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Gail Kerr: Room in the Inn ceremony brings everyone home

Commentary by **Gail Kerr** · The Tennessean · September 12, 2010

It was a scene that moved many to tears.

Hundreds of people gathered behind a downtown railroad trestle to see the new \$13 million **Room in the Inn** building. The designer-dud clan was there, from Nashville's oldest money. They stood toe-to-toe with the poorest among us — like the man with a backpack containing all of his possessions.

There was no discussion of mosques or the legalities of panhandling. **Gov. Phil Bredesen** and Mayor Karl Dean stayed nearly two hours, shaking the hands of the humble. Bredesen took photos of the crowd to e-mail his wife.

Charles Hodge, dressed in a jacket and tie, said he had prepared a written speech, but he decided to throw it away.

"I have to do this from the heart," Hodge said. "I don't consider myself homeless, because home is where the heart is. And my heart is here."

With that, he let fly a beautiful baritone rendition of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" to the folks gathered on an asphalt parking lot bookended by the old and the new.

The ragged old building was reflected in the windows of the shiny new glass and chrome one. Phase one of Room in the Inn's glorious transformation is done.

Now, it's on to phase two. Supporters will start afresh raising \$2.5 million to renovate that crumbling hunk of concrete. But before that starts, it was fitting to celebrate the new building with a ribbon-cutting, speech-giving, head-bowing, choir-singing ceremony.

"This must be holy ground," said Rachel Hester, executive director of Room in the Inn.

It all began with sandwiches

Room in the Inn began in 1977, when Father Charlie Strobel noticed shivering humans in his parish parking lot. He invited them in, fed them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and began a passionate lifelong ministry to the urban poor.

Room in the Inn now shuttles homeless guests to 173 congregations to eat and sleep every winter night. At the campus, beds are available for the most medically fragile. They have computer classes, job training, meals, crisis help, alcohol and drug treatment, phones and mailboxes.

The old building was cluttered and cramped. The new building is spacious and amenity-filled. It has coffee, free laundry service, music and art rooms, a lending library and a roof-top garden. For the first time, Room in the Inn also is becoming a landlord. Thirty-eight affordable apartments will be rented to working homeless men.

"It's hard to believe a peanut butter sandwich could lead to this," Strobel said. "All of you — every single one of you — is a special gift from God. You are good, lovable, beyond our imagination. I hope this building's beauty will reflect the beauty that is within yourself."

There's a daily mantra at Room in the Inn. Whether it's getting one more cold human in a van, adding one more cot or squeezing a few more people in out of the rain, they say, "Make a hole!"

Room in the Inn, old and new, fills holes in hearts

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and bodies. Holy ground, indeed.

Gail Kerr's column runs on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Find out more about her and contact her through her [reporter page](#).

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