

SOCIETY OF HELPERS

VOICES of Hope



HOMELESS, YES.
BUT NOT HOPELESS.
PLEASE HELP.
GIVE AND IT
SHALL BE GIVEN.

Homelessness

BRINGING HOPE TO THE HUMAN JOURNEY

Vol V Issue I

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"In my Father's house there are many mansions... I am going there to prepare a place for you."

A place called "home" is so basic to the experience of our humanity that even Jesus used the image of mansions to describe the coming kingdom of God in a place where we really don't need protection and shelter from the elements.

For us, now, our homes can be places of simplicity and/or beauty. We describe our homes as spacious, cozy, beautiful, messy, warm, inviting, tidy, chaotic, or simply a place we come to in order to sleep and then leave again. Homes are places where we put our needed and not-so-needed stuff. They are places where we keep our necessities and our mementos – the things that keep us mindful of the people and places we love. Indeed, Ann Douglas is quoted as saying "Home is an invention on which no one has yet improved."

Interiorly, home is the place where we dwell. A few years ago in the Chicago archdiocese, Catholics were invited to "Come Home for Christmas." The prodigal son of the Gospel went home and received forgiveness. Jesus went to the home of Martha and Mary and gave the miracle of life to Lazarus. At times of distraction and stress we need time and space to "come home to ourselves."

To be without a home, therefore, cuts deeply into our souls. Thomas Wolfe's image of "You Can't Go Home Again" evokes the painful feeling of loss – of childhood, of events, of places and people. We can't go back in time. To be homeless is to live in a painful state of loss of material and spiritual necessities.

Reading the articles in this issue of *Voices of Hope* will invite you to appreciate your own dwelling places as well as challenge you to touch the pain of the homeless in our world.



The reality of homelessness was not part of my experience growing up. My family lived in the same home for more than forty years, as did many of our neighbors. When I came to Chicago and entered the Helpers, one of my first ministries was at a shelter for single moms and children. This was foreign to me, to see so many families not having a place to call home. How could this be in the land of plenty?

Since those first days of volunteering at that homeless shelter, I have come to learn much more about the tragedy and impact of homelessness on families, individuals and especially children. For an excellent snapshot of homelessness in America, I would encourage you to check out the Snapshot of Homelessness of the National Alliance to End Homelessness' website. This site also gives you ideas of how you might get involved in the effort to assist families facing homelessness in your area.

In this issue of *Voices of Hope*, we have asked contributors to reflect on experiences of homelessness, either actual or feelings of homelessness while housed. "People can feel disconnected, or feel they are aimlessly searching for a place in this world -- a place where they fit, where they feel connected, and/or they feel complete." We have encouraged our contributors to consider where they experience homelessness in their lives and where and how their faith was present in the midst of this experience. Each of our writers has been touched by homelessness in some way and shares his/her journey with you. It is our hope that these reflections resonate with you in some way.

In keeping with our theme of "homelessness" our Helper Ministry article focuses on Casa Esperanza, a transitional shelter sponsored by the Society of Helpers. It will be my honor to share with you about this ministry. As a special feature in this issue, we have a guest letter from a member of the editorial team. Please enjoy this additional letter.

Peace,
Sr. Jean



Guest Letter from Editing Committee



Dear Readers,

As we prepared for this issue, and talked to friends of *Voices of Hope*, we came to realize that there are both conventional and unconventional ways to think about the topic of homelessness. There is the tangible and physical sense of being homeless, which is visible on our streets and in our shelters, and which has become even more visible in the tough economic times facing our country today. Also, there is an emotional sense of homelessness that exists in our world in which people can feel disconnected or where they are aimlessly searching for their place in it, a place where they fit, feel connected, and/or feel complete. Even in being surrounded by loved ones or community, people can feel this sense of separation and being unbalanced, which at times can be caused by emotional issues, pressures of social norms, and/or differences they may have with others. While other times it may be due to the sense of displacement that comes along with life changes such as losing a job, relocation, divorce or a death of a family member, friend, or loved one.

People can feel very alone in the midst of a big bustling city like Chicago, New York, or LA, even while being surrounded by people who may be friends, family, a supportive network, or a strong faith community. The causes of both conventional and unconventional homelessness are numerous, and the effects of both are very real. We asked contributors for this issue to share their stories and their experiences of both types of homelessness, as well as the challenges which accompany their perceived homelessness.

Inside each of us, there is a desire to have a home, go home, or be at home in a place that is comfortable, supportive, and safe. As we come out of this winter and Lenten season, we encourage each of you to think about times in your life when you have felt homeless, lost, and/or disconnected. And as we enter into the Easter season, we challenge you to remember the people, community, and faith/spiritual foundations which supported you, encouraged you, and led you out of the solemn time of darkness in your "homelessness" and into the light of rebirth and renewal, which is so visible in the Easter season.

It is a joy for me and the rest of our editorial team to journey with our contributors and readers through the various topics we delve into within each issue of our publication. On behalf of our team, we thank you for sharing in this experience with us.

Blessings,

Leigh M. Hartley, Lead Editor

Helpers and Friends Gathering: Make a Difference in the World



Theresa Casillas, Sr. Cecile Leung, Sr. Mary Ellen Moore

On February 23, 2013, the Society of Helpers invited friends and associates from across the United States to gather at suburban Chicago's Marian Village for a day of reflection and conversation in preparation for the February 24 and 25 United States Provincial Chapter meeting.

Facilitated by the Claret Center's Rima Imburgia and Scott Alessi of *U.S. Catholic*, participants delved into a variety of topics in large and small group settings, with a focus on making a positive impact on a range of social issues.

