



Sara Pittson/Chronicle photo

DuWayne Sipper hopes to find a cause for the old Citrus County jail in Inverness, possibly as a place to get a meal, a food bank where people could purchase groceries for 14 cents a pound, a place where a person could get a shower and a bed for the night, and a safe place where a person could hear that God loves him and experience that love through the kindness of Christian volunteers.

By Nancy Kennedy

Chronicle writer

IT'S NOT AS farfetched as it sounds. All DuWayne Sipper of Hernando wants is for the county to give him the old jail in Inverness. Or lease it to him for a dollar.

On second thought, maybe it is far-fetched. But then, so were the odds of a Hebrew shepherd boy named David standing up to a Philistine giant named Goliath and killing him with rocks from a slingshot.

"If God beckons, he can do incredible things," Sipper stated emphatically during a recent interview. For him, God has beckoned and is continuing to beckon toward a seemingly impossible mission of establishing a Christian Intervention Center in Citrus County, reaching those in need with the love of Jesus.

And while some may see a giant standing in his way (getting the county to relinquish the building and keeping it from being torn down), Sipper sees an incredible opportunity for God to work a miracle. Besides, he's not alone in this battle. He said others are standing behind him, cheering him on and offering their support. In fact, he's dropped the words "I" and "me" when talking about this proposed project and has taken on the more inclusive "we."

"It's unbelievable," Sipper said of the local support he has garnered. "Everyone I contact, every church, every county organization — the Family Resource Center, CASA, the various men's groups, local Christian businessmen like Sam Posey — everyone tells me the same thing: We need this."

What Sipper envisions, what he believes to be God's vision, is to take the jail and use it for a variety of ministries, depending on the predominant needs of the county. He sees the building being used as a place to get a meal, a food bank where people could purchase groceries for 14 cents a pound, a place where a person could get a shower and a bed for the night, a safe place where a person could hear that God loves him and experience that love through the kindness of Christian volunteers. The possibilities are endless.

All he needs is a building. Sipper says he's got an army of volunteer labor already waiting to go to work. The funding, however, is another story.

"I'm at a crossroads as far as money's concerned," he admitted. "People are wondering who I am. That's why I've asked two local churches to channel any money we receive to keep me from temptation and hold me accountable, and we're in the process of forming a board of directors to keep egos and power trips in check."

As for the money, Sipper said it will come. He has confidence that where God guides he provides and that he moves the hearts of people to give. All they need is a vision, not in the mystical sense, but in the sense of "God is in this."

As the unlikely giant-slayer explained, he stumbled into this whole thing during his recovery from an unidentified illness. Unable to work any longer as a limo driver in Palm Beach, Sipper moved to Hernando to live with his father.

As he recuperated, he began searching for a food co-op, hoping that a change of diet might help.

He discovered Citrus County didn't have one, neither did it have a homeless shelter, a youth home, a central food bank nor a soup kitchen that could adequately meet the needs of the entire county.

"That's when a light bulb went off," he said. "I felt I was on to something; I also felt God's hand was in it. So I

Jana Pittson/Chronicle photo
The exterior of the old Citrus County jail in Inverness.

Building a dream



started to research and to think what I could do to change things. I began exploring how you go about opening a shelter, and the more calls I made, the more ideas I got from other people."

The idea for using the old jail came as a coincidence at a local restaurant. He had bumped into a friend, and as Sipper outlined his idea, the friend suggested the jail building. From there, the ideas began to snowball, with Sipper growing increasingly excited as to the possibilities.

As he put it, it's a win-win-win-win situation for everyone involved. "The way I see it, the county gets rid of a building they don't know what to do

with, and the county gets a much-needed ministry." He also pointed out many cities around the nation have done similar things with public buildings, the closest one being Interfaith Emergency Services in Ocala.

So, what does this visionary know about running a rescue mission? "I don't know anything," he said, "but we have that covered too. International Union Gospel Missions is willing to send a mentor."

In addition, Sipper has a large labor pool of county people ready and willing to work. All they need is a building. If not the jail, then some other building.

The bottom line of his mission is mercy. He takes seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:13, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

"I'm just beginning to understand what that means," he said. "I used to think missionary work meant sacrifice, but sacrifice is doing something because you're supposed to. Mercy is doing something because God's in it and he puts it in your heart to do it. That's what he believes is happening here. That God is in it. All he needs is building."

For additional information about the Christian Intervention Center, please call DuWayne Sipper at 341-0551.

Hernando man has big ideas for use of old, empty jail

By Earle Kimel

Staff writer

DuWayne Sipper has a vision and a quest — to battle homelessness in Citrus County.

Tuesday, that quest takes the 35-year-old Hernando man to the Citrus County Commission where he will ask the board to give him the old Citrus County Jail as a site for a Christian intervention center.

The County Commission plans to demolish the \$1.8 million structure that's been deemed too run down, too inundated with the stench of urine and the potential for disease to save.

There's no long-range plan for the land other than to use it as a parking lot.

"It can be cleaned up," Sipper said. "The first thing I would do is cut out all the permanent windows and let God's fresh air in there.

"I'm sure that there's stagnation and mildew in there, but again this building is in such need that that's not one of my major problems. When you get a building of this size, a lot of factors come into play."

Sipper said the building can be used to spur regional and national charitable organizations to get behind the project. Local donors too, he said, will be spurred by that fact.

The center, Sipper said, will be a place where homeless people can go and be a part of a life-changing program.

"It is a homeless shelter but we've stopped calling it that because people have misconceived notions," Sipper said. "If you want a model of what we're looking to do, there's a church in Leesburg, called the First Baptist Church that runs several rescue missions."

IF YOU GO

What: Discussion on using the old Citrus County Jail as a Christian Intervention Center.

When: Tuesday at 1:30 p.m.

Where: Citrus County Commission hearing room, third floor of the Masonic Building, 111 W. Main Street, Inverness.

Rescue missions are run by a strict set of rules. The people who live there go through a program anywhere from three months to a year in length.

"Their lives are changed forever," Sipper said.

Sipper came to this crossroads after changing his own life. He grew up a military brat, traveling with his family from Turkey to Spain and Morocco. He developed a drug problem and cleaned himself up. That journey led him to Tuesday's appeal.

"God put it on my heart to start doing this about three or four months ago," Sipper said. "I need a direction in my life from all the things I've been through.

"Everything about this seems right."

Sipper said the building can house a food bank, a soup kitchen, be used as an emergency shelter in the event of a hurricane and as a clearing house for humanitarian services.

Still, the county commission is scheduled to accept a bid at its July 8 meeting to tear the old jail down.

"I have a week to change their minds," Sipper said. "I'll use everything that's advantageous to me to do God's work."

Staff writer Steve Arthur contributed to this report.