

# follow the journey

How James Davis became James Davis

**1979** At 13 Davis was sexually assaulted by his priest, Rev. Norman Christian. He didn't tell anyone because of Christians' power over him and the fear of being blamed.

"I was smart, always an honor roll student, but that doesn't mean nothing when you got something going on in yourself."

James Davis

"First you start doing the drug and then the drug does you."

James Davis

**1966** James Davis was born in St. Louis. Davis was raised going to church and eventually he became an altar boy.

"[Secrets] destroyed me. If I had let it go a long time ago, then I wouldn't have taken [the road I took]. Tell your story; don't be shy."

James Davis

**1980's** To cope with being sexually assaulted, Davis turned to drugs. First weed, later PCP because it's stronger.

"I started doing crime because that was [my] outlet of dealing with [the sexual assault] but in doing crime, I ended up killing some people."

James Davis

**1990's-2010's** Eventually, the law caught up to Davis. He served 25 years in prison for murder and robbery. While in prison, he was stabbed for standing up for someone.

# more than a house

People recover from homelessness and addiction at Stepping Into The Light Ministry

Content warning: Death, drug use and sexual assault

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Light floats in through the open door. The office is scattered degrees and religious proverbs populating the walls. Men come in and out, making small talk with each other; the door remaining open. Every inch of the space is filled, from the coffee station by the door to the crosses that almost touch the ceiling. House manager James Davis stands in the center of it all. This is Stepping Into the Light Ministry, a rehabilitation center for men struggling with addiction and homelessness. As men walk through, Davis chimes in, "Leave the door open."

"When I came through that door, I stepped into the light," Davis said. "From that moment on, my life has been consistently changed to the point that I've found my calling. This is my calling: helping save

souls."

To minimize triggers, men staying at SITLM don't have access to phones or the outside world for 30 days. Additionally, everyone who comes to SITLM has to be vetted by Davis.

"It's my duty and responsibility," Davis said. "I'm the caretaker; I'm the gatekeeper. You don't get through the [front door] unless you come through me."

SITLM was founded by Bishop Jerome Bracely as a way to combat drug use and gang violence within his own neighborhood. Under six months of Davis' leadership, 20 people have graduated and gotten stable housing. Davis has the highest graduation rate since SITLM's creation in 1995.

"Many lives have been changed and most of them are men that came through [the program] or were homeless," Bracely said. "I get them from the courts, different organizations, churches, word of mouth, family, jails [and] just all over. From [1995] up to now, I've

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For Stepping Into The Light Ministry's donation list

helped over 10,000 men."

When Davis met Bracely, he was struggling with drug usage, and soon entered SITLM's 90-day sobriety program.

"I came through the door broken and confused, and when I got here there was nothing but love shown to me," Davis said. "That's the key to it all. In healing is love. If you [have] love, you can definitely change the world, and there's a lot of love here."

SITLM's secretary, Xavier Mosely, 30, meets with people when they first arrive at the house to provide any resource they need, whether that's physical, social or emotional. Mosely was kicked out of his house at 17 by his mother because he allowed people experiencing homelessness to come inside his house and get food or a hot shower.

"I got a relationship with everyone," Mosley said. "I know everybody's story, I help everybody. A dude came [to me] and wanted some laundry soap, I told him to go



**TOP LEFT:** House manager James Davis rests against his desk in the front room of Stepping Into The Light Ministry. His diabetes medications often make him exhausted throughout the day. "I work so hard around here that when I go sleep, everybody says, 'don't wake James up,'" Davis said.

**TOP RIGHT:** A pile of donated clothes sit outside of SITLM. They then distribute donations to residents. "[When you're homeless], no doors will open up for you," Davis said. "Nobody will feed you [or] give you clothes."



**BOTTOM LEFT:** Bishop Jerome Bracely leads residents in prayer. Bracely founded SITLM to reduce homelessness though addiction treatment. "There was a lot of drug-infested activities going on right there on my doorstep," Bracely said.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Davis stands over his graduation certificate. Residents graduate the program after 90 days. "Since [Davis] has been here in September, over 20 people graduated," Xavier Mosely said. (Photos by Mac Huffman)

"Drugs lead to homelessness, but before you get to homeless you have to break the family up. [That's] how you have nowhere to go."

James Davis

**2010's** After getting out of prison, Davis started smoking crack to cope with the blood on his hands. He left his family and moved to a "crack house."

"I came through the door broken and confused, and nothing but love [was] shown to me."

James Davis

to my room, grab mine."

Davis, with the help of his community at SITLM, committed to sobriety and is now over five years sober. In his sobriety, he's been able to realize one of Bracely's original goals, connecting with family, especially his grandchildren.

"I want the sons of the men that come into the program to look at their father — [at] God first — [but] I want them to look at their father and say, 'This is my hero,'" Bracely said.

Throughout his stay at SITLM, Davis quickly adopted Bracely's motivational way of thinking.

"I'm here because I love these men," Davis said. "I love to be that driving force in their life, to show them what God done for me. Yesterday, I was a monster, but today, I'm a God man."

Though Davis can now confidently refer to himself as a "God man," he struggled with his religious identity well into his adulthood. He grew up Christian, but lost faith when he was molested at

age 13 by Rev. Norman Christian. At least eight other boys came forward with similar experiences in a lawsuit years later, but Davis didn't tell anyone besides his brother until 2022.

