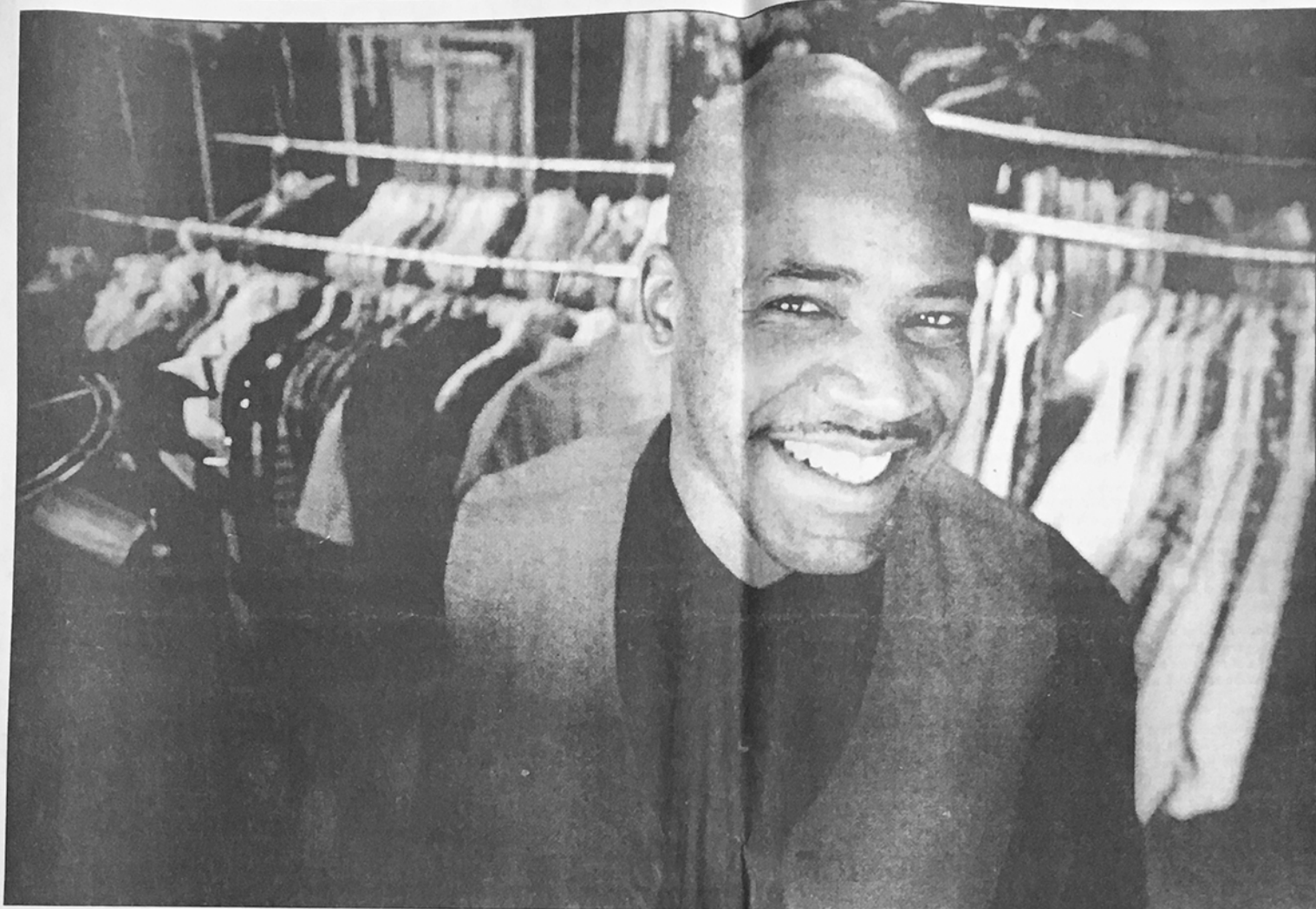


Lifestyles

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Section B

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Ariel Bellazer believes his role in life is to be a servant to the people. As service director for the Starkville office of the Salvation Army, Bellazer has found a place where he can make a difference.

Soldier of Service

By SUE JOE
Starkville Daily News

Every morning, people across the country wake up, griping about another work day. As they brush their teeth, they mumble about the leaky faucet, not to mention the monthly cable bill that just arrived first class in the mail.

At the same time so many are grumbling about petty complaints, a 32-year-old Mississippi woman wonders how she will feed her children.

While schoolchildren grimace at their lunches and fuss about the rusting playground equipment, some youngsters wander the street with tattered clothes and blisters on their feet because they've outgrown their worn-out shoes.

Although some people don't stop to think about others who are unable to keep themselves warm at night or keep their children clothed, one Starkville man believes his agency stands beside those who need help.

Ariel Bellazer, service director for the Starkville office of the Salvation Army, says his role in life is to be a servant to the people.

