

Good Works WALK SPEECH 2026

February 28, 2026

Keith Wasserman

GOOD morning!

It feels good to do something like this together. Greetings with gratitude!

I have experienced homelessness in 11 cities by choice. In academia, they call it “voluntary displacement”.

- In **Lexington, KY**, I learned about FEAR – how people who are without a home often live in a constant state of fear (and stress) which wears down one’s emotional and physical strength.
- In **Charleston, WV**, I learned about TIME - how we think about time differently when someone has no place to go and little structure to their day; how that leads to discouragement and even depression.
- In **Indianapolis, IN**, I learned how important it is for the staff of the shelter to be honest. They weren't.
- In **Tulsa, OK**, I learned about how important it is for the workers to know their city and what resources are available to people without homes. They didn't.
- In **Pittsburgh, PA**, I learned about loneliness, what long-term loneliness does to a person; and how this effects their ability to cope. It was in Pittsburgh that I saw older men who were afraid of younger men.
- In **Columbus, OH**, I learned about dehumanization. I experienced a powerful dose of dehumanization.

I want to be a life-long learner. I want to lead a community of “life-long” learners, especially when the subject is HOW TO LOVE. These experiences have shaped me and my perspective on how to love *our* neighbors!

I am not here to sell books – the book (Good Works Hospitality and Faithful Discipleship) is where some of these stories are written.

Any Birthday's in the room today?

Welcome!

This is the 18th year Good Works has sponsored the WALK. We started in 2003 and continued for 17 consecutive years until 2019. For the past few years, we sponsored an event called DAY IN THE LIFE in an effort to raise as many "days" as possible to fund the Good Works Timothy House.

The Timothy House costs around \$180,000 a year – more this year especially because of the cost of electricity. This covers staffing, insurance, utilities, maintenance and other things.

Good Works provided over 3,300 nights of shelter last year. Since we started in 1981, we have provided over 140,000 nights of shelter (if you include the early years at our home on Elliott Street) for over 16,000 consecutive nights of shelter.

I need to say that again: We have been open for sixteen thousand consecutive days. That is over 45 years.

I want to say that I too am amazed at this!

This part of GW has 4 full time and 4 part time staff.

We provided emergency shelter for 34 years and stopped in 2015 for 3 reasons:

1. We had a dryer fire and decided to move the entire program of providing shelter to people experiencing homelessness to the Good Works Luhrig Road property. We operated out of the Hannah House using the dorms there. This did not go well.
2. The opiate epidemic here in SE Ohio in 2014-2015 created so many problems, and we simply could not manage the dramatic increase in people using oxycodone and methamphetamine. We saw a lot of sabotage. Jule was doing really well with her recovery and had stayed with us for several months. Then, we took Karen in on an emergency

basis not knowing that Karen was still using. The next day, both Julie and Karen left. We later learned that Julie had relapsed.

3. We decided, based on our conscience that we had to stop receiving \$64,000 from the State of Ohio (Ohio Development Services), because of their ethics which collided with our ethics. They instructed us as a condition of receiving their grant to collect and upload personal information (data) about each of our residents to their 'safe and secure' website without the permission of the person. Did I just say, "without the permission of the person"? We chose to not continue to receive funding from Ohio Development Services at that time. We pressed on without this funding and reorganized. And we decided that we could promise to keep everyone's information private and only release information with their permission.

SO TODAY, Good Works is funded entirely from donations.

THANK YOU for supporting us.

The focus of GW is to care for the widow, the fatherless, and the stranger. By care we mean :

- We are building relationships, long term relationships with the people of rural Appalachia.
- We are taking the time to learn about the history, values, needs, beauty and people of this area.
- The story of Carol
- The story of Kevin

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It FEELS like some people want to place a political label on us. We are not a political organization. However, when **anyone** advocates for the vulnerable, or "defends the rights of the poor and needy", some people have decided that this is political.

We will continue to "speak for those who cannot speak for themselves"  
(Proverb 31:8-9)

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When I started GW, I was 22. At that time, we did one thing: emergency shelter for adults and children experiencing homelessness. In fact, I think we are the oldest rural shelter in Ohio. The year was 1981.

