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the best years

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Project HOPE

Out in life's right field

DENIS RIGDON GIVES HOPE TO THE HOPELESS

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Denis Rigdon of Cape Girardeau learned more about life playing Little League center field than he learned about baseball when he was a young boy in Festus, Mo.

Rigdon is founder and director of Project Hope, an agency that helps families and individuals in need find a way to turn their lives around — the people who get picked last on life's baseball team. The "hope" in Project Hope stands for "helping other people excel." As its director, Rigdon is out there in center field, backing up the people who are dodging the balls that life is whizzing toward them. Whenever he talks in the community about Project Hope, Rigdon sings a song by Peter, Paul and Mary called "Right Field."

...I'd dream of the day they'd hit one my way

*They never did but still I would pray
That I'd make a fantastic catch on the run*

*And not lose the ball in the sun
And then I'd awake from this long reverie
And pray that the ball never came out to me*

Rigdon recalls when he was a boy

playing center field on a ball team, his dad, who was the assistant coach, insisted on picking up a "little guy" named Frankie. Frankie was, he said, a dismal ball player, always the last one chosen on a team. Frankie played right field.

"The whole year he never swung a bat off his shoulder," he said. "He was a sure out."

Rigdon admitted that when his dad drove to Frankie's house to pick him up, he hoped Frankie wouldn't be there. Frankie always showed up. Rigdon recalled a game when a batter hit the ball right down the right field line and Frankie didn't even go after it.

"I had to go get it," he said. "I was yelling and screaming. The guy got a home run."

When his father asked him why he was so upset, an indignant young Rigdon told him that Frankie didn't even try to catch the ball.

"He said, 'What's your job as center fielder?'" Rigdon said. "I said, 'Backing up right and left in the field.' And he said, 'Why weren't you there?' I learned a lesson that day about teamwork."

Throughout his adult life, Rigdon has been out in life's center field backing up the Frankies who can't quite catch the ball.



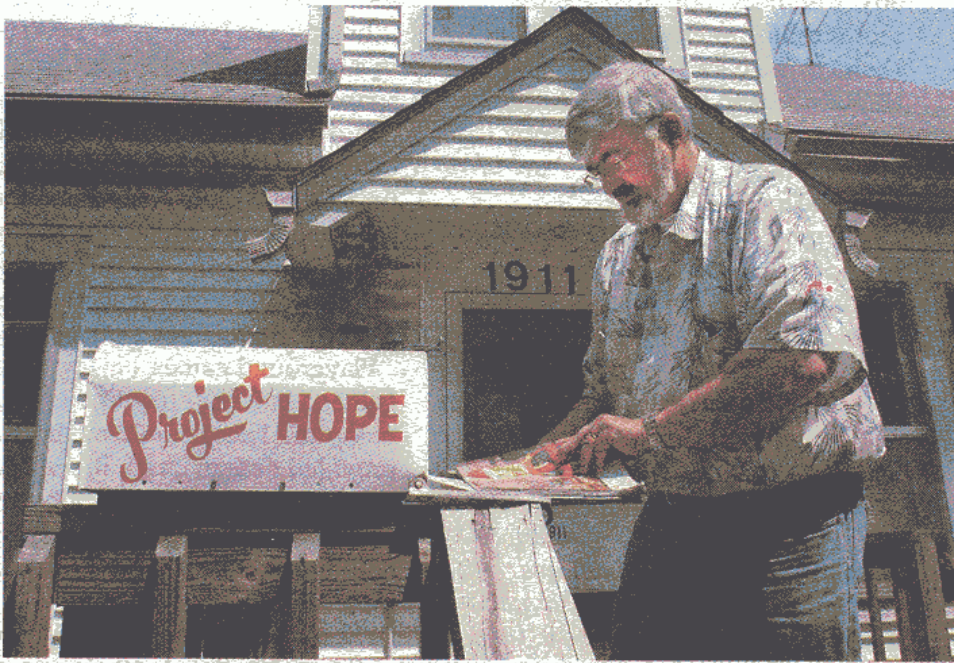
Before he founded the organization, Rigdon had owned and managed a bakery and sold office equipment. In 1988, he became involved with social ministry through St. Vincent's Catholic Church.

Through his involvement, Rigdon has lived the philosophy of teaching a man to fish so he can eat the rest of his life instead of handing him a fish and feeding him for a day.

