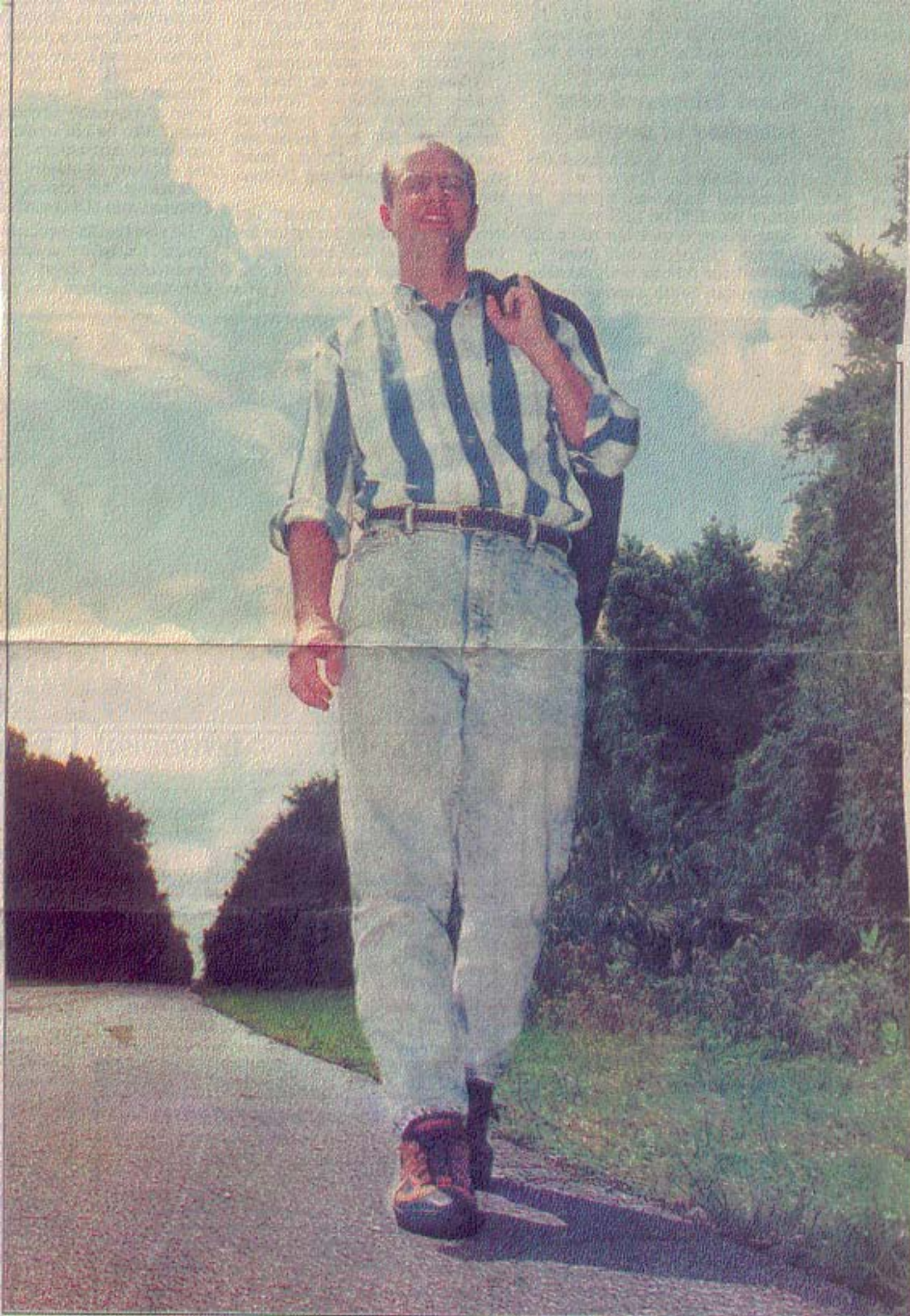


# To follow The Path



Dave Siper/Chronicle PHOTOS

DuWayne Sipper, executive director of The Path of Citrus County, seeks to involve the churches of the community in building a Christian intervention Center in Citrus County. Sipper believes the gospel shelter could act as a clearinghouse for the needs of the community.



