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REALTOR® Necia Freeman felt called to help opioid-addicted prostitutes and malnourished kids in heroin-plagued West Virginia.



August 30, 2018 | by Dawn Reiss

REALTOR® Necia Freeman remembers the first time she tried talking to a heroin-addicted prostitute in Huntington, W.V.

It was November 2011. The city was just beginning to get noticed for its growing opioid addiction and heroin crisis. By 2015, the death rate tied to the drugs would become 10 times the national average, earning Huntington the moniker of “overdose capital of the United States.”

Freeman, now a sales associate with Old Colony, REALTORS®, from nearby Barboursville, wanted to do something about the opioid problem that was affecting the children and mothers around her. She approached a property manager of a 20-unit apartment complex known to house prostitutes and asked if she could give his tenants some food. Nothing fancy. Just a simple brown bag.



Along with some Vienna sausages and snacks, she included a “gospel track,” a piece of paper describing the value of knowing Jesus and her phone number for anyone, regardless of their faith or lack thereof, to call for help. She had already handed out 11 brown lunch bags when Rhonda Stevens, then 35, asked if she could have the last one. “We’re not here to judge,” Freeman recalls saying. “We’re just here to give you a bag of food and maybe start a friendship someday.”

Stevens took the brown paper bag. “I opened it and said, ‘I think there’s hope in this bag,’” Stevens recalls about the encounter. At the time, the mother of three was hooked on heroin. “I was stressed out and it makes you not feel when you’re on it,” says Stevens, who had started using it at the age of 25.

After a four-year stint in prison for selling heroin, Stevens had recently been released and starting to get her life back together. She was crossing a street when the driver of a pick-up truck hit her. During her three-month hospital stay for a broken back and pelvis, Stevens says she was given oxycodone and became addicted. When the doctor wouldn’t write another prescription, she got back on heroin and began prostituting to pay for the drugs.

She was working the streets when Freeman offered her the brown bag. “I trusted Necia from the beginning,” says Stevens, who has been clean since September 2017. “She’s one of those women you only find once in a lifetime. She’s loving, but there are times she’ll crack you with a whip if she doesn’t agree with what you’re doing.”

## Impacting Others

Stevens is far from alone. Since 2011, when Freeman started Backpacks & Brown Bags as an outreach ministry of Lewis Memorial Baptist Church, she has helped more than a thousand people. Every Wednesday night, Freeman can be seen driving her midnight blue Honda Pilot, looking to help women who walk the streets. “Some of them tell me, you might not always see us, but we always know you’re there,” Freeman says.



“It is a huge, huge battle to be able to get these girls help because one of the things that happens

is they say "I'm ready" [to go to detox] but then we have no place to send them."—Necia Freeman

When some of the women have needed a place to stay, Freeman has opened up her home. She's driven them to rehab, visited women in jail, paid for medical bills, and helped furnish apartments. She has paid for a wedding, hosting one in her home, and has made intricate paper flowers out of her brown bags for wedding bouquets. As a member of Cabell County Drug Court Team in Huntington, she helps determine sanctions in weekly hearings of nonviolent drug and alcohol abuse cases.

Freeman's work gained accolades—and a wider audience—having been the subject of the Emmy and Oscar-nominated 2017 documentary "Heroin(e)."

"I don't know how she does it," says Mark Mansour, ABR, GRI, and Freeman's broker-manager at Old Colony, REALTORS®. "I don't think the woman sleeps. I wish I had five more of her. She somehow balances her mission work with being a top producer. She doesn't like seeing anyone getting hurt, no matter the circumstances."

## How the Ministry Started

Freeman was a cancer survivor, a divorced single mother of two daughters who initially struggled to pass her real estate licensing exam, when she felt a stronger calling to help others.

That's when Freeman's Bible teacher from high school asked her to go with him to visit families who lived in the worst neighborhood of Huntington.

It was 2010. During Freeman's visit, she stopped at Spring Hill Elementary School, an inner-city school in a low-income neighborhood known for shootings and drug usage, and asked the principal what would help them the most. Food, she was told. The children aren't eating on the weekends. Would she be willing to help feed the kids?

"And I said, absolutely," Freeman says. "We'll figure it out." She created a Facebook post and asked others to help as she began filling backpacks full of food, enough that first year for three dinners and two lunches each week for 18 kids.

The backpack ministry was born. About a year later, Freeman saw a brief newspaper article about the murder of a prostitute. "It said she was shot, her body was dumped in the cornfield, and she was a known prostitute," Freeman says. "But it didn't say anything else. No one followed up, and it was as if no one really cared because this was just another prostitute."

Then Freeman found out she was a mother of one of her backpack children. "That's when I decided, if we're going to change these kids' lives, we need to get to their mothers," Freeman says. "I'll start with prostitutes on the streets."

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## A Living Angel

Najah Menapace-Genet, 40, grew up with parents who were drug addicts. By the time she was 18, she was popping percocet pills. Eventually, she worked the streets and burglarized homes to fund her heroin addiction. She says Freeman never gave up on her, even when she relapsed. When Menapace-Genet came clean and got a job at a McDonald's, Freeman stepped up to buy her work shoes and uniform.

"Necia gives so freely of herself, wanting nothing more than to help others reach their full potential," says Menapace-Genet, who now works at a Subway and is studying behavioral science at a community college in the hopes of becoming a drug counselor. "She believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. She loved me unconditionally until I learned to love myself. She is my guardian angel."

Contact Necia Freeman at [neciatf@gmail.com](mailto:neciatf@gmail.com) and learn more about Backpacks & Brown Bags at [facebook.com/BackPackBrownBagsLifeMattersBecauseOfChrist](https://facebook.com/BackPackBrownBagsLifeMattersBecauseOfChrist).



### Dawn Reiss

Dawn Reiss is a Chicago-based journalist who has written for Time, U.S. News & World Report, USA Today, and The Atlantic.



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