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# Where Hardship Turns to Hope

BY KELLEY BRUSS



*Furman students and alumni  
find their ‘something bigger’  
at United Ministries.*

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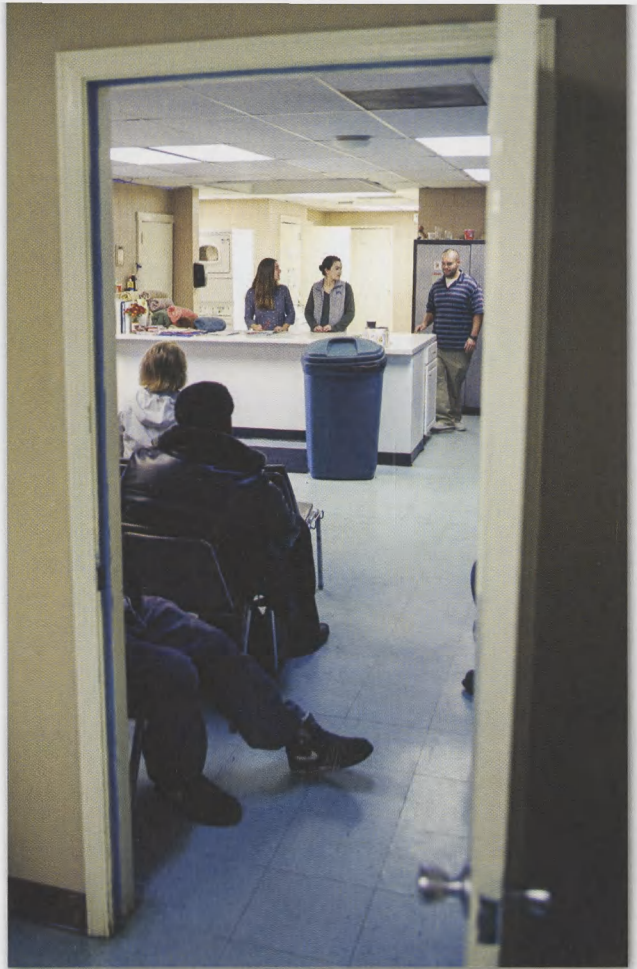
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evlin Jackson spent 14 years in prison. Within a year of his release, he'd earned a commercial driver's license and was trucking over the roadways. His next job was local, allowing him to be home more. Less than two years after leaving prison, Jackson moved into a third position, better than either of the first two.

“My overall goal is to become a business owner,” says the Greenville, South Carolina, native.

United Ministries provided for his education and prepared him for reentering the world. Among other things, he needed a budget, a crash course in the 14 years of technology he'd missed, and help breaking his goals into realistic steps.

“I appreciate my small wins just as much as my big wins,” Jackson says.



*Opposite: The picture gallery in the Adult Education and Employment Readiness halls displays the images of those who completed their GED or obtained employment, showing others that they, too, can achieve their goals.*

*Above: **Morgen Smith '22** and **Julia Lewis '20** confer with Nick Bush, program manager for United Ministries' Place of Hope, before working with participants.*

*The outside of United Ministries in Greenville, South Carolina.*





*(Top) Smith, Lewis, Lee Moore, a United Ministries volunteer, and Bush gather at United Ministries.*

*Lewis speaks with a participant at United Ministries.*

**U**nited Ministries has a dual focus: providing direct services to people in crisis while also helping them develop long-term self-sufficiency.

“They welcomed me with open arms,” Jackson says. “They were willing to give me everything they could to help me be the best I could be.”

The organization is “quite the machine,” says **Amanda Warren ’03**, associate director of integrated services, referring to United Ministries’ offerings – education and employment programs, financial coaching, crisis assistance and homelessness services.

“There’s an unspoken mission that invites community members to participate in our work,” says **Ethan Friddle ’00**, director of programs and operations.

It’s part of why, when he finished his seminary training, he went to United Ministries instead of to a pulpit.

“I was more interested in this participatory, collaborative form of ministry,” Friddle says.



*“For me, it’s very eye-opening to see what goes on but then say, ‘How can we tackle that?’”*

— JULIA LEWIS '20

He and Warren aren’t the only ones. From the executive director to volunteer tutors to board members, United Ministries is thick with Furman connections.

“I don’t think it should come as a surprise that there are individuals throughout Furman who choose to do something bigger,” says **Jade Fountain '09**, director of mission advancement.

