

# Opportunity for the homeless population

By Grant Masini  
Staff Writer

Adapting without evolving isn't enough to overcome life's challenges, especially a challenge like homelessness. At least, that's what Michael Wood believes.

For five years, Wood has taught an opportunity class for the Community Empowerment Fund. CEF is a non-profit organization that works to create opportunities for the struggling and the homeless to help permanently transition them out of poverty.

Opportunity classes meet weekly and cover topics from personal finance to job readiness to health, as well as teaching self-sufficiency and how to obtain permanent housing.

For a few weeks the opportunity class students have had to make do with substitutes; Wood broke his hip and is in the middle of a stint in rehab. With their teacher absent, the students began class this Saturday by explaining what CEF does.

"They work on whatever you need help with," said Cameron, one of the students. "Job stuff, housing — but you have to go in and set up an appointment, get an advocate and see them at least once a week."

For the rest of the class, the students did most of the talking, offering each other helpful hints on housing, food, utilities, healthcare and saving.

"You have to lead by example," Wood said. "Adults don't like

being preached to, and when I figured that out the students got a lot more responsive. Now I just have to crack a joke every now and again to keep things going."

Wood's students say differently, though. According to other volunteers and CEF staff, Wood has become something of an institution for the community. Wood said it is because he is one of them.

"They respect me. I'm not better than they are," he said. "The mistakes I've made give me the credibility."

Wood arrived at CEF under tough circumstances: from the 1980s until



**The Community Empowerment Fund, founded in 2009, has an office in both Chapel Hill and Durham. It has worked since its inception to help the struggling and homeless transition out of poverty. (Staff photo by Grant Masini)**

January 2010, he said he struggled with a cocaine addiction. On Jan. 10 of that year, he ended up in the homeless shelter. He's been sober since.

"I wasted so many opportunities," Wood said. "When I ended up in the shelter, I knew I couldn't let that be the final chapter of my life — of my legacy."

Wood has been busy since the days in the shelter. To prepare the class, CEF gave him 12 topics — ranging from budgeting to interview tips — that he has since tweaked and added to as the class has grown.

"I try to come up with things so everyone can offer a different viewpoint — so everyone feels like they have something to offer," he said. "Because they do."

This week, the class started with one of Wood's ideas: good fears and bad fears.

"My fear is spiders and snakes," said Michael, a student who was in the class with his brother, Julius. "I had fears of reading, but I faced them when I read aloud to the class before."

Wood said low self-esteem is one of the biggest problems his students and other homeless face.

"Many people that can do, don't, because of a lack of confidence," he said. "Giving them experience helps, like mock interviews or reading. Everybody's got it, but they have to believe they do."

Wood said the greatest challenge with the class is not letting one failure cloud over the next success, because not everyone is ready for the class. Some at the shelter become used to that system of dependence and lose their drive to

move forward, he said.

But for those who do stick with the class, it's life changing, Wood said.

"We recognize effort, not results," he said. "Outcomes will take care of themselves if the effort is there."

Wood also lauded the contribution that students make to CEF. UNC senior Claire Ogburn is the opportunity class coordinator.

Speaking of her own fears to open the discussion in class, Ogburn said job hunting is one of them.

"Most of the time when I apply to jobs and I don't hear anything, I get a little scared," she said. "And that's a good fear: it gives me something to work on, something to improve."

Wood said he isn't sure where he sees the class going or growing in the future.

"I always say, if we held it for everyone that needs it, the Dean Smith Center wouldn't be big enough to hold everyone," he said. "Right now I want to keep it going, keep improving, but I like having it steady at 15 to 20 people, so we'll see."

## Opportunity classes

Where: Holy Trinity Lutheran Church,  
300 E. Rosemary St., Chapel Hill

When: Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Contact: (919) 200-0233