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Loveland couple takes Lifetree Café concept to Homeless Connection  
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For one hour every Monday, the 137 Homeless Connection day shelter is transformed into a coffee shop atmosphere with coffee, pastries and conversation on the menu.

The setting is a conversation cafe through Lifetree Cafe, a new kind of ministry that explores how faith intersects life.

"It's an opportunity to share. It's not a Bible-thumping thing," said Barbara Miller, cafe co-director with her husband, Dennis Miller, who is a licensed minister with First Christian Church.

The Millers opened the cafe through their license with Group Publishing, a Loveland-based Christian publishing company that started the cafe concept in 2007 and licensed it to organizations nationwide in May 2010.

The cafe at the 137 Homeless Connection is the first Lifetree Cafe solely focused on reaching out to the homeless, said Craig Cable, national director of Lifetree Cafe at Group.

"It's not ministering to them. It's building relationships with them," Cable said. "It's an opportunity to get to know them on a personal level, what their struggles are and what makes them happy."

Run by volunteers, Lifetree Cafes across the nation offer an "hour of stories and conversation to feed your soul," as described on the fliers about the monthly programs.

The topics for these stories, such as finding a purpose, facing a terminal illness or dealing with difficult people, are first tested at Group. Staffers assess the topics and participants' reactions before the 265 licensees can use them at their churches, hotels, coffeehouses, community centers and corporate meeting spaces.

#### The Millers' First Cafe

When the Millers opened their first Lifetree Cafe at the Comfort Inn in mid-April, theirs was the 76th licensed cafe. They chose the secular location to reach out to the unchurched and de-churched, or those who left the church, as well as spiritually mature Christians.

Opening a second cafe was a matter of coincidence and circumstance.

When the Millers dropped off supplies at 137 Connection, they talked with Val Fisher, the day shelter manager, about the Lifetree Cafe. Fisher asked the Millers to consider starting a cafe at the day shelter, 137 S. Lincoln Ave., instead.

The Millers agreed, offering the first cafe on Monday, Nov. 12, where 19 people attended, including shelter staff and volunteers and volunteers from the cafe. The next week had a turnout of 27, and 21 on Monday.

"It's prompting their thinking outside of their routines," Fisher said about the clients who use the day shelter to take showers, do laundry, job search and receive case management services. "I love that it creates conversation. It puts 'us' as 'we,' instead of 'them' and 'us.' It's putting us together in the same place."

#### The Cafe Conversations

The cafe participants sit at tables for four after getting their coffee and refreshments.

The host for the week -- this time it was Tracy Morgan, a commissioned minister at First Christian Church and a Lifetree Cafe volunteer -- tells the participants, "You're welcome just as you are. Your thoughts are welcome. Your doubts are welcome. We're all in this

together. God is here, ready to connect with you in a fresh way." If You Go

What: Lifetree Cafe.

When: 10 a.m. Mondays.

Where: 137 Homeless Connection, 137 S. Lincoln Ave.

Next Program: Simplify Your Life.

Questions: Call 667-7330 or go to LifetreeCafe.com.

"With the conversations they have, it gives you a chance to get to know somebody else and vice versa," said Carl Elliott, a client of 137 Connection since the beginning of the year. "It's a way of sharing different experiences."

Diane Johnson, a client of the shelter who has been homeless for about a year, said she already feels comfortable at the cafe, which she attended for all three programs.

"It brings other people closer together," Johnson said.

The connections happen at each table, where two or three people converse with a volunteer at their table, who is there to help encourage the conversation.

"It was interesting," Dennis Miller said. "The noise continued to drop. People from the other side of the room crept over to see what was going on."

The Millers formed a nonprofit called God Talk Ministries to operate the Lifetree Cafe. If the 137 Connection cafe proves successful, they want to spread the idea of a cafe for the homeless to other communities.

"If it works, we want to encourage churches to take this to homeless shelters. We can show them what we're experiencing," Barbara Miller said.

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Photo:

Lori Casteel, left, Dennis Miller, center, and Diane Johnson talk about prayer Monday morning at the 137 Connection in downtown Loveland. The Lifetree Cafe, started at Group Publishing, held its third discussion here at the 137 Connection for the homeless.

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