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## Lehmans help start 'Changing Lives'

by **John Davis** - May. 7, 2008 01:32 PM

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As Brenda Combs detailed the painful, horrific and wretched life she had lived, literally on the streets of Phoenix, Tom and Melissa Lehman sat in front of her, their eyes transfixed, the lumps growing in their throats.

The Lehmans are honorary co-chairs of the Changing Lives Center project of the Phoenix Rescue Mission, which recently had a groundbreaking ceremony on 15th Avenue, just north of Van Buren Street.



Jack Kurtz/The Arizona Republic

Brenda Combs (left) and Terri Leveton sing and pray at the ceremonial groundbreaking for the new Changing Lives Center for Women and Children in Central Phoenix. Construction on the shelter will start in June.

It is expected to open in August of 2009, and when it is completed, the three-acre complex will have seven buildings, including 66 apartments. It will be home to 200 women and children who are homeless and struggling with addictions, abuse and despair.

The mission has raised three-fourths of the \$12 million it will cost to build the faith-based facility, which will provide an addiction recovery program, counseling for the entire family and resources needed to transform the lives of its residents.

No, it's not a [golf](#) project, but golf is playing an important role, just as it does in many other charitable efforts around the community and country.

Support from the golf world isn't coming only from the Lehmans, but also major donations from Phoenix Thunderbirds Charities and the Solheim family, which owns Ping Golf.

The amount of money golf generates for charity is staggering. The [PGA Tour](#) alone has given more than \$1 billion to charity and annually donates more than all of the other spectator sports combined. That doesn't include the LPGA, Champions, Nationwide and developmental tours, not to mention the thousands of charity tournaments played every week around the country at local courses.

In 2000, the Thunderbirds built a similar housing facility with 80 apartments in the Valley for women and children that is run by the Homeward Bound program, which assists families in transition.

"What it does is it gives me a good feeling about the circle of the community," Thunderbirds Big Chief Pat McGinley said. "You look at how the community supports an event like the FBR Open and the tournament, in turn, gives so much back to the community. Without their support we couldn't give back to them in special ways."

Lehman, who received the inaugural Byron Nelson Prize, which honors a person for the ideals of giving back that Nelson personified, looks at his own involvement much the same way as the Thunderbirds.

"That's the one thing about golf I have always appreciated, that it gives me the opportunity I might not have had otherwise to be involved with a project like this," Lehman said. "It's just a matter of what you decide to do with that opportunity."

It's little surprise that the Lehmans would be involved, and the same is true of Kurt and Brenda Warner, who are among the project's main supporters.

Both Lehman and Warner, the Cardinals quarterback, have reached the pinnacle of their sports. Lehman is a former Ryder Cup captain and PGA Tour Player of the Year. Warner has won a Super Bowl and twice was named the NFL's Most Valuable Player.

That's what they do. Supporting projects like Changing Lives Center is who they are. And hearing stories like Combs' testimonial can't help but inspire them to do more.

In her early teens, Combs began a downward spiral when she succumbed to peer pressure and low self-esteem, turning to drugs and street gangs as her support system.

Her life became a vicious cycle of petty crimes, drug abuse, jail, rehab and eating out of dumpsters. Within three weeks of arriving in Phoenix, she was sexually assaulted several times, stabbed in the back with a broken beer bottle, burned with cigarettes, hit by a car, shot in a drive-by shooting and nearly lost a leg.

She asked to stay longer in a jail cell for her own protection but said police refused to keep her. So she lived on the mean streets and sometimes slept in vacant lots, including the one where the new center will be built.

All of that changed the day she woke up in a downtown alley after a crack binge and her shoes were missing. After walking several miles across searing asphalt on a 115-degree day, with her bare feet blistered and bleeding, she said, she fell to her knees and prayed.

So you think you've got it tough? Try to imagine that the person most [responsible](#) for changing your life is the one who stole your only pair of shoes off your feet while you were passed out.

After Combs completed rehabilitation, life threw her yet another downhill double breaker when her son, Mycole, suffered a stroke at birth.

He now lives a normal life, and she works as Ambassador of Inspiration and Achievement at Grand Canyon University, where she has earned a Masters degree and is close to completing a Ph.D. She has written an autobiography entitled *Finding My Shoes* and has been honored as a distinguished teacher by First Lady Laura Bush.

She said she is eager for Changing Lives Center to open so she can try to help rescue others in desperation.

"I want to show them that if I can do what I've done, it's possible for every person to do something special, to make their dreams come true," she said.

Lehman, for one, has no doubts that others will do so as a result of the new center. He has designed golf courses and felt a sense of pride when they opened, and said it might be even more special when Changing Lives Center opens its doors.

"We still have work to do," said Lehman, who became involved with Phoenix Rescue Mission 10 years ago. "But days like today and stories like Brenda's give me even more motivation to do what I can to help take the project the rest of the way.

"A hundred years from now, without question, there are going to be people who lived here who will go on to be leaders, politicians, doctors, professional athletes - they will make a difference in the world. And they will be able to look back and say, 'This place changed my life.' "

Just like the shoe thief.