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Pregnant, in crisis and welcomed



"If your life is ever upside down, in chaos and crisis, that's when you come to Thiessen Roadhouse."

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JULIE SULLIVAN
The Oregonian Staff

Her story, as old as Christmas, began with a long trip and a child about to be born. She was 19. There was no room at the home for unwed mothers. She boarded a bus heading south.

It is easy, from 2007, to forget how lonesome that ride was, how leaving Oregon for a stark Oakland women's shelter "felt like driving off the edge of the world."

Linda Wiles Thornton never forgot. Forty-six years later, she leads pregnant strangers into her light-filled cottage in Milwaukie, past the Victorian couch and scented candles, to bedrooms plush with lacy pillows and fat comforters. The bedrooms are for the mothers.

The extra back room is for her. Her \$866 Social Security check goes to the lights, mortgage and groceries. She has no college degree, no grants, no foundation, no staff. She has a house. And for 23 years, that has been enough. "If your life is ever upside down, in chaos and crisis, that's when you come to



Thiessen Roadhouse," Wiles Thornton says.

She was a divorced mother of three tending bar and racing motorcycles, drifting from party to party, man to man, when, while riding dirt bikes at Sand Lake in 1979, she dropped to her knees on a hilltop and asked God to change her life. And, she says, God did.

Overnight, she opened a business as a custom sign-painter and pinstriper. And she opened her house: inviting homeless men, prostitutes and recovering drug users for dinner. "There was always someone at the table we'd never met," says daughter JillMarie Wiles. "We learned not to be judgmental but to find out what people's stories are."

As methamphetamine tore through Oregon families in the late 1990s, every call seemed to be about a mother in crisis, so Wiles Thornton aimed the program at them. A half-dozen area homes shelter pregnant women or mothers with newborns, most with waiting lists. "People think the maternity home is a thing of the past, but it's not, and the need for them is huge," says Robin Neal, who is director of pregnancy support at Catholic Charities. Elizabeth House, for example, shelters three young women and provides support for 150 others.



Wiles Thornton, 66, works alone, taking a woman or two at a time. She gets help from ordinary families and local businesses, gathering donations of, for instance, unsold items at garage sales. But after a head injury limited her ability to work, she's charged the mothers fees to cover costs. "These are my babies," she says pointing to framed photos lining a hallway. She has helped 34 women deliver. "I help women birth, support them, make it beautiful."

Julie Ferchland is a caterer who was heading a local drug prevention campaign when Wiles Thornton appeared at her garage sale and turned her into a supporter because she reaches out to one person at a time.

"I've worked for the public forever and I thought, 'She's somebody special,' " Ferchland said. "We don't run across people like that, someone so giving that is a normal person you'd meet at the grocery store."

With a style her daughter describes as "hippie chic Martha Stewart," Wiles Thornton has a knack for turning a \$7 bookshelf into the centerpiece of a remodeled kitchen, a Nordstrom window display item into a coffee table, a small suburban ranch into a private retreat for mothers and their babies. Mothers' names are stenciled on each bedroom door, and babies' ultrasound pictures are posted on the fridge. A walkway a recovering drug addict built is called the "pathway to hope and miracles."

"This is their home," Thornton says. "It's God's home and a mama can have her privacy in getting healed and well."

Annie Cernak was seven weeks pregnant with no job and no place to live when she called Thiessen Roadhouse in July 2005. Minutes later, Wiles Thornton pulled up in a van, jumped out and hugged her.

"She said that she loved me," Cernak recalls. "I didn't know what to think, I was so overcome." Cernak moved in and stayed 14 months. Wiles Thornton stood at her side and helped deliver baby Karmen, who turns 2 on Jan. 19. This fall, Cernak earned her real estate license; she works two jobs to support her family.

Plenty fail. One pregnant woman stomped out because Wiles Thornton required that she quit smoking. Another, after five months of Wiles Thornton's intense support to reunite her with her newborn already in state custody, returned to abusing drugs. Wiles Thornton learned of the abuse from other mothers, prayed overnight, then asked the woman to leave for a drug program. She mentioned the departure several times the next day, wavering between anger -- "she wasn't serious about her baby" -- and resignation.

That night, she called the remaining mothers into Bible study, "to just to have the sisterhood and ask God to take care of you daughters and bless this house."

"The closest we come to the Lord is our babies, but that gift can be taken from you," she told them. "So what are your triggers? How can you cope?"

Wiles Thornton works closely with state caseworkers and court-appointed advocates for children. In 2006, the Oregon Republican Party named her a "hometown hero." She reluctantly began fundraising after a fall from a horse in 2000 left her unable to see well enough to continue sign painting. She charges \$600 a month for room, board, transportation and classes, but both she and mothers struggle to afford that. She spent six months collecting items for an annual auction, but her most recent earned just \$14,000 -- less than a third of the \$58,000 annual budget.

"But can I stop her? Can I stop her? I have to support her," JillMarie Wiles says. Her mother's altruism led to her own career: Wiles is a nationally known commercial auctioneer who also raises thousands of dollars for charity.

Hospitality is central to the holidays, sharing food and drink with those we love most. But Christian theologian Paul Louis Metzger, author of "Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church," says that the Bible calls for hospitality to strangers and to give to those who cannot give back or help us.



On Christmas Eve, dozens of the hundreds of people who've stayed with Wiles Thornton return to Thiessen Roadhouse. From JillMarie and her husband, real estate broker Tim Stuart, and their children to a one-time heroin addict who was living in a Dumpster when Wiles Thornton approached him at a truck stop. Now he is drug-free and the married father of one.

Others telephone from across the country to join in "our family tradition of loving on each other," Wiles Thornton says. There is no Christmas tree or pile of gifts -- an exchange would discourage those who can't afford them. Instead, Wiles Thornton reads the Christmas story. They light candles. One by one, they say what they are thankful for this year and what their prayer is for the next.

Their gift, Wiles Thornton says, is their presence.

Julie Sullivan: 503-221-8068; juliesullivan@news.oregonian.com