One of his earliest experiences with that came through a St. Vincent's social ministry outreach program that sent a shipping container full of donated items to a leper colony in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia through Catholic Relief Services. Some volunteers who had worked with the people there brought back some clothing and jewelry items the Ethiopians had made and began selling it, Rigdon said. Through the sales, they raised enough money to give to the Ethiopians so they could dig a well. Following the well, the Ethiopians dug a pond and used some leftover pipes from the well to connect it to the pond; they began raising fish. That led to their growing and irrigating their own crops. They cut windows in the shipping container the donated items came in and used it as a school. Eventually the Ethiopian government took notice and began helping the people



Denis Rigdon, director of Project Hope, surfs on his computer to find ways of assisting people in need and funding for his organization.



Project Hope, is at 1911 Woodlawn. Director Denis Rigdon points out the large mailbox with the group's name prominently displayed on it as a way of finding an office.

with other needs — improved housing and sewage.

That well in Ethiopia — the last one the Catholic Relief Services ever dug, he said — led to another well in Salem, Ind., for a family struggling to scratch out a living on a 40-acre farm. After the well was dug, what flowed next was financial and agricultural advice from the Department of Agriculture and further support from St. Vincent's outreach program. Eventually, the family that had everything going against it was thriving, Rigdon said. The son began raising vegetables while he was still in high school and sold them to contribute to the family income. He won a scholarship to the University of Indiana where he has excelled in agriculture studies.

"The dad got to see his son make a profit on the farm before he passed away," Rigdon said.

Project Hope took off because Rigdon knew what worked in the church's outreach program would work at the community level. Once he secured funding, mostly from private sources, he linked Project Hope with other helping agencies in the area.

Connie Eichhorn worked with Rigdon for seven years on the Christian Services committee at St. Vincent's church.

"Denis I think is one of the most caring people toward other people I have known," Eichhorn said. "Everything he does he does not out of any kind of selfishness, but solely out of his desire to serve other people."

"He has the biggest heart in the whole world," said Nancy Jernigan, who is working with Rigdon in setting up another helping organization, Love INC (In the Name of Christ). "He works through any and all barriers. He has been able to turn around families not just with resources but with his style. He's very gentle. I can just imagine when he sits down to talk to people he has a calming effect on them."

Breaking through the barriers, Jernigan said, means thinking outside the box, taking chances that sometimes defy business practices but helping to catch the grounders that come hurling toward the people out in right field.

Such outside the box thinking includes a way Rigdon came up with for helping people without transportation get to work. Someone wanted to donate a pickup truck to St. Vincent's, Rigdon said, but the church didn't want the truck. He wondered if the truck could be fixed up and given to someone who needed it, so he contacted the Community Caring Council. The idea took off and people began donating older, high-mileage cars to Project Hope. So far Project Hope has refurbished and given away 150 cars.

Rigdon has taught Project Hope's volunteers to empower people to be able to take over their lives, yet keep a respectful distance.

"The major thing is a plan," he said. "Our volunteers are taught from the beginning how to focus and set boundaries, to help other people succeed and not take over their lives, but help them grow."

Most people plan their lives without really thinking about it; some people need help doing that, he said.

"People may think the life skills they have aren't worth much, but that may be what's missing in the lives of most people we have," Rigdon said. "We have people who are down and depressed. The ones who really change are the ones connected to fellowship and reconnected to the community. We want them to bring God back into their lives."

We want them to connect people to God and opportunities and lift people up and improve the community.”

Rigdon said he believes bringing people to God is what makes his work successful.

“From a spiritual standpoint, Denis is led by the Holy Spirit to do the kind of work he is doing,” Eichhorn said. “He prays about it, he prays for people and that’s what makes him so special. I think he does what he does because of his faith. It truly comes from his heart.”

“The name of the organization is Project Hope and that is exactly what he gives them,” Jernigan said. “Everything he does is with the perspective that he is working for God and God is working through him to affect these people’s lives.”

Rigdon has been able to turn his volunteer efforts into a profession because people in the community have

seen what he has been able to do and have responded with their own involvement — playing center field to back up his right field efforts.

The people who need Project Hope are the people mostly invisible to the community — the guy who just got out of prison and is trying to start over. The mother whose husband walked out on the family leaving her destitute. People who, were it not for bad luck, would have no luck. The homeless family living in a tent in a state park, showering in the park facilities.

In a society where 60 million housing units will be needed by the year 2030, it follows that the homeless can be trained to help build homes — and rebuild their lives. Rigdon said Project Hope has been talking with a company who wants to build a factory in the area to make pre-engineered homes. He is also working with developers who would build those

homes and provide jobs and a future for people who need it.

