



Douglas / Elbert Task Force

From the Parker Chronicle News
By Rhonda Moore Published: 06.02.09

Timothy Benton is homeless. Homeless and wandering for nearly 10 years, but filled with hope for a future that includes a wife, kids, home and job.

He drove to Castle Rock on a hand-me-down bicycle, more than four months after leaving Illinois. And when he stopped at the Douglas/Elbert Task Force on May 26 for a helping hand, he found one like he's never seen before.

Benton wanted to share his story to "pay it forward" for an organization that rarely says no to people in need.

Benton is 45 years old and has been homeless since 2000, the year his father passed away. He and his brothers had buried their mother the year before and the four held it together through the process of saying goodbye to their parents.

Not long after that, Benton began wandering.

He lived in Florida for a time, made his way to Texas, "taking care of myself the best way I can," he said, and ended up back in Illinois, where two of his brothers remain.

His wandering began after years at jobs that included a stint at a gas station, jobs at air force bases, hospitals, schools, on highway crews. He's good with his hands and can do demo work and carpentry, he said, but he can't seem to find his place just yet.

With no driver's license, car or roof over his head, he left Illinois in November and spent the winter making his way to Denver, where he hopes to find work in a labor pool and see what the west end of the country looks like.

On the morning he landed in Castle Rock, his breakfast was a piece of bread and a can of tuna. He ate it when he stopped for a rest in Franktown.

By the time he rode his bike into town, he decided to see if he could get a little help. Castle Rock police pointed him to the Douglas/Elbert Task Force, the third such organization he has reached out to during his travels.

At the task force, he found something he hadn't seen before. Compassion.

The task force offers assistance to residents in Douglas and Elbert counties who need help with food, utilities, housing, transportation and other basic needs. This year the task force has served 4,875 people, a 16 percent increase from last year, said Suzanne Greene, executive director.

That, however, is not the most interesting statistic, she said. Most compelling is the fact that the task force, which relies solely on donations, grants and proceeds from sales at its Castle Rock thrift store, has so far this year handed out \$308,142 in public assistance, a 59 percent increase from the same time last year, Greene said.

"It's striking to me how many people are hurting," Greene said. "If you're reading this and you're a task force client, tell someone about the task force. If you know somebody who could use the task force services, let them



Timothy Benton who left Illinois on the back of a bike in Nov. 2008 on his way to Denver, keeps a travel diary of sorts tucked inside his baseball cap. Timothy passed through Castle Rock on his way to Denver, months after embarking on his trip from Illinois. The homeless man was grateful for help he received from the Douglas/Elbert Task Force. Photo by Rhonda Moore

know that we're here."

Benton's case is one of many that demonstrate her observation that "hunger happens every day." Greene encourages donors to look out for two-for-one specials at the grocery store and pick up the extra freebie for the task force, asks gardeners to plant a row of fresh vegetables for the task force, which has two freezers and plenty of capacity to harvest fresh produce and asks caring residents to refrain from donating old food.

"We counsel against cleaning out your cupboards and donating the old items," she said. "A lot of times it's expired and we have to throw it away. It increases our staff time and our trash."

On the day the task force was faced with a man who has no links to Douglas County, their answer to a call for help was the same. The task force gave Benton enough food to hold him over for a couple of days as well as something else entirely unexpected. He spent the night in a warm bed and had a chance to take a hot shower at a local hotel, thanks to the task force's generosity.

It is a generosity Benton witnessed when a mother of three, crying and uncertain, was assured she could come back as many times as she needed. The task force wasn't going anywhere.

"I really think the public just needs to know more about them," Benton said. "The thing I find most fascinating is they take the money they get and they're not selfish with it. I think people need to know about it so they can buy more stuff there because [the task force doesn't] keep it all to themselves."

In addition to donations and grants, the task force generates income through its thrift store on Jerry Street. Proceeds from all sales are returned directly to the community through its food bank and outreach efforts.

Benton planned to continue to Denver after spending the night in Castle Rock.

"I want to get cash immediately to save up my money and keep working," he said. "And hopefully have the American dream like everybody else, where you get married, have kids, a wife, a car and all that. I think I would love that — just being settled down not have to worry about a place to sleep, food to eat, where you're money's going to come from, all that good stuff."

He was struck by the people he met at the task force, who treated him with respect and dignity, he said, reaching out to him despite the fact he's not a county resident. He was fascinated by the experience and wanted to be sure to spread the word because, "that's what we're supposed to do, people helping people."

He left with his worldly possessions tied to the back of his bike, a sleeping bag secured in front and four bags of groceries tied to his handle bars. Despite an outlook filled with hope, rather than despair, his parting words revealed the tenuous future before him.

"Pray for me."

The Douglas/Elbert Task Force thrift store is at 416 Jerry Street, hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

Cash donations are accepted at the task force office, 404 Jerry Street. For more information call 303-688-1114 or visit the Web site at www.detaskforce.org .