

With soap comes HOPE

COUPLE PROVIDES HOMELESS
WITH A PLACE TO SHOWER ON
THE WEEKENDS



BY **Esther Keane**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Harry Gerwien**

When Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on New Orleans in August 2005, everyone watched as reports of loss and need streamed in. Everyone including Hampton Roads local Clay Culbreth who didn't just observe but went to his brother, John, who had just bought a new truck.

The question he asked his brother was simple: What are you doing? Culbreth's plan was to drive to Louisiana with supplies and fuel and help wherever he was needed. No sponsor. No backing from an organization, just his brother, the truck and a willingness to help.

Once he made the first move, others heard about the plan and offered more supplies; one man even loaned a trailer that they filled from top to bottom.

The journey was a success, and many who had nothing were given something.

"I've always had a heart to give back," Culbreth said. "It's been a theme in my life that's come up over and over again."

He has displayed this by lending a hand wherever he can, whether that is donating supplies or finances to a nonprofit organization or opening his home, like he did for those in his neighborhood in the aftermath of Hurricane Isabel.

"Our house was one of the few with running water, so we let people come by whenever they needed to take showers," Culbreth said. "It's funny how that was sort of like a precursor to what we are doing now."

Today, Culbreth is the founder and operator of Soap Chips, a nonprofit that offers showers to the homeless in Hampton Roads. He explained that the name comes from the little used pieces of soap we are so quick to throw away. In the same way, we can be quick to take for granted how fortunate we are and disregard those who are in need.

Up and running since March of this year, the nonprofit's four-stall portable shower trailer is parked at PIN Ministry on 15th Street and Baltic Avenue in Virginia Beach. The homeless are welcome to take private showers on Saturday mornings or Sunday afternoons.

Culbreth, a commercial real estate agent, and his wife Kathi, a sales representative at Sentara Home Health Care, work the events together. Despite the fact that they both work full-time and have a busy family life, the couple, along with a few volunteers made up of friends and family, show up every weekend to serve those in need.

This is the first time he's ever gotten hands-on involved, Culbreth said. In 2007 he founded MINO, which stands for 'Money is no object,' as a way to donate money anonymously to other nonprofits.



At top, the Culbreths, Clay and Kathi, are shown with their portable trailer that's been in use since March. Clay said Kathi has an amazing gift of patience and kindness and she engages the customers. At lower right, Culbreth is shown with Soap Chips volunteers.

This year he changed the name to Soap Chips in order to serve his new vision.

“It’s a whole new world, because it’s not something I could just write a check for and then go about my business.”

While they haven’t kept count of the overall number of showers given since they started, they average about 50 to 60 showers a weekend with the biggest crowd coming out on Sundays.

Jerome, who didn’t provide his last name, has become a regular at Soap Chips. “The showers are a blessing because they can be taken anywhere,” he said, “and the best thing is you don’t have to go inside a building. You can take a shower and keep moving and go on about your day.”

He continued, “They are warm and a lot of people come because you can shower without 150 people lined up. It moves fast and you have some good guys out here that help us out.”

With portability at the heart of Culbreth’s vision, the four-stall shower trailer is supplied with a 300-gallon clean water tank, a 425-gallon gray water tank, two 45-pound propane tanks that power the instant hot water system, and a portable generator, making the unit entirely self-contained.

Culbreth was struck with the idea in 2013 after watching a YouTube video of a homeless man trying to find a place where his sons could take a shower and brush their teeth. He wondered what Hampton Roads was doing to meet that need locally. Turning to the Web, his research brought up only a few places throughout the seven cities that openly offer showers, all of them with limited times and accessibility. It was then that he was inspired to make plans for a shower that could meet the homeless where they are.

“I’m always interested in making things better,” Culbreth said. “If you see something, do something. If you see people in need, do something to help.”

But he’ll also be the first to say it’s easier said than done. Before the shower trailer was a reality, Culbreth had a vision not many others could see. A portable shower for the homeless is a fairly new concept.

