

Saturday gala set to raise funds for post-prison program

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The Way Home Program will host its first gala this Saturday, April 21, at 5:30 p.m. at Irish Eyes restaurant in Lewes. There will be a buffet dinner of pasta primavera with zucchini squash and tilapia, salad and dessert, beverages and a cash bar. There will also be a silent auction, door prizes and entertainment by singer and songwriter Doug James.

James is an internationally acclaimed and award-winning singer and songwriter whose hometown is Rehoboth Beach. His songs have been performed and recorded by artists and producers including Dionne Warwick, Joe Cocker, Michael Bolton, Dan Hill and more. His hits include "After You," "Break it to Me Gently" and the 1990 BMI Song of the Year, "How Am I Supposed to Live Without You."

The Way Home Program has a mission of meeting "former prisoners at the prison gates and the office door in Georgetown to provide connections to the community, meet needs and foster relationships that prevent return to prison."

Associate Director Rick Chamberlain, who was in law enforcement for 29 years – 25 as a state trooper and four working with the Children's Advocacy Center – said they have done fundraisers before, but this is their first "gala."

Chamberlain explained that the Way Home Program has a very "holistic" approach to working with men and women who are getting out of prison to re-enter society.

"There is very little that we do not do," he said, "with two main goals: to increase public safety and reduce recidivism."

He said they start by going into the prisons, in pre-release classes, and telling the soon-to-be-released prisoners about the program. If people are interested, they then set up a one-on-one interview to see what their individual needs are, such as housing, addiction counseling and other post-prison needs.

Because many of the prisoners are homeless, Chamberlain said they help with housing and then also jobs, transportation, obtaining state IDs, Social Security cards or birth certificates, if needed, and food stamps, and they have an attic full of clothing.

He said they are very well-known in the prison system and the only organization of its kind in the state.

“There are lots of programs that may do one facet of what we do,” Chamberlain acknowledged. But, he said, they are the only program that serves the population with everything from transportation to finding a job and a place to live.

Chamberlain said they have seen considerable growth since starting in 1998. They have about 100 permanent clients and handle between 100 and 150 client contacts per month.

The Way Home is a private non-profit that grew out of a church-sponsored prison Bible study “where volunteers realized the desperate needs of men who were being released from Sussex Correctional Institution and took action to make a difference.”

After their first year of operation, in 1998, under the auspices of Children and Families First, they became affiliated with the Episcopal Diocese of Delaware. In 2006, they became an independent, non-denominational non-profit with 501(C) status. The director is Barbara Del Mastro. Their lead case worker is Tony Neal. Their office is managed by Joy Spicer.

Although a private non-profit, Chamberlain explained that they receive some funding from the State, area churches, the Southeastern Sussex Ministerium, the group Lewes, Rehoboth Area Churches (LRAC) and private donations. He said it takes about \$30,000 per month to run their program, so they do fundraisers, such as the gala on April 21 at Irish Eyes, as well.

In their most recent newsletter, they state that the Way Home Program provides “case-management services for a participant for approximately \$5,000 per year, or about one-sixth the cost of incarceration.”

They cite a 2006 University of Delaware report that found that Way Home Program participants were less likely to return to prison – especially in the first year after their release. In 2004, the recidivism rate for Way Home participants was 10 percent, or nearly half the rate for Department of Correction’s clients (21 percent).

Tickets to the April gala cost \$35. For more information or to purchase tickets, call Bob at (302) 239-5336. Tickets will also be available at the door.