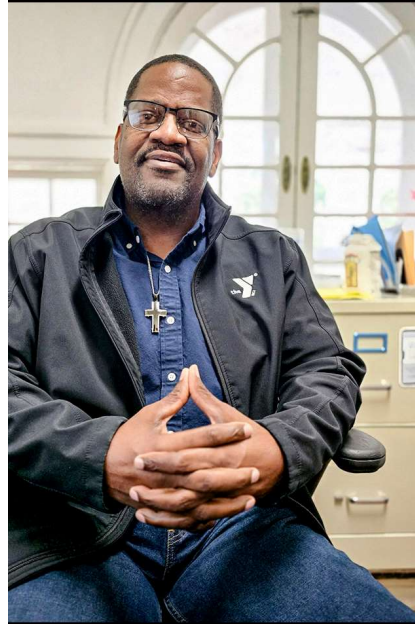


PREMIUM REPORTS

# *A Place of Hope and Refuge for Houston's Growing Homeless Population*

Magnificat Houses founder, Rose Mary Badami, recently passed away at the age of 100, but her legacy lives on.



(Clockwise from top left) St. Joseph Clubhouse Director Darrien Phillips, Magnificat Houses member Caesar Pena, and Magnificat Houses executive director Meredith Vaughan. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

 221

 153

 Listen

 Save

By **Allan Stein** | August 18, 2024 Updated: August 20, 2024

HOUSTON—He was hungry, alone, and struggling to survive on the streets of Houston, but somehow, Caesar Pena knew kinder days were just ahead of him.

“I’m a spiritual person. I pray a lot. I wasn’t lazy about being homeless,” said the silver-haired Pena, 56.

During that desperate period in his life, Pena had no money, no job, and no family to rely upon. He was also disabled, battling drugs and alcohol.

The only thing he truly owned was the determination to rise above his painful condition in life. He began digging his way out of poverty and homelessness.

By good fortune, a friend introduced him to St. Joseph Clubhouse about 10 years ago. He said the program opened up a world of possibilities for him.

Not only that, Pena believes the program saved his life by providing him with access to food, clothing, shelter, and employment opportunities.

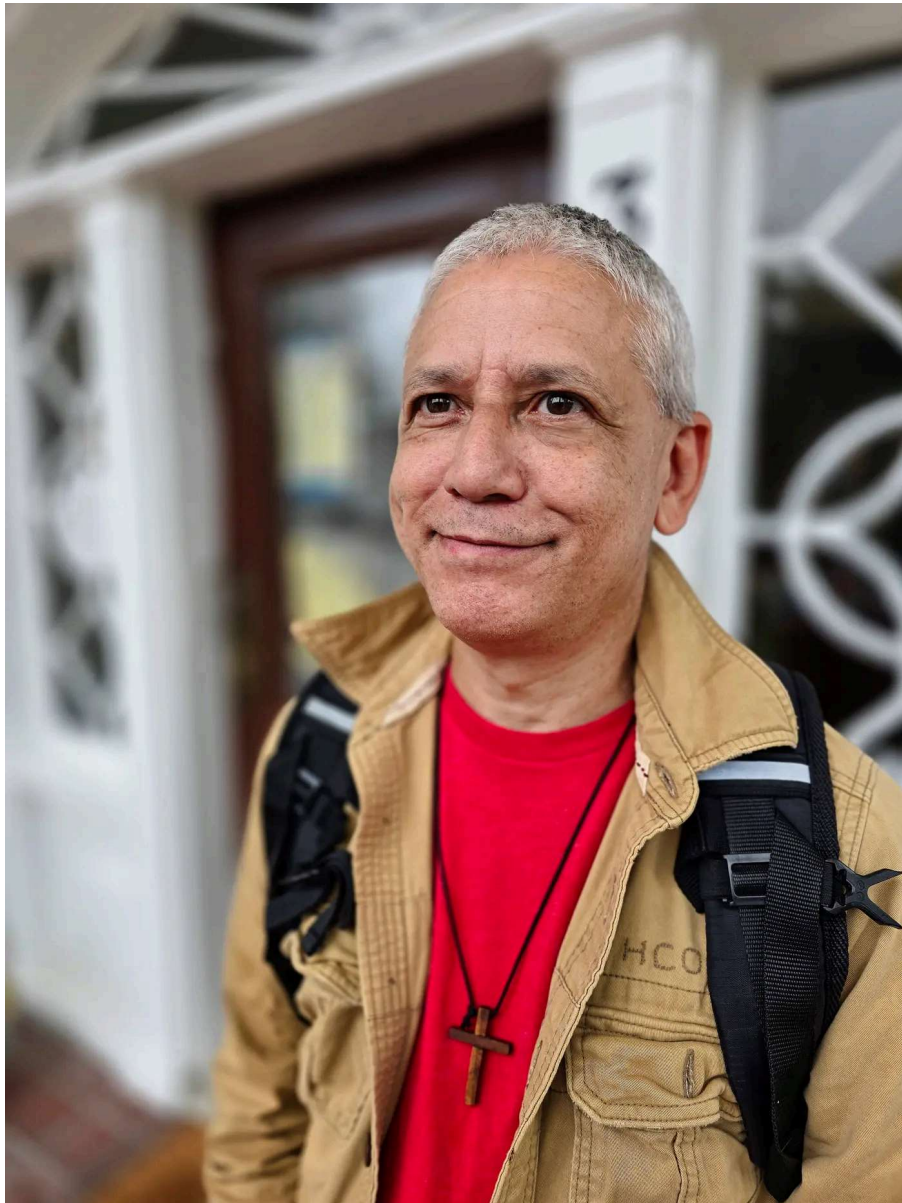
In short, he’d found his family.