Proceeding without a clear-cut example to follow prompted Culbreth to take his time doing research, some of which didn’t come back with positive results. He began to realize that leading this project meant taking complete ownership.

“During the beginning days, before I had the shower or a track record, I needed an in. I needed someone to believe in the vision and see past the disconnect others were struggling with,” Culbreth said.

With over 30 years’ experience in the commercial real estate industry, he is no stranger to cold calls and didn’t hesitate to meet with city employees, church board members, and any nonprofit organization that already offered breakfasts, dinners or overnights to the homeless. He pitched that he would simply add the showers to what they were already providing.

Culbreth said that walls immediately went up. They couldn’t see how allowing people to take any sort of public shower could be

discreet and safe. Discouraged, he noted in an online journal that he started on soapchips.org that “the enthusiasm faded and rekindled and faded.”

When the urge to act finally came back, Culbreth and his wife spent an entire Saturday driving from one homeless community to another, to ask people where they showered. He wanted to see the need for himself, up close and personal. The drive led them from Virginia Beach to Portsmouth as each group suggested another place to visit.

The Culbreths learned that without transportation, many homeless people in Hampton Roads hose off where they can or jump in the ocean. One man who owned a bike was able to ride 5 miles to the Union Mission Ministries in Norfolk, which provides showers. But by the time he rides 5 miles back in the summer heat, the effort seems futile.

It became apparent to the Culbreths that a portable shower is the answer.

Culbreth made a call to Rick Reuter with Power Mechanical, a company in Newport News that builds boilers. Culbreth had been

an agent for Reuter in the past, and while receiving financial support was a goal, he also needed expertise on how to build a portable unit. Reuter advised him that buying one would be cheaper than making one.

Culbreth then called a man in Minnesota, whose information he found online, that had a four-stall portable shower unit for sale. Told to call back when he was ready to make a serious offer, Culbreth instead shelved the idea.

Almost a year passed and the vision was still there. “It was not a loud shout,” Culbreth wrote in the online journal, “but an ongoing drone

of tidbits to act. It was a thought or a comment or a reading or a conversation.”

He decided to call the man in Minnesota, almost certain that the unit was no longer available. To his amazement, the unit hadn’t been sold. Better yet, the owner was willing to sell it for \$23,500 instead of the original price of \$33,000.

Culbreth contacted Reuter to see if he would be interested in making a financial investment. Reuter not only volunteered to match Culbreth dollar to dollar up to \$25,000 but also said many people in his organization were ready to get involved. In November 2014, Soap Chips took possession of the four-stall portable shower unit.

“I think it better to do and not ask,” Culbreth states in another online journal entry.

“What I mean,” he continues, “is do what needs to be done and let others offer to help.”

One more piece of the puzzle needed to be solved. With the unit purchased and moved into a makeover phase, Culbreth still needed a place to park the trailer.

It was Dallas Stamper, executive director of PIN Ministry, who finally gave Culbreth the chance he needed. Established in 2002,

