

Vera Benson, founder of Grandmothers Against Drugs, in the upper floor of the senior center that is used as a wood shop where ex-drug

users produce bunk beds.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

# Grandmother Fights Drug Abuse

by Bob Lothian

Vera Benson knows what drugs can do to a family. Three of Benson's four adult children became so hooked that they could no longer care for their children, so Benson took eight grandchildren into her home.

"At 50 years of age I'm a mother of 12 children," said Benson.

She had to start over again as a mother, Benson said, making sure the children had clothes for school, food, health care, all on a limited disability income.

It was almost more than she could handle. "I mean, I was so angry that all I could do was start crying," Benson said.

She looked for support, a group of some kind, where she could go and voice her troubles and get help. There was none. Finally, sitting in a church circle on Sunday, it all came out, she said, and that's where Grandmothers Against Drugs was born.

GMAD, founded by Benson in December, has grown to include 14 grandmothers whose families have been ravaged by drugs. The group meets at the Senior Service Center, 4128 N.E. Union Avenue. It operates under the umbrella of the House of Rescue Mission, of which Benson is a volunteer.

Her situation is not uncommon, Benson said. When families are broken apart by drugs, it is often grandmothers who are left to pick up the pieces. That's why a support group is needed, she said.

GMAD assists grandmothers and families with clothes, food, rent, and counselling. It offers support to mothers who have lost their children, and to children who have lost their parents, Benson said.

In addition, she said, GMAD has turned the top floor of the senior center into a wood shop for producing bunk beds. Financed by a \$5,000 Collins Foundation grant, the bunk bed program provides full time jobs at \$4 an hour for two adult men and an adult woman who had formerly been drug users.

The constructive work gives the former users more positive self-image, according to Benson. It enables them to say, "I'm through with drugs and ready to go back and work and live in the community," she said.

The beds sell for \$40 each, or \$80 a pair. She came up with the idea of making beds, Benson said, because she had seen too many children sleeping on the floor. Inexpensive tables may be added to the GMAD furniture line soon, she said.

Robert Milton, a House of Refuge Mission volunteer, serves as coordinator of the bed making project. Benson, a longtime community volunteer, received a plaque from the Metro Crisis Intervention Service for her around-the-clock volunteer work to make sure senior citizens had heat during a cold spell. She also received letters of commendation from King School for organizing back-to-school clothes drives.

Benson is optimistic about Grandmothers Against Drugs, but discouraged about the lack of community involvement in well-publicized events sponsored by GMAD. No one showed up for the drug abuse seminar at the center last week, for example, she said. That was a shame, she said, because parents and grandparents need drug awareness to recognize the signs of abuse among their children.

"So many grandmothers don't know what to look for," Benson said.

A pamphlet put out by her group lists the warning signs: a sudden or noticeable change in school performance, a loss of interest in sports and other activities, unexplained purchases or missing property, mood swings.

Not recognizing the warning signs leads to trouble for family members and senior citizens who often become the first victims of users seeking to finance their habits, Benson said.

She spoke of one 81-year-old woman who was surprised and robbed in a store parking lot after shopping with her daughter. "We are assisting in paying her rent because they took everything she had," Benson said. "It's really dangerous now for people to be out."

A support group like GMAD can help senior citizens understand what to look for so they can guard against attack, she said. "One of the main messages I'd like to get across is that there has to be drug awareness to prevent grandmothers and senior citizens from getting beaten up," Benson said.

GMAD meets tonight at 7:30 at the Senior Service Center at 4128 N.E. Union. Benson can be reached at the center from 9-5 at 281-1611. For further information, call HELPLINE of the Oregon Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, 232-8083.



Willa Dorsey will present a gospel concert Sunday, September 7 at 8:30 a.m. in Holladay Park. Concert is presented by Holladay Park Medical Center Foundation for the Light Rail Celebration.

## Light Rail Celebration Weekend

A community-wide celebration of the Portland area's new light rail system is set for Friday through Sunday, September 5-7.

Called "Ride the Rails," the celebration will offer free rides on the light rail trains all three days and will be a festive and historic occasion, with concerts, dances, shows, retail sales, exhibits, and other events along the entire fifteen-mile route from Gresham into Downtown Portland.

According to organizers, a "community feel" to the celebration will serve to help spotlight those districts disrupted by light rail construction and demonstrate how these districts and others have been conveniently linked by the new rail system.

Business organizations, civic groups, and individuals have planned the festival under the direction of Project Director Joan Biggs. Monies for the celebration were privately raised, with Fred Meyer, Inc., the main sponsor.

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|                |                   |            |
|----------------|-------------------|------------|
| Tuesday        | Bible Band        | 7:30 p.m.  |
| Thursday       | Choir Rehearsal   | 7:00 p.m.  |
| Sunday         | Sunday School     | 9:15 a.m.  |
| Morning        | Worship           | 11:15 a.m. |
| P.P.W.W.       |                   | 6:30 p.m.  |
| Evang. W.      |                   | 8:00 p.m.  |
| Tuesday-Friday | Noon Day Prayer   |            |
| Friday         | The Pastor Speaks | 7:30 p.m.  |
| Saturday       | Morning Prayer    | 9:00 a.m.  |

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Sundays: Evening, 7:00 P.M.  
Sundays: 5:45 P.M. - 7:00 P.M.

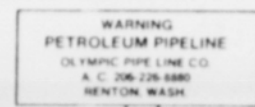
## In Concert

Mount Olivet Baptist Church Building Fund Committee proudly presents in concert Mr. Jerry White of California, renowned organist and soloist; Mrs. Lessie Williams, soloist; Rev. John Sims, soloist; Mr. Ken Barry, pianist and soloist; and Mr. Claude Bowles, Director of Jubilee Singers, Sunday, August 24, 1986 at 5 PM, N.E. First and Schuyler. Admission is free.

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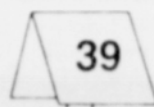
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