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Mission magic, no waffling

Should we believe urban legends about clandestine campaigns to smear Durham's image when a Cary businessman makes an investment to lure crackheads back to the place from which they got the boot?

It'd be great yarn for conspiracy spinners. But context makes all the difference in the world.

It's a fact that the old Durham Inn overlooking Interstate 85 attracted drug users the way Black Flag lured roaches to its cardboard motels.

And there's also some truth to Cary resident David Martin — who owns Raleigh's South Hills Mall — wanting to bring dope smokers back to the former Durham Inn.

But that motel is now the Good Samaritan Inn, and it's run by Ernie and Gail Mills, who 30 years ago co-founded the Durham Rescue Mission, located on East Main Street.

The Millses specialize in cleaning up substance abusers. Seems like they know something about rehabing old buildings, too.

Right now, the mission can house 35 women and children. When the Good Samaritan Inn is fully operational, 150 of them will have a very decent temporary home.

"The main thing is not how you start, it's how you end up," said Martin, who grew up poor and now does pretty well for himself.

"You a millionaire or something?" I asked.

"I've been blessed," he said. "[But] if a man had millions of dollars and didn't have the Lord in his heart, he'd be bankrupt."

Which prompts him to help folks.

Sitting next to the Good Samaritan Inn is property valued at \$200,000. That's Martin's property. The guy once had a mind to put a Waffle House on it. Good location for it, too, right there off the interstate.

Never got around to it, though. "Out of sight, out of mind," he said.

But Martin, 77, heard about what the Millses are doing with the former Durham Inn, which, by the way, he owned before it became a dump.

Moved by the Millses vision, Martin decided to donate that property next to the old motel, but on one condition: Durham had to do its part.

If the Bull City could match the price of the property, Martin would sign it over free and clear to the rescue mission, leaving \$200,000 in the bank to go toward operational expenses at the new shelter.

Drum roll please while I get Gail Mills on the line. I need to see where the rescue mission is with reaching its goal ...

"We have met it!" she said.

Martin will scribble his name on the property deed Tuesday.

"Good things are happening in Durham," Gail Mills said.

Meaning a bunch of people around here are serious about ending homelessness by 2015.

I recently wrote about an abused mother and her two boys not finding a homeless shelter when they fled from Norfolk, Va., to Durham. All the places she checked were full.

So I'm thinking the extra room now at the rescue mission will trickle down to create more space elsewhere in the city, allowing directors at other shelters to pull out cots for emergency respites.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think folks around here actually care — even the politicians we often malign.

Come 5:30 a.m. Monday, the city manager and council members will serve breakfast to the rescue mission's men at the East Main Street site.

Then Wednesday evening, the county manager and commissioners will scoop out dinner to women and children at the Good Samaritan Inn.

David Martin's Waffle House never got built.

But a story like this should still make your mouth water.

John McCann's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Contact him at jmccann@heraldsun.com or 419-6601.