

“God was faithful” Retired Crisis Center Director shares her heart for the broken

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After 38 years of uplifting the downtrodden, Datha Ray retired from her role as crisis center director in the Lauderdale Baptist Association.

John Maxey, Associational Missions Strategist for the association, said of Ray, “She interacted daily with those seeking assistance through the crisis center. She was responsible for ordering, organizing, inventorying, and distributing the food. She also secured volunteers from our partnering churches... She has provided smiles, words of encouragement and hope for the discouraged that have entered through our crisis center doors.”

Only a few years after the crisis center opened, Ray started her job as a part-time employee and quickly recognized the obstacles in her path: the building was spacious but divided into cubicles not functional for their work, and the center was hardly ever busy. Churches gave food donations, but they were often unwanted cans from cleaned cabinets.

Because of this, Ray formed her standard procedure: “If I wouldn’t eat it at home, I won’t serve it to someone else.” She operated to this standard until the day she retired.

A couple of years after Ray started her job, the crisis center partnered with the Mississippi Food Network, and operations began to improve. Churches offered financial donations to meet needs, and Ray’s hours increased until she eventually became a

full-time employee.

In 2002, the crisis center moved into a new building specifically built for their work. Ray packed 30 extra bags of food items in the morning and 30 bags in the afternoon, so that clients would not have to wait long to receive what they needed. As time went on, the work wore on Ray, but God provided volunteers who were faithful to help.

“In the early years all food items were donated by our churches and the crisis center ministry was mostly used clothing,” said Greg Massey, retired Associational Missions Strategist for the association. “Datha has changed all of that over these 38 years of leadership. It has become a huge ministry serving hundreds of families every year! If clothing is needed, then Datha contacts churches with the need by sizes, and God provides. But the ministry primarily has evolved to help struggling families with much needed food.

“From an old building filled with old clothes to a huge building filled with walk-in freezers and tables filled with thousands of canned foods – that’s the difference Datha has made!”

Jamie Smith, former ministry assistant for the association and friend of Ray, commented on her coworker’s Christ-like compassion, “Datha took her clients’ needs to heart and tried to help them with not only food for their bodies, but let them know she truly loved and cared about their well-being. She would listen to their needs and try to give good sound advice.

“She always said that she knew she was where God wanted her to be. That was obvious by the way she treated people...with respect, kindness and love. She strived to be a good Christian influence for every client who sat with her because she just might be the only one they saw that day. Datha not only served the Lord through her work at the crisis center, but she served Him well.”

Looking back on all of those who stepped through the crisis center doors, Ray stated, "I knew who had an open-heart surgery. I knew who had a hip replacement. I knew who had a knee replacement. I knew who came in one month on a walker and still in a lot of pain, but then came back in three months and I said, 'Oh you don't have your walker!' They just became my people and my extended family.

"They never left there not knowing that Jesus loved them, that they were not begging, they were not to be humiliated, and that all of us, at one time or another, get down and need a hand to help us get up."

"When I started this job," Ray recalled, "it was not my ministry. Before that, my mother and daddy were alive and I had been caring for them, and they went into a nursing home. My husband and I decided I would not fill out a resume but look for a part-time job by word-of-mouth. I did not want to work because I wanted to be free to do things with, at the time, my 10-year-old daughter, but this job just sort of fell into my lap.

"To tell you the truth, when I first started, I thought, 'Now look, you better be careful what you pray for.' Because I didn't like it. I wasn't busy at all. And then right after I went to work, my daddy died. So I worked in a fog. We had to deal with my mother, who was getting dementia at that point. She could not remember that my daddy had died; she thought he had abandoned her. It was just an emotional time."

"But God was faithful during all this time. I want that said," she ensured. "God was faithful. He always provided and sometimes He had to slap me and say, 'Look, I'm taking care of you.'"

"I had been working about a year at the crisis center when one morning out of the clear blue, I was in the bathroom putting on my face and combing my hair, and it was just like a light

came on and I just looked in the mirror and said, 'God, I am exactly where You want me to be.' And since then, it was always like that. My heart was where my heart was supposed to be. So I was called to this ministry like any preacher is called to be a preacher."

Since retirement, some personal challenges have entered the picture for Ray and her family, but she and her husband take care of each other. In the afternoons, they enjoy going for a drive together and picking up a cup of coffee. Ray was sure to add, "Not only was God faithful at the crisis center, He's faithful at my house. He's still faithful."