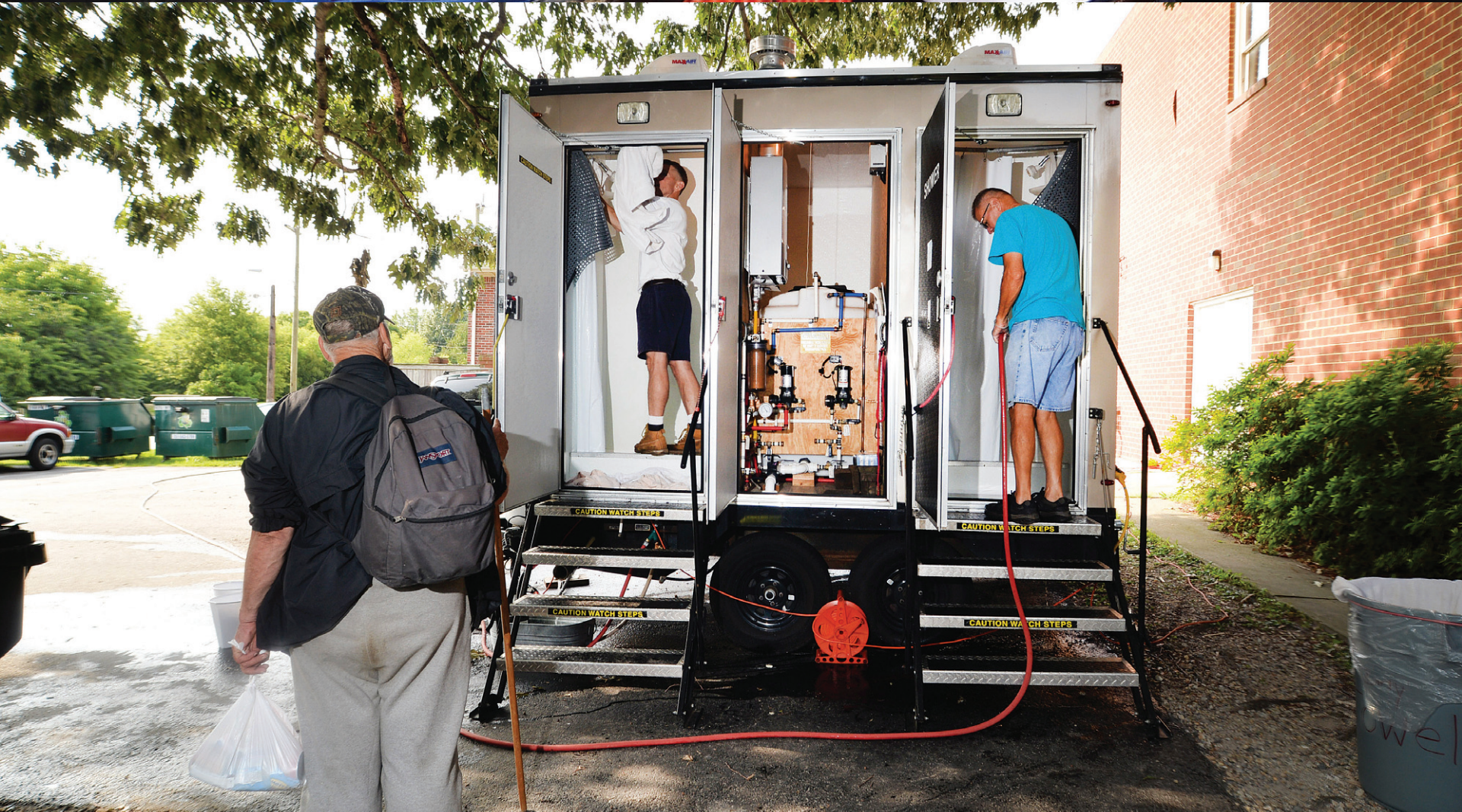
“*I’m always interested in making things better. If you see something, do something. If you see people in need, do something to help.*”
— Clay Culbreth,
Founder and operator of Soap Chips



GOING THE EXTRA MILE,
AFTER MILE AFTER MILE.

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Top photo, Culbreth greets a customer. Bottom photo, each stall is cleaned out after it's been used.

PIN provides breakfast on Saturdays and a clothes bank and dinner on Sundays. Soap Chips became a partner with the ministry to provide showers during its schedule of activities and keeps the trailer parked on the property throughout the week.

Culbreth remained steady against a current of negative remarks from associates and members of the community until finally the renovations were done and people could see for themselves the finished product. Completely private, the four stalls are large enough to allow someone to comfortably change out of their clothes and step into a shower that provides warm water at the push of a button.

At 6:45 on a summer Saturday morning, the Oceanfront is quiet and peaceful. For many, the day hasn't even started, but the Culbreths have been preparing for this moment all week.