### A shared background

The growing intersection between Furman and United Ministries has only made it easier for the next generation of students to find their way to United Ministries. **Julia Lewis '20** and **Morgen Smith '22** interned there

last fall. Both got connected through Furman’s Exploration of Vocation and Ministry.

Lewis, a Greenville native, has seen the city grow through her lifetime. But her work with United Ministries – assisting caseworkers, helping with adult education, engaging with families in the shelter – gave her a new perspective on it.

“From that growth, there’s also things that happen that people don’t realize,” she says. “For me, it’s very eye-opening to see what goes on but then say, ‘How can we tackle that?’”

At United Ministries, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, part of the answer is found in relationships. Staff and volunteers use the word “participants” instead of “clients” when referring to the people they are working to help. That feels natural to Lewis.

“Furman does a great job of building community, welcoming everyone, which United Ministries does, too,” she says.

The Furman presence at the organization creates a shared culture, too. Fountain, who came to United Ministries about four years ago, says it’s reassuring to walk into a situation “knowing that there are people here who share, on some level, where you’ve come from and the way that you’ve learned.”

Smith stands in front of a wall inside the day shelter for community members who are homeless. The wall was painted by youth from a supporting congregation and is intended to depict the winding nature of the path that many must navigate in pursuit of permanent housing. Lewis appears in front of lockers that are used by participants who do not have a place to live.







*Ethan Friddle '00 and Tony McDade '79 (facing front) explain the organization's work outside United Ministries to a group of Furman students participating in the Nonprofit Career Trek, sponsored by the Malone Center for Career Engagement.*

*"I became very interested in the lives that my children were going home to."*

—AMANDA WARREN '03

### Challenging the familiar

Executive Director **Tony McDade '79** says Furman has always been invested in the community, but the level of engagement today is "both broader and deeper – definitely deeper."

Warren left Furman with a degree in music education and began to teach middle school chorus at a Title I school. It was her first significant exposure to people living in poverty.

"I became very interested in the lives that my children were going home to," she says. She ultimately decided she wanted to work "upstream" of the problems.

For **Amelia Miles '19**, the opportunity came earlier. Miles, an AmeriCorps member and benefits counselor at United Ministries, did a poverty studies internship with an organization in Lyman, South Carolina, while at Furman.

"Without that, I don't think I would have been interested in this kind of work," she says.

Warren is excited that students now have more of these kinds of opportunities.

"Learning about poverty in a classroom on Furman's campus is quite different from interacting with people living in poverty in a setting like United Ministries," she says.

While an intern himself, Friddle remembers driving around with an Episcopal priest, meeting drug dealers and prostitutes and discovering unexpected commonalities despite vastly different life experiences.



He couldn't look at the city the same way after that.

It's crucial to help people "have personal experiences that help them understand there's a world beyond what they know," Friddle says.

### Careers take shape

**S**ometimes students, like community members, view nonprofits simply as potential volunteer opportunities. At United Ministries, exposure isn't only about developing understanding and compassion. It can also reveal a vocational view of nonprofit work.

Friddle has seen the light come on for interns, at times expressed with wonderment: "This is the thing I want to do!" he recalls.

Meanwhile, others may never apply for a job at a nonprofit organization but instead transfer what they've seen and learned to positions where they have voices on a much broader platform.

"And then they use that voice and that knowledge they've gained to advocate for people who come through our doors," Fountain says.

It's part of the Furman culture, Lewis says. Students are trained to look for solutions, "and not just sit back and say, 'Oh, this is happening.'"

United Ministries is in the middle of a two-year partnership with The Riley Institute, which is facilitating planning workshops and gathering evidence-based research to develop the organization's capacity to evaluate the impact of its work.

*Friddle and McDade address a group of Furman alumni who also work for United Ministries.*

Friddle wants United Ministries to be seen as a professional, specialized organization, which he knows may fly in the face of some nonprofit stereotypes.

While there's always room to grow, that professional impression is already established. Smith, one of the current interns, says the reputation and stability of United Ministries is what first drew her.

"I knew that there was structure and support built in," she says.

And that means Furman graduates and volunteers who want to make a difference don't have to look far for their opportunity.

"You've got a shot at that right here," McDade says. ✦

### New executive director

In April, United Ministries announced that it had hired Lizzie Bebbler as its new executive director, following an extensive national search. Bebbler will lead United Ministries when Tony McDade retires later this year. Bebbler and McDade will work side-by-side until then to assist with the transition. Please see [united-ministries.org](http://united-ministries.org) for more information.