"I love my mother a lot; [she's] passed away now, and I never told her," Davis said. "I was wrong [for not telling her] because she thought he was Father Christian. I trusted him with all my life, and that's what he did to me. That was his gift to me, but it wasn't a gift; it was destruction. You have to deal with that every day of your life. Every day of your life, it's there. It never goes away."

In the aftermath of his assault, Davis found something to distract himself from Christian's "gift," but it only brought more destruction.

"I started doing crime because that was my outlet [to deal] with it," Davis said. "But in doing crime I ended up killing some people. From killing people, I started using drugs, because I can't cope. You can't cope with wrongdoing in a

**process of the program**  
**day 1**  
People come to Stepping Into The Light Ministry from hospitals, jails and the streets. SITLM gives them housing and helps them get sober.

**day 30**  
People regain access to the outside world and their phones. They're encouraged to look for a job.

continued on page 18

conscious state of mind."

Davis served 25 years in the Missouri State Penitentiary for homicide and robbery. He continued to use drugs after he got out of prison.

"[When] I got out, you would have thought that it would've taught me something," Davis said. "But it didn't because I wasn't informed about [the] root of the problem. I just knew I had a problem and I used drugs to cope with it, which created an even [worse] problem, to the point that I became overwhelmed with life."

To protect his family from his drug use, Davis decided to move out of the family home.

"I said [to my family], 'It's gonna hurt you, [but] I love you,'" Davis said. "I know it seems like I chose drugs over you, and in a way I did, but if I'm destroying myself, what right do I have to destroy you? What right do I have to destroy my children?"

After leaving, Davis became homeless. He floated between

multiple “crack houses” within West St. Louis. After his journey with homelessness, Davis can’t walk by someone on the street without stopping to help.

“Whether you’re living in a state of poverty or the maximum state of luxury, we’re all human,” Davis said. “How could you look down on somebody [who’s homeless]? When you look down that means you can’t look [inward] because that could be you. You don’t ever know [where] life may take [you]. [The people here] didn’t think it was going to be them. I didn’t think it was going to be me.”

SITLM accepts anyone who needs help, no matter their past. Additionally, SITLM offers food, clothes and other necessities to anyone who asks, even if they’re not part of the 90-day program.

“A home is where love is at, where people take care of each other,” Davis said. “Love is an action; it’s something you put forth all the time.”

Davis’s love for SITLM’s residents isn’t always sweet, though.

“He is hard on us but that’s what we need,” SITLM resident Dylan Martinek, 30, said. “The one thing

**process of the program**

**day 90**

After 90 days, people can **graduate or stay longer**. A **ceremony with friends and family** is held for graduates.

**beyond**

**Alumni run SITLM** and have the opportunity to **visit every Sunday** for group meetings and prayer. House manager **James Davis stays in contact** with graduates.

that we were lacking [before coming to SITLM] was structure.”

When he was 13 years old, Martinek’s dad died, so he had to live with his mom and her addiction.

“Me and my mom actually got high together, so it was not the best spot for me,” Martinek said. “I used to go by [her house] and make sure she was still alive, but now since I’m trying to get clean, I try not to be around anything like that.”

Martinek used drugs for 15 years before he got sober six months ago with the help of SITLM. He’s striving for at least a year in programs to rebuild his life after the destruction drug use caused.

“There’s something about this building, this ministry, that really is different,” Martinek said. “I don’t know how to describe it or put it in words but it’s helped me tremendously.”

SITLM helps people get back on their feet by getting them IDs, Social Security numbers and jobs. But recovering from addiction and homelessness is far more than pa-

perwork. Everyone who comes to SITLM has a past to unpack. Braceley leads religious classes throughout the day to facilitate healing.

“I am going to do what I’m doing because I’ve been set free,” Braceley said. “So I’m committed to helping men to be set free like me. I’m committed to see men in their rightful position.”

This level of care doesn’t stop when men graduate from the program. Some come back as to visit, while others, like Davis and Moseley, continue to build the program from the inside out.

“I stay in touch with all the men that [are] willing to stay in touch with me,” Davis said. “I tell them, ‘If you need me, call me and I will come.’ It doesn’t stop here; gift it’s a lifetime. How can I stop touching your life once I touch it? How can I stop? Then, I wouldn’t be the friend and brother that I say I am. Brothers in faith; brothers in love.”

**beyond**

**James Davis’s story doesn’t end here.** He continues to help men rebuild their lives through sobriety as well as his own.

**2022** After **graduating** the program, Davis became **house manager** of SITLM.

**2022** After **decades of using drugs**, Davis committed to his **sobriety** and entered Stepping Into The Light Ministry’s 90-day sobriety program.

**“I couldn’t stop [the sexual assault] then, but I can stop it now. I don’t have to be homeless anymore. I don’t have to be on drugs, I’m 5 years 7 months clean.”**

**James Davis**



**BOTTOM RIGHT:** A SITLM graduate leads prayer. The group meets every Sunday to pray and reconnect. “This is a self-help program,” Davis said. “All we do is provide, you have to do the rest.”

**TOP RIGHT:** SITLM resident Dylan Martinek signs a check-in sheet. Martinek started studying to take his realtor license exam after joining SITLM. “I noticed a huge change in myself,” Martinek said. “[I have] more peace of mind [than I’ve] had in my whole life.”

**LEFT:** SITLM’s secretary, Xavier Moseley, sits at the front desk. Moseley has been at the house since Dec. 5, 2022. “My mom kicked me out [because] I kept letting homeless people in the house, giving them showers and food,” Moseley said. (Photos by Mac Huffman)