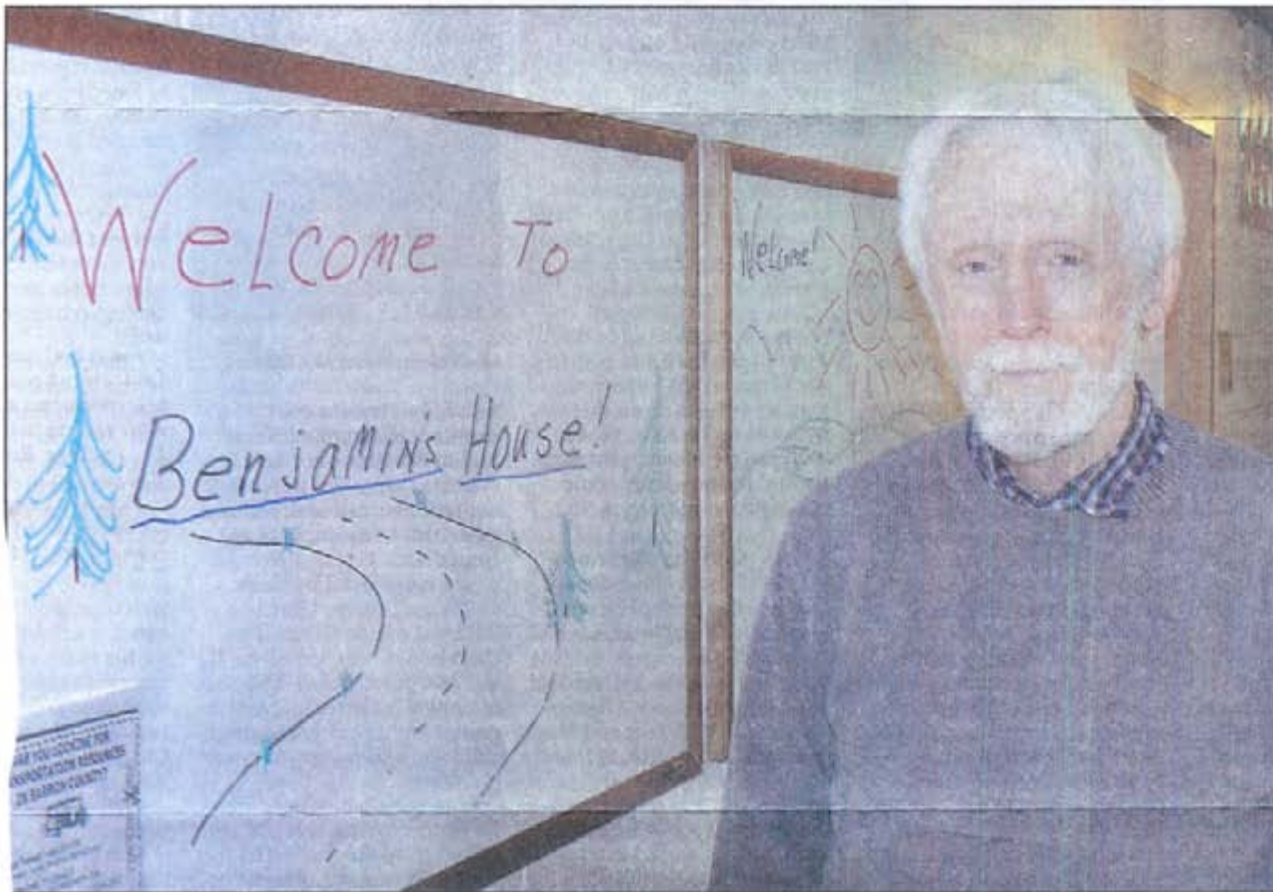


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RICE LAKE HOMELESS SHELTER



Benjamin's House executive director Ron Petit said many people have been contacting the shelter about availability since it opened about two weeks ago.