“They practically gave my life back to me. They helped restore my life,” Pena told The Epoch Times.

“In a nutshell, they are my support system—my place of refuge. They make me feel loved. They’ve been my family for 10 years.”

Now, he has an apartment and a renewed sense of purpose in life.

“I’m doing my future right now. I’m living my future. St. Joseph’s is part of my future—a big part of my future,” he said.



Caesar Pena, 56, had been living on the streets of Houston before he discovered St. Joseph House in 2014, on July 26, 2024. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

St. Joseph is one of many nonsectarian services provided by Magnificat Houses, a faith-based nonprofit offering support to the chronically homeless and mentally ill.

But it's more than the number of programs that Meredith Vaughan cares about as Magnificat's new executive director.

"I want this to be about quality," she said. "I want all the beds filled. I want the quality of our programs to be top-notch."

Vaughan began her new position in April—just two months before the group's founder and former executive director, Rose Mary Badami, died peacefully in a care facility at the age of 100.

At Rose Mary's wake, Vaughan prayed: "Please watch over me. Please make sure I do right by you. That's the most important thing."

"I feel a great responsibility to carry on her legacy," Vaughan told The Epoch Times. "I think about her every day."

Born in 1923, Rose Mary was a child of the Great Depression. At the time, it was common for her to see homeless men, hats in hand, at her grandmother's back door.

"Instead of handing them a sack lunch, her grandmother invited the strangers into the dining room to eat on her best china," Badami's obituary reads.

"Rose Mary never forgot the dignity her grandmother bestowed on the helpless. It shaped her life and her career."

In 1968, Badami saw the mounting need for support services with the closure of most state-sponsored mental institutions. As the number of homeless individuals on the city's streets continued to grow, she decided to take action.

She purchased and repaired a house in midtown Houston with the help of private money and volunteers. She then turned the house into



Rose Mary Badami.  
Courtesy of Magnificat  
Houses



a place of hope and healing for street-bound women.

“Over time, Magnificat grew to encompass 15 residential properties, mostly neighborhood homes where the homeless and ex-offenders could re-enter society through a supportive, family-style environment,” her obituary states.

In 1972, Badami launched her downtown Houston soup kitchen, Loaves & Fishes, serving a daily average of 340 meals to hungry residents.



Volunteers line up cups filled with apple juice at Loaves & Fishes Soup Kitchen in Houston on July 27, 2024.  
Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

“By 1991, confident that mental illness underlies most social problems, Rose Mary founded St. Joseph House to offer free healing programs for Magnificat residents,” her obituary reads.

Magnificat Houses is a community in the “fullest sense of the word,” according to the organization’s website.

“All who come here are wanted and needed as valued members of our extended family.

“And just like a family, our guests and members contribute to running their houses, volunteer in the larger community, and work, dine, and play together.”