"I have a love for people, and I love taking care of people," he says. "I guess I received a call and a commission to be a servant. When you have the desire to serve people, you want to do all that you can. This is the best way I can do that."

Working out of an office in the Salvation Army Thrift Store on U.S. Highway 82 West, Bellazer left Hammond, La., almost two months ago to begin his service here.

"I had no idea Starkville, Miss., existed," he said, laughing.

Before moving to Mississippi, Bellazer worked as a volunteer for the Salvation Army in Louisiana for five years as an administrative assistant, sorting clothes, picking up food, and working with the agency's clients.

After moving to Starkville, Bellazer said he had to adjust to differences between the two communities.

"[Starkville] is different from Louisiana economically, and I have to understand there are fewer opportunities for employment here and fewer opportunities for job improvement skills," he said. "I have to assess needs in comparison to a person's



Margurita Darnell, 2, has a hard time keeping a mismatched pair of grownup shoes on her feet while browsing at the Starkville Salvation Army Thrift Store Friday afternoon.

skills." Aside from economic differences, Louisiana residents have a clearer perception of the Salvation Army,

Bellazer said. "[Starkville does not] realize that the Salvation Army is a ministry and a church," he said. "We have to ver-

balize it and become a more visible part of the community."

During the Christmas season, the Salvation Army — a United Way agency — lines its familiar red buckets in front of local department stores with tireless ringers who hope to add some jingle to their pails. And while it collects leftover change from holiday shoppers, the agency also conducts an Angel Tree program to provide Christmas gifts for needy children.

"Different kids have wishes on the tree, and a person or a corporation will come by, adopt a particular child, and give that child what he wants," Bellazer explained.

The Salvation Army not only helps individuals but gives assistance to groups as well. During the Christmas season, the Salvation Army conducts an adopt-a-family program, working with other community organizations and churches to sponsor families, he said.

"With the different social agencies, we can get a better idea of what families really need," he said. "We try to zero in on a family, adopt them, and make sure they have a joyful Christmas."

But after the holiday cheer and ho, ho, ho's fade away, the salvation Army stays busy by helping people who have difficulty making ends meet.

"Throughout the year, we assist on emergency needs for the families in the community experiencing financial difficulties with electric, water, gas and rent bills," he said.

With this assistance, Bellazer said the Salvation Army can help an individual only twice a year, and the situation must be an emergency, such as a death in the family or loss of a job.

"It has to be something that normally would not happen," he added.

And while the Salvation Army provides relief for adults, it also makes sure children can be children. Working with area schools, the agency holds its annual summer camp at Camp Hidden Lake each July.

"We zero in on kids who wouldn't normally have an activity," Bellazer said. "The kids go wild. It's a big retreat."

While enjoying the great outdoors, campers go fishing and enjoy tradi-

tional camping activities like boating and hiking, and those who cannot swim can earn their fins with lessons. The children also attend Bible study as a part of the Salvation Army's Christian atmosphere.

And while the children get to enjoy the activities of the camp, Bellazer said he wishes they had a place to go year-round.

"My primary focus is youth, and I would love to see a youth recreation center here," he said. "I think it's important that we as adults, being role models for our youth, give children a positive influence in their lives. They need to see a person who is structured and someone who says if they are going to do something, they'll do it. Children need guidance and discipline and they want it."

Although Bellazer says he loves to help others, he has faced difficulties as a volunteer.

"The most difficult part is not putting my personal feelings into a person's need and not being judgmental," he said. "To assess the need of a person is the most difficult part because you have to be very unbiased and at the same time be ready to investigate and willing to follow through what you say."

After getting the right help to those who need it, Bellazer said he hopes those he's aided realize they are not alone.

"I hope that they will see a positive force in their community doing something that will help them. My impact that I want to make on this community is that I'm here to do what it takes to pull us all up. We're all one; we're all trying to make it," he said. "If you see one positive light, then follow that light. As long as that light is doing good for the betterment of the community, then let's do it."

Striving to lend a helping hand, Bellazer recalled a woman who came to the Salvation Army in Louisiana for help.

"[She] needed some assistance as far as electricity goes, and she mentioned that her life had been in such a turmoil. She didn't know how she was going to make it, and through the Salvation Army, and by us helping her with her utility bill, she realized that there was somebody behind her

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who wanted her to succeed. That gave her an incentive to keep trying to find a job because before then, she had given up and didn't care," he said.

"Three months later, she found a job and started going to church. By coming to the Salvation Army that day and praying with her, it just changed her whole life," he said. "We really never know what effect it will have on people's lives."

After working with people of misfortune, Bellazer said he realized he enjoys a wealth of riches in his life.

"The really important thing I learned when working with the Salvation Army is that you really are better off than you think you are. Until I became involved with the Salvation Army, I didn't realize what it is to need," he said.

"I'm on the inside, looking out, and I see the needs people have. I'm really fortunate and blessed."

Editor's note: Sue Joe is a senior communication major at Mississippi State University.