"I can't even explain it," she said. "I thank God and all of those who have helped. They have done this without even knowing me." Kuot works at Blackberry Farms. East Tennessee, she said, is home.

"It will finally sink in that this is mine when I sleep that first night," this grateful homeowner said.

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