

https://www.winchesterstar.com/news/clarke/fish-clothing-bank-at-old-chapel-to-close/article_f96aee12-50b3-5f99-9143-440a67bd9990.html

FISH Clothing Bank at Old Chapel to close

By CATHY KUEHNER | The Winchester Star
Feb 26, 2018



ABOVE: The FISH clothing bank stands in the background. RIGHT: FISH volunteers Mary Veilleux (from left), Shar Harrison, Mary Nagelvoort and Opal Wolford inside the building.

Scott Mason/The Winchest

MILLWOOD — Some drivers may go so fast they've never noticed the little, white clapboard building that sits off the road not far from the intersection of U.S. 340 and Bishop Meade Road (Va. 255) in Clarke County.

But for almost 50 years, that small building has provided county residents with free or inexpensive clothing. The volunteers who have kept the building filled with gently used clothes have also freely offered compassion and hope to those in need.

The FISH Clothing Bank at Old Chapel will open its doors for the last time on March 24, and its volunteers will spend the month of April clearing out the building.

“We want to thank the Burwell Cemetery board for allowing us to be here, rent free, for all these years,” said Sharon Harrison, a FISH of Clarke County board member whose late mother-in-law, Jane Harrison, co-founded FISH in the late 1960s.

Burwell Cemetery Inc. owns the building and recently informed FISH it is time for the nonprofit organization to vacate the old building.

“We’re probably going to put some money into the building and use it for the church,” said A.R. “Pete” Dunning, agent for Burwell Cemetery Inc.

The historic Episcopal church, known as Old Chapel, dates to 1793 and includes a cemetery that dates to the early 1700s. Both are located adjacent to the FISH building.

The FISH Clothing Bank is located in a one-story, two-room former schoolhouse that dates to 1840. It was originally a private school and became a public school in the 1870s.

Dunning said there are no immediate plans for the building, but one day it might be used by bridal parties prior to weddings at the church. “We will clean up the place, take down some trees to open it up and put up fences. It will be very nice,” he said.

In the late 1960s, Jane Harrison and Gertie Watkins were among a small group of concerned county residents who studied the needs of their Clarke neighbors. They determined the greatest need was connecting people who need help with people who could help.

They created FISH, a multifaceted volunteer organization that connects people to the services they need.

From the beginning, FISH collected clothes for individuals and families who are among the county’s working poor, as well as those on fixed incomes and those whose homes are destroyed by fire or other disasters.

Volunteers from 15 Clarke County churches have opened the little building for decades from 9 a.m. to noon on Saturdays and at other times for emergencies.

“They set up the shop and make it attractive. They keep it neat and tidy,” said Sharon Harrison.

“Volunteers knew to wear layers on cold days, and they knew how to start the wood stove,” said longtime volunteer Mary Nagelvoort, laughing. The only time the clothing bank did not open was when deep snow made it impossible to get to the door, she said.

FISH installed an electric heater years ago and repaired the roof. A portable toilet sits out back.

“Admittedly, we haven’t put a lot of money into the building, because we don’t own the building,” Harrison said.

Architectural historian Maral Kalbian, who is a consultant for Clarke County, said the former schoolhouse is a contributing structure in the Greenway Historic Rural District, meaning it is eligible for state and federal rehabilitation tax credits

Kalbian said the building was remodeled in the early 1930s and abandoned in 1941. It was sold and reopened as a private kindergarten in 1947.

It is unclear at what point the school permanently closed and the building became property of Burwell Cemetery Inc.

The church, the former schoolhouse and other buildings around Old Chapel are significant, Kalbian said, because the area was once a primary intersection in the county. Old Chapel Road defines the property’s southern border, and Chapel Run passes through the land.

“A building by itself may not tell the story of a place, but collectively they tell an important story,” Kalbian said. “Sometimes, buildings are altered to the point they’re unrecognizable. FISH was a good fit for that building.”

In addition to the clothing bank at Old Chapel, FISH of Clarke County has a thrift store, food pantry and administrative space at 36 E. Main St. in Berryville.

That expansion was possible for FISH after the Clarke County Library moved from the house at 36 E. Main St. to the Berryville-Clarke County Government Center on Chalmers Court in 2008. The Main Street house sat empty until 2013, when FISH moved in. Last year, volunteers planted a community garden in the backyard to grow fresh produce for the pantry.

In addition to providing clothing and food to those in need, FISH volunteers staff a telephone helpline service. Calls to 540-955-1823 are forwarded to FISH volunteers, who refer callers to the appropriate resources.

One resource is free transportation for elderly residents who need to get to medical appointments. Drivers are FISH volunteers.

FISH provides financial counseling, too, so individuals can better manage their money, and the organization is able to help with utility bills, heating fuel and donated firewood.

FISH remains an organization with few expenses. It depends on the goodwill of its volunteers as well as the support of local churches, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the Department of Social Services and individual gifts from residents.

Mary Veilleux, a longtime FISH volunteer and its current board president, said, "The volunteers have kept the Old Chapel clothing bank running smoothly all these years. They know more about it than I do."

Opal Wolford has volunteered at the clothing bank for more than a decade. "A team of volunteers comes on Friday to clean and arrange clothes," she said. "Then, a couple volunteers open the shop on Saturday morning. We have a great time."

Wolford continued, "This place has been meaningful to me. I'm praying we find another building."

Harrison said, "We'd love to find a space between Millwood and White Post, so we can continue serving residents who live in southern Clarke County. We can't afford to pay rent, but we know there is a need for a clothing bank."

She added: "If someone has a small space to offer, we'd love to look."

Dunning was adamant the building will not be torn down.

In December 2016, Burwell Cemetery Inc. purchased a two-acre lot north of Old Chapel. In January 2017, it demolished a mid-18th century, two-story house that sat by a spring along Bishop Meade Road without obtaining the required demolition permit. At that time, Dunning said there were no plans for the land where the house sat.

Of the former schoolhouse, Dunning said last week, “We’ll spend the money to make it nice. We’re working on Old Chapel, doing as much as we can afford to do.”

As FISH volunteers prepare for March 24 and the clothing bank’s last day, Veilleux said FISH of Clarke County is planning a 50th anniversary celebration in October.

“We will continue to serve county residents who are working but struggling to make ends meet, those who need a hand, and our elderly residents,” Veilleux said.

v

Visit FISH of Clarke County at fishofclarke.org and follow it on Facebook. Contact FISH at 540-955-1823 or fishofclarkeco@gmail.com.

— Contact Cathy Kuehner at ckuehner@winchesterstar.com