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*January 14, 2021*

## **“A Quiet Space” for Saige**

The City Mission Library in Memory of Saige Knapp opened on December 2. It has been a dream two years in the making for Shelby Lonce, City Mission’s Donor Relations Manager, who is working to honor the memory of her brother, Saige, who passed away in 2017.

“When you lose a loved one,” she explained, “your whole life comes to a screeching halt. The rest of the world keeps moving, but you’re stuck.” Shelby and her family have been looking for ways to heal after their tragic loss.

“The idea of donating books kept gnawing at me,” Shelby said. “It came to me in dreams.”

When her brother died, Shelby and her family cleaned out his home. They packed away 11 boxes full of stuff. Three of those boxes were books. “Books are what helped him in his life,” she said. “he managed to keep all of those books even through time in jail and periods of homelessness. They were helpful to him. I wanted to get books in the hands of our residents too.”

She started a book drive and got 80 books by the end of the first day and 200 brand new books at the end of the initial drive. When she donated the books to City Mission, Dean Gartland, the Mission’s President/CEO told her it had always been his dream to start a library for the residents. “And that became my mission,” Shelby recalls.

Shelby developed a very specific vision for the library. It was very important that the books be brand new or in excellent condition. She did not wish to fill the library with books that look like somebody’s throwaways.

“I don’t want our residents to think that they are anybody’s throwaways,” she explained. “I want them to feel and know that they are worthy. This is just a moment in their life on the way to better things.”

Roughly a thousand books were collected for the library. Shelby made a list of all the books Saige had read throughout the last five years of his life, and she was able to get almost every single one of them for the City Mission Library.

One of the classrooms in the Mission’s Career Training and Education Center was converted into a library space, and beautiful, new shelves were built and installed along the walls. Shelby procured an online cataloguing system and started coming in on the weekends to label, categorize, and sort each and every book. Quickly, she realized that this was a much bigger task than she was able to accomplish on her own.

That was when Brianna Kadlecik, City Mission’s Manager of Career Services, jumped onboard the project.

“It was just this amazingly perfect thing,” said Brianna. “I love books, and I get to sit in a room full of books and talk to residents about books. This is my dream.”

Brianna took over the day-to-day management of the library, and she was immediately impressed with the quality and variety of the books. “When I do intake with new residents, I can think of books in our library that directly meet their needs and can help them with the exact things that they want to learn.”

When Brianna told Matt, a City Mission resident and avid reader, about the project, he jumped at the chance to help.

“Personally, I consider it a privilege to be able to work on this project,” he said. “I’m grateful that in this season of my life, God was able to use me to be a piece of the puzzle to help Shelby and her family. I’m glad I was part of that.”

When he started working on the library, the books were all in piles on the floor. He worked to categorize, stamp, label, and organize every single book in the library. He volunteered his time on evenings and weekends, working for about six weeks to get the library ready to open.

“Books have absolutely been transformational for me in my life. I’m a big believer in the power of books. Absolutely,” he explained. “Shelby saw fit to keep everything neat and organized and to make sure all the books were in good condition. That speaks volumes to me.”

Matt is also excited about what the library space could eventually mean for himself and his fellow residents. “The library will provide a place for you to enter into the world of the book and allow the book to enter into your world. To enter that place of imagination. It could also be a place to do homework and study. Right now, there just isn’t that place. It’s tough. You have to scramble to get time and a place to study and focus.”

“My hope,” added Shelby, “is that eventually the library can be a quiet space for residents to go. There aren’t too many of those places around campus right now.”

Currently, during the COVID pandemic, the library is open primarily online, and only one resident at a time is permitted in the library space. Residents can view the card catalog online and check out up to two books at a time, and Brianna will have the books delivered directly to them. Eventually, once COVID restrictions are lifted, the library will be open for browsing.

For one resident in particular, the library has already been a revelation. Lu is a refugee from Burma who is still learning to read and speak English. His face lit up when he walked into the library for the first time. He went straight for the kids’ section and starting reading and re-reading Dr. Seuss books out loud, practicing words he doesn’t normally see or say.

“The delight on his face was just so genuine,” said Brianna, who was in the library at the time. “It was just a really beautiful moment. We’re giving him a resource he wouldn’t otherwise have.”

The library is already proving to be a valuable resource for City Mission residents. And for Shelby and her family, it has already been a healing experience.

Saige’s daughter, his aunts and uncles, and his cousins from all across the country needed some avenue to direct all the love they still have for Saige, and this library has been a unifier for them all.

“It has been really amazing to connect with people who have donated books to the library and to share Saige’s story with City Mission donors,” she explained. “Saige is the reason I’m connected to the Mission. He is in the fabric of the Mission.”

“Saige was so smart and kind and adventurous,” Shelby added. “He would read everything. He had a really good heart. He was so much more than his addiction. I just wish he could have known that.”

“Saige struggled with self-worth. He struggled to separate his identity from his addiction,” Shelby said. But when he came to City Mission, everyone treated him like family. “I’m really thankful for what the Mission has been for my family,” she added. “I’m thankful that City Mission is here for our residents, because all of our residents are somebody’s brother or dad or sister.”

**About City Mission:** For over 75 years, City Mission has sheltered, healed, and restored the homeless to independent living—without discrimination. City Mission’s comprehensive program addresses both short-term needs like food and shelter, and long-term needs, including drug and alcohol counseling, mental health and medical treatment, legal aid, and employment training. City Mission’s goal is to help each man, woman, mother with children, or veteran who walks through our doors to become a healthy, productive member of society. With your help, we can help our residents renew their lives.