In the meantime, Magnificat Houses is working on a three-year plan to continue growing in service quality, people, brand name, and culture and acquiring stewardship finances through grant writer Kimberly Elliott.

The organization operates with 30 employees and a \$2 million annual budget.

“We need to always be in a place of financial strength, and that’s always a challenge for a nonprofit. It never ends,” Vaughan said.



Meredith Vaughan began her role as executive director at Magnificat Houses in Houston in April 2024. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

Magnificat Houses currently has 77 people enrolled in group homes with a total capacity of 99 residents.

In addition to support services, the organization provides occupational training at Moran Center and job skills matching programs.

In late 2022, the NHP Foundation closed on the construction financing for Rose Mary's Place Apartments, a 149-unit studio apartment complex for formerly chronically homeless people.

The NHP Foundation said that when completed, the four-story elevator building will provide "wraparound social services" for all income-eligible residents in a partnership venture with Magnificat Houses.

In fiscal year 2023, Houston allocated \$179 million for homeless solutions, according to Homeless Houston.

The organization also found that in 2023, more than 23,300 people in Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties sought access to homeless services.

The 2024 Homeless Count and Survey revealed that at “any given moment,” nearly 3,300 individuals were “experiencing homelessness” in the Houston area.

According to the NHF Foundation website, “The construction of Rose Mary’s Place will help to alleviate the growing homelessness issue in the city of Houston while providing residents with the support that they need.”

The total development cost of the project is an estimated \$46.3 million, with financing from the city, Harris County, and other funding sources.

Vaughan said her mission is to continue Badami’s legacy while acknowledging the spiritual and business sides of Magnificat Houses.

“We’re not just here for the business side. We’re here because of the ministry, which is a very religious component—a faith-based component, I would say,” Vaughan said.

The organization hired St. Joseph Clubhouse Director Darrien Phillips in April. He worked for many years in the child welfare and protective services sector.





Darrien Phillips is the new director of St. Joseph Clubhouse, a program of Magnificat Houses, in Houston, on July 26, 2024. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

“There are many times I would drive by a homeless person living in the elements, and I would always wonder why. I knew I just had to get involved,” Phillips said.

He agrees that mental illness and homelessness often go hand in hand and that many people living on the streets lack access to resources and programs.

“The number is so great [but] we can only do our part,” Phillips told The Epoch Times. “People don’t really understand why a person would become homeless.

“It’s not anything new. It’s just more [prevalent] now. And there is more awareness of it. It’s worldwide. Hopefully—prayerfully—people will take a look at it and take it seriously.”

Sometimes, a homeless or mentally ill person doesn’t want help, he said. Others will discover that obtaining services requires navigating through bureaucratic “hoops.”



**We ask them [to be productive],  
and then we give them the ability  
to do those things on their own.  
We help them find purpose.**

*Darrien Phillips, director, St. Joseph Clubhouse*

Having a mental illness makes this doubly challenging for a homeless person seeking help, Phillips said.

“This is the part that gets lost in the fray—sympathy. Sympathy has been lost somewhere along the way,” he said.

“I was born in the 60s. It was love thy neighbor. Now, everybody has their ideology and agendas. And so empathy has been lost along the way. It gets discouraging at times, but you have to keep fighting.”

Fortunately, Phillips gets to see success stories at St. Joseph every day: residents who found a good job or a place to call their own.

“Every day, we push for productive days. But we don’t force them to do anything. We ask them, and then we give them the ability to do those things on their own. We help them find purpose,” Phillips said.



Greg Lueb worked in finance before retiring and then taking a position as managing director of food services at Magnificat Houses in June 2019.



Greg Lueb (L), managing director of food services, coordinates food preparation with St. Joseph Director Darrien Phillips (R), and volunteer Loretta Scribner, at Magnificat Houses in Houston on July 26, 2024. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

He remembered Rose Mary as a person whose handshake was her bond and who had one standing order: “Nobody leaves hungry.”

“She wanted group homes to be communal experiences. Everybody eats and does chores together,” Lueb said.

Though his roles are now many, Lueb said he is satisfied in knowing that his work helps people rebuild their broken lives.

He said that making sure they're fed properly—whether in a group home or soup kitchen—is a significant part of his job.