# Group seeks to develop a local mission

By Nancy Kennedy  
Chronicle writer

The Bible talks a lot about paths. Some paths are dark and slippery, others are fraught with danger. Some meander and twist until the one who's walking it feels like he's lost and can't be found. On the other hand, there's one path that leads to life, and The Path of Citrus County is dedicated to helping those who are lost find their way to it through the ministry of a gospel mission.

More than a homeless shelter, The Path of Citrus County believes a Christian Intervention Center, a gospel-centered mission where men can live and be nurtured and disciplined by loving Christians, can be an asset to the community. All they need now is money, land and supplies to build. They already have a vision.

Several years ago, executive director of The Path, DuWayne Sipper, tried in vain to obtain the old, now-demolished jail building in Inverness. He envisioned a place where churches could refer transients for a hot meal, a shower and a bed. A place where newly-released prisoners could stay until they got back on their feet. A place where families could go for food. A place where people could experience the love of God and find their way, to receive a second chance at life. He felt God had called him to this, that Citrus County could benefit from it.

But...they tore down the jail. However, no one could tear down the vision. Because, as Sipper is quick to point out, the vision is God's, and Sipper isn't the only one to capture it. Many throughout the county share it as well and are dedicated to doing all they can to dispel the myths surrounding gospel missions.

According to Path board member Jeff Hollis, the biggest concern a community has is whether a shelter will attract the homeless to an area. He said Citrus County already has homeless people living in the woods. A shelter, ideally located in Lecanto, would simply be a means of aiding (and monitoring) the homeless who are already living within our borders. Another board member mentioned the "couch homeless." He posed the question, "How many people have someone staying on their couch because there's no place else for him or her to go? Or know people who go from house to house of friends?" No longer is the term "homeless" reserved for derelicts and the mentally unstable. It could be our friend. It could be any one of us.

As for a shelter attracting homeless to the area, Hollis said the lack of industry here is enough to keep most transients away. He also pointed out that, regardless of where the people come from, those who come to a shelter for help undergo a background check. Anyone with a warrant or warrant will immediately be turned over to the sheriff or police. Hollis said that in itself makes a community that much safer.

In addition, with a centralized networking system linking the shelter to county churches, the common practice of transients (or residents) bilking area churches can be curtailed. Currently it's not uncommon for a family or individual to go from church to church to church in *one day* with requests for financial assistance. With

a shelter, those requesting aid from a church would be immediately referred to the shelter. After a background check and a registration, legitimate needs could be met and those who are out to "work the system" would be identified and dealt with — lovingly, of course.

"The goal of a gospel mission is Christian Discipleship," explained Sipper. "You let a man stay for two days, let him rest and get cleaned up, then you ask him to commit to a strict set of rules." The

rules, he said, are intended to rehabilitate a man and set him on the right path. They involve zero tolerance for fighting, alcohol or drug use, plus mandatory Bible study, church attendance, employment search and participation in the daily chores of the mission itself.

"When you think of it," said Sipper,





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"It's really no different from how the early disciples lived in the book of Acts. They lived together, ate together, learned the scriptures together. This intense discipleship works well, especially if you're trying to break bad habits. And nine times out of 10, a man will respect the rules of the mission if given the chance."

How else can a gospel shelter benefit a community? Sipper said the possibilities are endless. He mentioned offering a free "latchkey kids" after-school program, a thrift store, food pantry, soup kitchen and meals to shut-ins program.

He also said it's not uncommon for a gospel mission to grow some of its own food and to employ its own people. It could be a clearing-house for the needs of a community: someone needs furniture or clothing, they call the shelter. Someone wants to donate furniture, they call the shelter. Sipper

says it's nothing less than a win-win situation all around.

There's just one catch. Although The Path has what they call "seed money," although they have a builder who is willing to donate his services, although area building supply stores are willing to do what they can and volunteers willing to help build, they still need land, preferably five or more acres in Lecanto.

They also need people who are qualified and able to act as fund raisers. They need churches to take on The Path as a mission project — as little as \$20 per month from each of Citrus County's 100-plus churches isn't unreasonable, as Hollis pointed out. They need large and small cash donations. They need the prayers of other Christians.

They need the entire community, leaders as well as residents, to get behind them with their support. As all the board members present at their last meeting agreed, building a gospel shelter can be one of the best things a community can do for itself.

For further information, contact DuWayne Sipper at 341-0551.



Dave Siger/Chronicle photo

Board of directors of The Path of Citrus County, from the left, include: Eric Welshans, George Dehn, Randy Casiano, Diane Cooka and Tom Upton.