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## His calling was to a thrift store on Lee Street

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GREENSBORO - Kenneth Brown keeps the small, red book in his small, cluttered office at the Salvation Army Family Store.



**Kenneth Brown is the store manager of the Salvation Army Family Store in Greensboro.**

Credit: Neslon Kepley / News & Record

He and Nicole "Nikky" Slaughter, his assistant manager, use it to record the names of any new student who comes in for community service after getting suspended from school or popped by the law.

Flip through it and you'll see hundreds of names and phone numbers. And every one has a story, a story about a broken kid in need.

They come in looking all hard. They don't want to hang clothes, load trucks, or watch an inspirational Christian film.

But days later, Brown and Slaughter see the change. The hard façade cracks, they open up and they leave with Slaughter's words of advice bouncing around in their head.

"Just come back and tell us you're on the right road."

They do. And they don't get into any more trouble. The numbers and the school social workers will tell you that.

So will Brown. But he knows about transformation firsthand. He's been broken, too.

It must've been six years ago when he was riding high. Married with a young son. Building a new house in Liberty. Driving an SUV with leather seats. Making \$70,000 a year running a retail store that moved nearly \$14 million in merchandise.

Then, in two months, everything tumbled.

His marriage dissolved. His grandfather got sick. His store went out of business. He had a benign

### WANT TO HELP?

The Salvation Army needs more volunteers to work with the teenagers who come in for community service at the nonprofit's thrift store. If you're interested, call Christy Hardy at 235-0349.

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tumor the size of a golf ball on his right lung. And he was headed toward foreclosure. He was broke - and alone.

At his rented house in High Point, he'd get up before daybreak, bike five minutes to a nearby park and sit on the bleachers. There, as the sun topped the trees, he prayed hard. "Lord, why did this have to happen?"

As a child, the youngest of three, Brown had grown up at South Elm Street Baptist. His mother was the church secretary. But as he grew older, he had abandoned his faith in his drive to make a dollar.

But he remembered how his church - and his faith - made him feel: safe and secure. So, Brown returned to church and started to pray.

Answers came. It felt almost surreal, as if guided by an unseen hand.

Like the time he went to dinner with a friend, unwrapped a butter mint and read the phrase, "Remember, you are not alone." Brown kept that saying in his wallet for months.

Or the time he sat down with the Salvation Army in early 2003 and talked to them about the opening at the thrift store.

He already had snagged a store manager's job with a High Point furniture company that paid him much more money. But he heard this small voice in his head.

"Kenneth, this is what I prepared you for."

He believes that. Especially today.

"This is my mission field," he says. "I'm not called to a foreign soil. I'm called to Lee Street."

Brown is now 40, a new husband and a new father with a new outlook on life. He ditched his ties. He feels more comfortable in a T-shirt and jeans as he runs a thrift store that makes, maybe, \$700,000 a year.

But it's not about the money. It's about the names in that small, red book.

Ask Brown about them, and his face breaks. Between sobs, he'll tell you their stories. Calvin has a father in prison. Arica has no father. And Jesse had just lost his father when he felt moved to come by.

"I felt I was loved here," Jesse told them in April, "and this was the place to go."

Brown has dozens of stories like that. And with each teenager - Brown calls them "kids" - he does the same thing when they come in: watches "Facing The Giants," a 2006 Christian drama about high school football.

Afterward, they talk. And sometimes, Brown will share his own story. But mostly, he or Slaughter will share their faith, give them a New Testament and scribble their name in their small, red book.

Expect our call, they'll say. We want to make sure you're all right.

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