

Coats of kindness

A retiree is using his time to help brighten his hometown, one can of paint at a time, and attracting new volunteers

By [Lori Kurtzman](#)

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GLOUSTER, Ohio — The transformation was swift. Regina Williams left home to spend time with her grandkids and came back to find her house gleaming, the exterior slathered with two fresh coats of white paint.

The painters finished Bonnie's Home Cooking in only a few hours, covering years of mildew and neglect in a cheery shade of orange. Owner Bonnie Shifflet burst into tears and thanked them with a lunch of cabbage rolls.

"Breathtaking," she said. "They made it look like a new joint."

Building by building, this band of do-gooders is trying to perk up their Athens County village of 2,000, hoping that a little cosmetic work can boost the community's spirit. They've transformed at least eight buildings, and by the time you read this, they've probably painted more. The project has grown so fast that no one's sure just how many places they'll tackle with their rollers.

"I didn't expect it to get as big and to take off as quickly," said Mayor Miles Wolf, who looked outside the window of his flower shop on High Street and saw the man who's changing Glouster with the swipe of his brush.

No surprise, he's painting.

James Cotter is his name. Jim. He wears a baseball cap that reads "GHS class of 1950."

"Born here in 1930," he says. "I'm 81 years old."

Cotter now lives in the Dayton suburb of Kettering but grew up in Glouster. He played football at the stadium down the street. He remembers a time when the village was home to fancy grocery stores, movie theaters and bakeries, even a bowling alley. He recalls when the school kids would stop at the Wonder Bar to fill their lunch pails with beers for their dads at the coal mines that were the area's economic engine back then.

When Cotter sees the vacant buildings, peeling paint and junkyard lawns of today's Glouster, he sees a problem that can be fixed.

"Obviously," Cotter said, "almost every place in town needs painting."

And so he paints. It was something he'd always wanted to do, and after his wife died in May, he found he had the time to do it. He and his sister, Jody Moore, who has spent her entire 83 years in Gloucester, assembled a volunteer group to paint the outside of an old photography studio this year, and that's where it started.

They took an abandoned home and made it a buttery yellow with blue doors. They not only painted Williams' home but also added new shutters and flower boxes. Shifflet got her orange building, of course, and 88-year-old Verna Grubbs watched as the peeling paint on her two buildings was replaced by a clean, bright white.

"Are you satisfied with what we did?" Cotter asked Grubbs.

"Oh, yes," she said.

"You're not going to fire us?" he joked.

Cotter, who owned a sign shop in Dayton for 50 years, has funded the project through donations of cash, materials and sweat. When he visits paint and hardware stores to explain what he's doing, they usually give him the cans they can't sell. When people see his crews painting, they stop to help, even if they don't know what's going on. He has 39 names on his volunteer list.

People give money, too. An Athens woman sent a check for \$1,000. A man walked up to Cotter on the street and pressed \$20 into his hand.

It's enough to bring tears to Cotter's eyes, and he apologizes for getting choked up.

"It feels great," he said. "If I died today, I'd be happy."

The project likely will be done by summer. Cotter wants to fix up the cracked and peeling football stadium and paint a few more buildings, and then he hopes Gloucester's residents will take over from there.

He has reason to be hopeful. Not long after the project started, the owners of a hair salon on High Street saw what was happening in the neighborhood and had the store's walls power-washed.

They plan to paint next.

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