

'His Branches' opens, with hope for Arnett Blvd.

by Tom Williams

For ten years, the pessimists have been having a field day on Arnett Boulevard's commercial strip—an increase in abandoned storefronts, crime, litter, and other ills.

Maybe that's come to an end.

"His Branches" has arrived.

Occupying the former Mahali Youth Center building at 344 Arnett Boulevard, "His Branches" now contains a medical practice and a coffee house, and will soon have a Christian bookstore and counseling services.

As pure bricks and mortar, the refurbished structure with its Park Avenue-style canopy and remodeled interior is already having an enormous positive psychological impact in that area. But there's more: His Branches is the visible expression of the personal religious commitment of several dozen city and suburban people.

"It is a personal expression of our own involvement with Jesus Christ," explains Dr. William Morehouse, who heads the new medical practice.

"This is the answer to our prayers of the past year," observed co-organizer Jerry Wilkins at last Sunday's dedication service at the His Branches coffeehouse.

His Branches is certainly an unlikely creation - its founders prefer the word "miraculous."

It all started about one year ago when Jerry Wilkins, the Dean of Men at the Elim Bible Institute in Lima, was visiting Westminster Presbyterian Church, where Bill Morehouse and his family (wife Sue and daughter Sarah) worship regularly.

"I was sharing my burden with Bill and with Dr. Tucker (the Rev. Bruce Tucker, pastor at Westminster) about the great need to bring the teachings of Christ into the cities, and into Rochester in particular. Originally, we were hoping to found an intercessory prayer center, which may yet come out of this," says Jerry.



In front of "His Branches": from left, Rita Donnelly, Jerry Wilkins, Bernie Heroux, Jim Wilenius, Bill Morehouse.

Call it coincidence or an answer to prayers, but at the very same time, the 344 Arnett Boulevard building was being sold to Bernie Heroux, who had high hopes of rehabilitating its apartments and storefronts. Bernie, who recently moved to Rochester from his native French Canada, unabashedly calls himself one of those people who sees a half-full glass of water instead of a half-empty one.

In short order, the Wilkins-Morehouse group agreed to start work on the ex-Mahali space downstairs, while Bernie finished work on the apartments upstairs (now fully rented). Bernie saw the proposed new Christian center as the key to getting the commercial-space ball rolling along that deteriorated section of Arnett Boulevard. A committed Christian himself, he is now affectionately known as "brother Bernie."

Bernie Heroux calls the surrounding 19th Ward "a great neighborhood with real dynamic people." He feels that the only reason Arnett Boulevard has not revived at the same rate as the residential area around it is because nobody like himself (except for the existing merchants) has taken the first step, the big plunge.

The popular conception that large amounts of cash or financial clout are needed to refurbish a storefront is refuted at His Branches. As soon as the idea was launched by Bill Morehouse, Jerry Wilkins, and several Westminster Presbyterian Church members, other Christians began to pop out of the woodwork to offer volunteer help—and some literally helped with the woodwork.

Another important member of the founding group was Jurjen J. Hoomans, former Protestant chaplain at St. Mary's Hospital and now pastor of the North Chili Community Church. Mr. Hoomans (pronounced hoe-mans) is also developing a rural retreat center at his home in North Chili.

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From city and suburb alike, people donated some wood here, some paint there, some expertise at electrical wiring, some legal, or financial assistance, or whatever, to get His Branches off the ground (the name comes from Christ's New Testament message, "I am the Vine and you are the branches."). They were, and are, members of dozens of different Christian churches, including Protestant, Catholic, and non-denominational fundamentalists.

"What we all had in common," says the gentle-mannered, soft-spoken Bill Morehouse, "was that we were Christ-centered people seeking wholeness in our lives, and we felt we could lead other people to wholeness in a very gentle, sharing sort of way." With that foundation, Jerry Wilkins' prayer center idea blossomed into a place where a whole range of human-oriented services could be offered. The result is His Branches.

A graduate of the University of Kentucky Medical School, Dr. Bill Morehouse, 34, lives on Wellington Avenue and has had a life-long dream of practicing medicine in the city. He interned at Highland Hospital and was a staff physician at the old Third Ward Health Center before it became the Millbank Center. For the past several years, he has shared a private practice with another Christian-oriented family doctor on South Goodman Street.

Spiritual healing is an integral part of Bill's practice, he says, and people of all faiths can experience healing in both the physical sense and in the spiritual sense that Christ and his disciples often practiced. The bookstore, coffeehouse, and counseling service—all operated at no profit and with whatever donations and volunteer help can provide - will work in harmony to assist each individual who comes in contact with His Branches toward a more fulfilling life.

But it won't be replacing the local churches. Explains Bill: "Our goal will be to serve and support their work." Nor do the His Branches people have visions of grandeur: "This will be the focus for this kind of service in this neighborhood," notes Bill, "but hopefully other centers like it can be set up in other city neighborhoods." Bill added that his new medical practice on Arnett Boulevard will have reached its ultimate goal when he is able to bring in another Christian physician to assist him. At this infant stage of the practice, he is helped in clerical duties by Rita Donnelly, a member of St. Monica's parish.

For now, the founders of His Branches are taking special pride in a statement by Jerry Wilkins, made at last Sunday evening's dedication: "We have the opportunity in Rochester to be a showcase for the Lord, to claim this neighborhood for Jesus Christ, so that whole families may be transformed."
