

TAXES SUNDAY

COMMUNITY NEWS

Special Advertising Feature

Their love of Christ fuels churches' Car Care Clinics

In the fall of 2002, three men from Southern Hills Baptist Church met on a Saturday morning in the church parking lot to fix cars for single moms and other low-income people in the congregation.

That was the beginning of Car Care Clinic, a ministry that now has 60 volunteers at several sites, and last year repaired 500 cars on a budget close to \$250,000.

For its first nine years, the Car Care Clinic was held two Saturdays a month in the church parking lot, said Lonnie Vaughan, who founded the ministry with his wife, Martha. Vaughan owns and operates The Appliance Warehouse at 2547 E. Admiral Place, buying and selling major appliances.

Vaughan said the idea for a car-repair ministry came to him when he was helping start a Hispanic church in Tulsa. Over and over, he heard stories of families who spiraled into poverty after their car broke down and they could no longer get to work.

He talked to his pastor at Southern Hills, the Rev. Hess Hester, about starting a car-repair ministry in the church parking lot, and Hester gave him a green light, as long as they cleaned up the lot and didn't leave cars overnight.

"I've seen my volunteers out in the parking lot when it was 10 degrees, coming inside the church to thaw out their fingers, and when it was 110 degrees. These guys were unstoppable," Vaughan said.

Eventually the team got a 20-by-36-foot tent to keep them out of the rain, and after that, a trailer to store their tools.

"We really thought we were uptown," he said. "I never looked beyond that parking lot. We were happy there."

But the clinic took a giant step forward in 2011.



MATT BARNARD/Tulsa World

Eli Sumrall (right) and Rodney Walker repair a vehicle at the Car Care Clinic at Rivergate Church, on 71st Street just east of Riverside Drive.

Vaughan said he had been driving past RiverGate Church at 1439 E. 71st St. for years, and he always felt a prompting to go inside and tell them about the clinic.

One day, he did it.

Their response was, "Why didn't you come by sooner?" he said.

The church, located in a former Walmart building, gave the Car Care Clinic permission to use its six-bay auto-repair facility. The Rev. Joel Budd, RiverGate pastor, said the church had intended for years to use that area for a car-repair ministry.

Donors provided three car lifts, a commercial air compressor and four fully stocked Snap-on toolboxes, some \$30,000 in equipment. Suddenly the ministry was working inside with quality equipment.

Since then, progress has been rapid. Boston Avenue United Methodist Church got involved, setting up a second location at J & E Automotive, 1920 E. Sixth St. A Ponca City site has opened, and a Major Auto Repair Service has been launched to cover repairs like motor or transmission replacement. The ministry has expanded into receiving and

repairing donated cars to be given away to needy families or sold to finance the clinic.

The ministry has attracted grants from local foundations, businesses, churches and the government, a total of \$120,000 this year.

One of those grants came in last month. At mid-morning, volunteers at the clinic took a short break for a ceremony at which State Farm donated \$10,000 to the ministry.

State Farm agent Ed Martinez said car repair is not seen as a classic charity, but for many families, a working vehicle is the only thing standing between them and bankruptcy.

"That's the value of what you do. You keep people working," he said.

Vaughan said road safety is a goal shared by the clinic and State Farm.

"To me, what this represents is government, businesses, churches and community coming together. We're setting aside differences and concentrating on what we do have in common.

"And what we have in common is the needs of our community," he said.

— Bill Sherman, World Writer