It will work, he said, because he has seen it happen before.

“I’ve been blessed to see people go from tears and fears to joy and happiness,” he said. “I have seen more than a few cases of people who turn their whole lives around.”

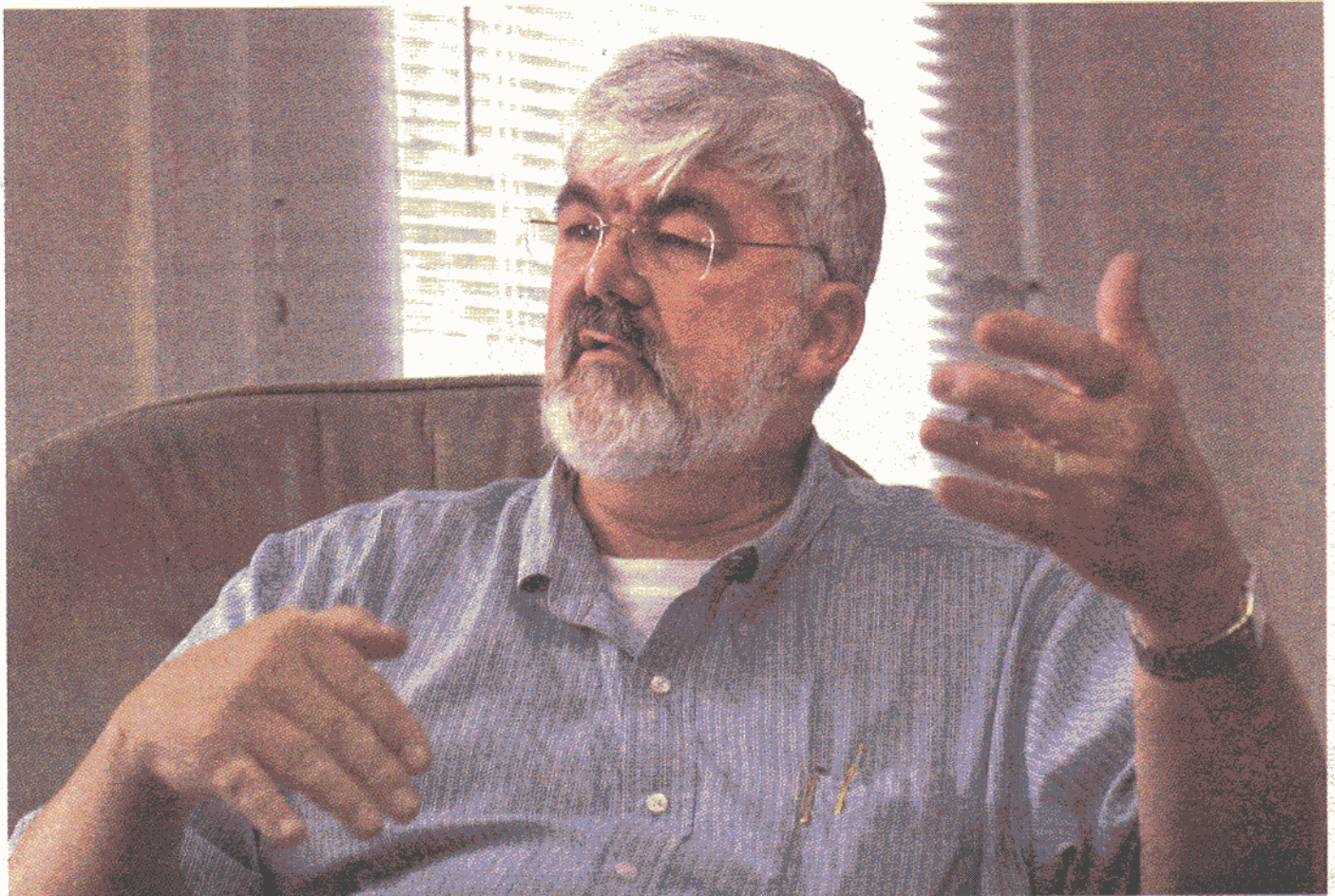
For Rigdon, 58, helping people is a spiritual ministry, a calling. He says it’s “an opportunity to play and sing and dance and talk to people about transforming their lives.”

The song he sings, “Right Field” is appropriate:

“Here in right field, it’s important you know.

You gotta know how to catch, you gotta know how to throw,

That’s why I’m here in right field, just watching the dandelions grow.”



Denis Rigdon, director of Project Hope, makes a point about his organization’s involvement in helping people.