But before we started welcoming strangers, we organized volunteers in partnership with three local congregations to visit widows and widowers at their homes all over Athens County. This was part of my Ohio University Internship in Mental Health. Today, Good Works cares for widows, widowers and adults with disabilities at their homes all over Athens County through an initiative we developed called NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS.

The widow, the fatherless, and the stranger all have several things in common. Here are just a few things:

1. Vulnerability
2. Dependency
3. Loneliness
4. Disconnection
5. Impoverishment
6. They didn't CHOOSE to be in the situation they are in.

Please don't misunderstand me. Each of us must take responsibility for things in this life. And, at Good Works, one of our core values is to call people to be responsible for the things THEY CAN do something about.

Our method of care?

DO FOR

DO WITH

BE WITH

Today, Good Works has around 30 different ways to serve our neighbors.

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Some of you will carry signs today which represent our values and what we believe can be shared values. Others will be asked to carry bricks with the words “the weight of poverty”. Still others will be asked to carry bags of groceries on your walk. This is one of the realities people without vehicles must navigate.

### The Signs

- The signs we will carry today represent our vision and our values, especially as we care for the widow, the fatherless and the stranger. They are not political statements. However, as I said, when anyone advocates for the poor, the vulnerable, and speaks on their behalf to those in power, some people want to frame this as political. For us, this is simply the faith we have practiced for 45 years.

Weight of poverty

Food

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Bryan Stevenson in his book JUST MERCY says:

“Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done”

I would add “each of us is more than the worst thing that has ever happened to us”

Several years ago, I had lunch with Kevin. During our lunch he said to me “I am homeless.” I replied and said to Kevin “you are not homeless.” He leaned over towards me, looked me in the eye, and said “*well...I am living in your shelter.*” I said “Kevin, you are not homeless. You are a man who right now is without a home.”

We must separate what happened to people (and even what they have done) from their identity. Kevin, like you and I, are made in the image of God with beauty, dignity, purpose, creativity, capacity and much more.

**IN CLOSING**, I hope you will take-home this question:

How do you see people?

Am I willing to examine, talk about, and discuss how I see people?

How is this “seeing” formed? Where does our “objectivity” or “bias” originate?

Someone once said, “seeing is believing.” I say, “that how we see people determines a lot of how we treat people.”

Are we starting with compassion or judgement?

May we all learn how to examine “how we see”, and with it the origins of why people end up in the situations they are in.

Let’s help each other SEE.

Let us help each other SEE people as made in God’s image- worthy of respect, kindness, our TIME and our compassion, empathy and love.

And let’s keep on *learning* together how to love.

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The scripture signs simply represent our values and vision to care for the vulnerable. These are the starting places. No one should feel obligated to carry any of these signs. And it’s okay to leave them here if no one wants to carry them.

These verses represent who we are at Good Works. Who we have been, and who we intend to be. These verses represent us well.

I want to thank my co-workers – many of whom are wearing yellow hats. The WALK happens primarily because of them.

## WE ARE GIVING THANKS!

The Good Works WALK takes place *because* of the support Good Works receives from our community. Good Works is really an example of what is possible when a community brings support and encouragement! WE are grateful.

WE would especially like to acknowledge the organizations and people who helped make the WALK happen today:

- The people of First United Methodist Church. This congregation has hosted and supported the WALK since we began in 2003.
- The people of Canaanville United Methodist Church – thank you for assisting today!
- The people of Central Avenue United Methodist Church – thank you for allowing Good Works to use your building today, and for your kindness and refreshments!
- **MANY** VOLUNTEERS TODAY who helped to make this day so good and meaningful for all of us!
- Our WALK Interns from Ohio University, Kate and Molly!
- The people of First Presbyterian Church who provided a space for the mini – WALK
- The Scout Troop # 53 who came to prepare our rice and beans lunch!
- The City of Athens who provided free parking for us as a gift!
- The ROTC guards who walked with us today helping to keep everyone safe!
- Zones and Dave Kasler who provided the signs.
- EVERYONE who has (and who will) contributed financially to DAY IN THE LIFE!

Father, in Jesus' name, WE give thanks for your faithful provision!