The showers open at 7 a.m. but for the first half-hour only a few homeless people come by. They stand around the supply table Kathi has set up with fresh towels and wash clothes and boxes full of travel-size shampoos, conditioners, lotions and deodorants. Kathi greets each person with a smile and asks how their week has been as they look over the products, picking the scent they like best.

"The stories are what I love," Kathi said.

Repeat attendees are glad to see her, and those who are new quickly open up. It's in her nature to lend an ear and a word of encouragement. At the showers, Culbreth maintains the steady flow of traffic, cleaning out each stall after it has been used and monitoring the pumps and tanks.

Red, a recent attendee, said, "It's a great thing to have, and it comes in handy, especially for females. It takes a lot of pride to come out here and do this. Being homeless in general takes a lot of pride. I won't be like this for long."

Kathi is quick to ask her what she needs and to offer her prayers.

"She has an amazing gift of patience and kindness," Culbreth said, praising his wife. "I just run the showers, but she really engages people when they come by."

The two work as a team to care for their customers physically and emotionally.

"We get out here and work together and that's fun," Kathi said. "It's hard because we both work full-time, but it's neat that we both get out here and share the experience."

Every weekend presents a new lesson. One of the hardest so far has been handling complaints from customers. Whether it's that the water's too hot or too cold or that there aren't enough socks, Clay and Kathi take each remark with a smile and a promise to do better.

"We naturally hear the negative," Culbreth said. "We can hear 20 compliments but one negative gets to us."

During the first couple of weeks, the few complaints were overwhelming. Culbreth went to Stamper who has been serving the homeless for over a decade.

"He advised me to focus on my one mission," Culbreth said. "My mission is to provide showers. That just set me straight real quick."

One morning a husband, wife and their little girl came to take showers. Culbreth said that through a series of unfortunate circumstances the couple found themselves without employment or a home.

They had been living in their vehicle, trying to figure out the next move. Seeing their new sense of well-being after all three took



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– Clay Culbreth

a shower reminded Culbreth that the journey to get Soap Chips started has been worth it.

“I’ve had a shower today,” Culbreth said. “I might have another one later as well. It just shows how fortunate we are.”

Ultimately, the goal is to be mobile in order to reach more people.

“Ideally we would like to have 10 more trailers,” Culbreth said. “It would be easy if all you had to do was write a check, but you have to staff them and have a vehicle that can tow them.”

Until then, the Culbreths are hoping to collaborate with more organizations and ministries in the area. Culbreth recently spoke to Trudy Rauch with the Chesapeake Area Shelter Team. CAST partners with over 30 churches to provide overnight shelter from November to April. Each church offers its facility for one week, and starting this November, the Soap Chips trailer will be at each location to provide showers for those receiving a place to sleep.

As the location and volunteer details continue to be worked out, Culbreth stays focused.

“Right now I’m scraping for clean socks and deodorant,” he said.

From the beginning, Soap Chips has received consistent donations of travel-size soaps, shampoos and conditioners, but socks, underwear and deodorant are purchased by the Culbreths.

While more financial support would be welcomed, what they really need is time. More trailers means more volunteers.

“I’ve been blessed financially and I live modestly,” Culbreth said. “I just want to buy another trailer.”

As Culbreth sits in his 18th-story office in the heart of Town Center overlooking the city of Virginia Beach, he reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out a page removed from a daily devotional he reads every morning.

The page he holds focuses on George Washington’s leadership style. It states that Washington was a servant leader who in one story made an effort to replace the stones of a wall his riding party had knocked down despite his friends’ insistence that the owner of the wall would fix it himself.

Culbreth read, “I follow the great leaders by serving where I am able. I treat others as I would like to be treated.”

And then he said, “We as humans are really called to take care of others, and we can’t sit back and let other people do it, because if we do it will never get done. Do something, and hopefully that catches on with others.” – **IL**

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