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**Many residents of Magnificat Houses  
have found jobs as bartenders,  
cashiers, chefs, and donut makers,  
earning wages that might lead them  
to independent housing.**

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“I’m doing a lot of things. Rarely, I sit still,” Lueb said. “You come in the morning hoping. If you do just one good thing for somebody, it makes the day.”

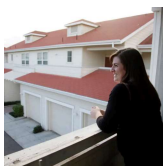
Tacked onto a bulletin board in St. Joseph are pictures of Magnificat House’s latest success stories—residents who found jobs as bartenders, cashiers, chefs, and donut makers, earning wages that might lead them to independent housing.

Robert, now in his 70s, said he was almost homeless when he joined St. Joseph. He spends his days in the clubhouse, conversing with fellow members and reading.

“Wherever there is something to learn, I go for it,” he said. “It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness.”

#### **Premium Picks**

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California to Turn Unused School Land  
Into Millions of Housing Units





## Los Angeles Buys 'Luxury' Apartments With 'Sweeping Views' to House Homeless

At another group home, Kelley, 38, had been there only three weeks, but her leadership skills earned her the title of house leader.

Kelley said she became homeless following the breakup of an abusive relationship in Missouri. So she came to Houston, thinking there were better opportunities.

When she arrived, she encountered long waiting lists for available programs and services for the homeless.

"I was living outside, sleeping under bridges," Kelley told The Epoch Times. "I came down here thinking there was a lot of help for the homeless."

"When I got here, it wasn't so easy getting in. There were waiting lists. I didn't know where to go. It was most unexpected."

Feeling overwhelmed, Kelley was "on her last legs—she really was," Lueb said.

Her plan now is to find a job and start her own cleaning business.

"Well, I'm hoping to get my place soon. I'm hoping," Kelley said.

James, 66, is an assistant house leader who serves as a "cold breakfast cook" at Magnificat's Emmaus House. He's been in the program for the past 13 years.



Magnificat Houses assistant group home leader James, 66, sits on the bench on the front porch on July 26, 2024. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

Before that, he'd been living on the streets, obtaining available resources from charitable groups.

On a Friday, someone told him about Magnificat House.

“I had to suffer through Saturday and Sunday to get to Monday” in order to apply for residency, he said.

“It just fell in my lap. It’s God-given. I can’t explain it any other way,” James told The Epoch Times.

Group home leader and “hot breakfast cook” Ross, 66, had just returned on a bicycle laden with groceries and immediately began restocking the food pantry.

He became a resident 14 years ago after serving time in prison and learning about Magnificat Houses from a “cellie.”



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**This place has changed my whole life. It's kept me going in the direction my mom wanted me to go—which was straight.**

*Ross, group home leader, Magnificat Houses*

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Ross wrote to “Miss Rose Mary” asking to become a resident, and she replied, “Yeah, I got a place for you.”

“I said, ‘Well, can I give you a big hug?’ She said, ‘You better.’”

“This place has changed my whole life. I went in [prison] for drugs. I had a lot of people praying for me. So this was a faith-based program,” Ross told The Epoch Times.

“It's kept me going in the direction my mom wanted me to go—which was straight.”

As a group home resident, he reads The Bible every day, prays, and talks to God in church.

“I only missed one day. It was raining bad, but I wanted to go,” Ross said.





Magnificat Houses group home leader Ross, 66, restocks the food pantry on July 26, 2024. Allan Stein/The Epoch Times

He regards his housemates as his “sons.”

“I have some bad ones and some good ones,” he said. “But I see them as all my sons.”

One day, in 2010, while he was sitting in church, praying, Ross decided he needed a job quickly.

“Lord, I want a job,” he prayed. “I’m going to leave this church and go to my job.”

Not long afterward, he landed a good job working four days a week in a warehouse and learning new skills.



“I’m doing stuff I wanted to do but was never trained for. Now, I can drive a forklift and show other people how to drive a forklift,” Ross said.

Recently, in church, he prayed for another blessing, “Lord, I want to leave this church, go to my own house, and have a car.”

That blessing has yet to manifest, Ross said, but when it does, it will be a bittersweet day in his life.

It will mean having to say goodbye to his adopted family.

“One day, I’m going to have to leave Magnificat House. I’m going to hate it because I’m used to eating dinner around people,” he said, though his memories of their kindness will always be with him.

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