Staff photos by
Chuck Rupnow

Warmly welcoming

Former convent becomes place for people needing a new start

By **Chuck Rupnow**
Leader-Telegram staff

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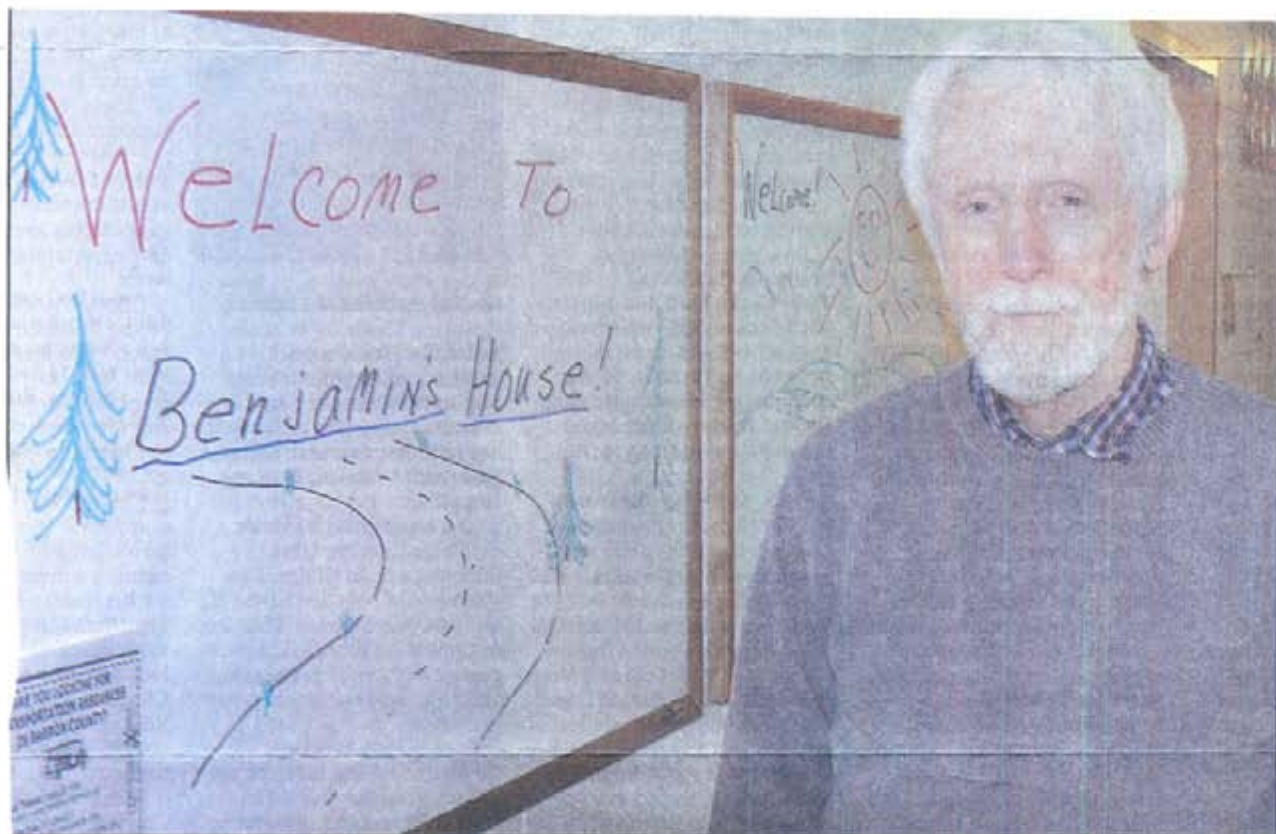
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used primarily for families in need.

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■ For more in-





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Former convent becomes place for people needing a new start

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RICE LAKE — There's a reason the recently opened Barron County homeless shelter has its headquarters on Heart Island in Rice Lake.

"I didn't realize there were this many friendly, helpful people out there," said Tony Denman, a resident who also volunteers services at the Benjamin's House emergency shelter.

"These people were willing to help me; to talk with me," he added during an interview Wednesday at the center. "They will do anything to help people."

Denman, 49, was the first resident of the shelter, a former convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis. The shelter also has a guest house that has been used by the homeless for several years and now will be

used primarily for families in need.

"This has really changed me; to be more helpful and considerate," said Denman, who entered the facility about two weeks ago and is working on trying to find a job. "I consider others' feelings now more than I used to."

■ For more information contact Benjamin's House at 715-736-2437 or Info@Benjamins-House.org.

Benjamin's House is named after Mary Benjamin, the mother superior of the order, who took in another order of sisters who were poor, homeless and in jeopardy of

disbanding. About two years ago, community leaders discussed Barron County's homeless situation, in part because there was no shelter in the county and the homeless traveled to adjacent counties for help, according to Benjamin's House executive director Ron Petit.

The planning group evolved



Resident Terri Kempker, sitting in one of the shelter's rooms, said her stay at Benjamin's House has helped her in such ways as motivating her to make personal improvements.

into the Benjamin's House board of directors and was incorporated as a state non-profit agency. The Sisters of St. Joseph offered the vacant convent for the shelter, and many renovations and upgrades allowed for the the shelter to open Feb. 28.

"Our main goal is to help move individuals and families

into permanent housing," Petit said. "Equally important is the goal of helping them remove barriers to sustaining that housing."

He said that goal comprises smaller objectives such as helping them to find work, deal with any disability or

Shelter/Goal

+ is to gain the trust of those applying

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medical conditions, address legal problems, upgrade work skills and find suitable transportation.

"In the end, we aim to help them break the entire cycle of homelessness," he said.

The staff includes two case managers, a full-time program assistant and three part-time program assistants. Case managers work with residents to identify goals and develop an action plan.

Applicant screenings include verification of homelessness and criminal background checks, and also address medical or chemical issues. Two people were recently denied access because of "legal problems," Petit said.

"Case management is the main service that will help our residents get back on their feet and become more self-sufficient," Petit said.

Establishing a trusting relationship with applicants is vital, Petit said. "This relationship will be anchored in compassion, empathy and a desire to understand their life journey wedded to accountability, limits and natural consequences."

Petit emphasized residents' need to take responsibility for themselves and use the tools

and services the shelter provides to spur positive change. One tool is a savings program for those who have jobs and training them to use funds for essential items.

The facility has a high-tech security system and is available to residents 24 hours a day. Residents can stay up to three months. It receives state and federal grants, and grants from the Rice Lake Community Health Foundation and The Salvation Army.

The shelter has 10 single rooms and six connected rooms. The Family Enrichment Center and West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency are also located in the building.

Terri Kempker, 52, formerly of the Cumberland area, is staying in the guest house with two grandchildren, ages 8 and 12, while she seeks employment and other living arrangements.

"This place has given me hope and opened up my eyes that there are people out there who want to help," she said. "They have helped me believe in myself and they have been an inspiration."

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