"Our religious community is nurtured not only through our members, but through our relationships with our families, friends, challengers, and those who appreciate who we are and what we do," said Provincial Mary Ellen Moore, S.H. "The purpose of the Gathering is to learn from one another, to broaden our vision, and work together today in a way that will positively impact our global tomorrow."



Delphine Mwizerwa, Sr. Laetitia Bordes

The informal program began with introductions and viewing a video created by Alessi, who worked closely with Jean Kieilty, S.H., to develop the theme and presentation.



Eva Hernandez

"We came up with topics to highlight, [including] war, violence, poverty, hunger, homelessness, domestic violence, natural disasters, and immigration. I sorted through a number of images from various sources to find the ones that seemed to be the most visually striking on those topics. The Helpers provided me with photos, so we could contrast images of the challenges we face in our world with shots of the Helpers and friends working together to bring about positive change," Alessi

said. "The plan was to spark discussion throughout the day of both the challenges we face and how we can work together to overcome them."



The oldest and the youngest participants, Sr. Mary Paul Metivier and Naomi Ramirez

The reflections participants shared in large and small group discussions resulted in a productive exchange of ideas and the creation of new relationships with unlimited potential to make positive changes within participants' lives, communities and the world at large while living out the charism of the Helpers.

"I found it to be a day of sharing faith and experience," said participant Margaret Mulligan, a lay person and a friend of the Helpers. "It was amazing to witness the Helpers empowering others within many communities to become who God is calling them each to be."



There but for the Grace of God, Go I

by Sharita R. Sloan



Twenty years ago, I lived a different life. A serious drug problem caused me to not only lose my job and my home, but custody of my three children, as well. I stayed in homeless shelters for a while, but the severity of my addictions caused me to not only get kicked out of or banned from different shelters in Chicago. I lived on the streets, sometimes in abandoned buildings and garages, and sometimes staying with people (usually other drug addicts) I met along the way.

I remember once sleeping in an old abandoned Volkswagen van for a week, before it was towed away by the city. It was littered and dirty and cold, but having four walls around me certainly felt like home. A while later, I met a homeless veteran who lived in a cardboard box in an alley off of 22nd Street on Chicago's south side. He taught me how to layer blankets and clothes inside the box so that it was comfortable, and showed me how to place Sterno candles so that I could have warmth on the cold winter nights. We learned the days that the restaurants in Greektown threw away the most food and would raid their dumpsters after hours for fruit, vegetables and bread. Heading further north around Broadway Ave., we could score clothes and other odds and ends from garbage bins in the alley.

*"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers,
for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"*

-Hebrews (13:2)

I collected my share of knick knacks, books and other items. I toted them around with me in my bags, just so I could feel like I had something that was truly mine. When there were no other places to go, I slept in entryways and doorways, sometimes behind dumpsters. Alleys were always best because you were safer if no one knew you were there. I washed up in restaurant bathrooms, usually at a McDonald's or in other fast food places. Once I was washing myself off in a puddle of water along a curb on the Southside and looked up to see an old high school classmate staring at me, shaking his head in disgust. To this day I am not sure if he recognized me, but the sting of my shame remains.

Along the way, however, I met amazing people who - though dirty and discarded - still had bursts of wisdom to impart upon whomever chose to listen. There is

a verse in Hebrews (13:2), “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” that always comes to mind when I think back on the friends I met while living on the street. Some are surprised to hear me say that the most spiritual people I have ever known were homeless. When you have nothing but yourself and God, you learn to listen to and rely upon that still small voice that is the Holy Spirit.

Being a homeless woman is dangerous. There were many times I found myself at the mercy of drug dealers and other criminals. The homeless are constant victims of assault, rape and other crimes. I can recall many times when I realized that it was nothing but God’s grace that kept me from being mortally harmed. There were times when I did not know how I would go on, or even if I wanted to, and somehow the Lord would show me that He was still with me, loving me even though I couldn’t love myself.

One of my favorite photographers is Lee Jeffries. He has an amazing portfolio of portraits of the homeless throughout the world and, in my opinion, perfectly captures the beautiful souls of those who most people don’t see.

“Everyone else walks by like the homeless are invisible. I’m stepping through the fear, in the hope that people will realize these people are just like me and you.” - Lee Jeffries



Picture by Lee Jeffries

Somewhere along the line, someone took the time to “see me” and treated me with the respect that all children of God deserve. Yes, I have indeed come full circle, from needing help to being the helper. And while it mostly came from me, I know that I could not have done it alone. God held me in the palm of his hand when I was unable to care for myself. He instilled within me a lesson that I live by to this day:

His grace is sufficient for us all, for His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Sharita R. Sloan is currently Program Supervisor for Madonna House, an interim housing facility for women and children who are experiencing homelessness. For the past 15 years, she has worked with people who are homeless. Her mission is to continue giving back what was given to her years before...God’s grace. She is happily married with two wonderful sons and resides in Glenwood, Illinois. She may be contacted at ssloan@catholiccharities.net.



We gather at the table every Wednesday night – the women, another volunteer, my husband, Jim, and I and sometimes a staff member. We pass the dishes around. Ask for more water. Hope the dessert will be good. We’re in a home for women transitioning out of jail or prison, St. Vincent de Paul Society’s (SVdP’s) Catherine’s Center. Jim and I have been graced to volunteer with these women for the past eight years, sharing weekly meals with them and offering courses in ethics, scripture, and earth care.

For about a year, up to 10 women live at SVdP’s Catherine’s Center. It’s a place of love, connection to God and the spiritual life, and community. Here the women are challenged to be true to themselves, and good to one another. They are a part of something. They are together in their journey. They are wanted. They are “home.”

In every home, there are blessings and challenges. We help one another out, and we disappoint each other. Sometimes we do the dishes well, and other times we leave the pots on the stove. We laugh, and cry and yell. We want to talk. We need to be left alone. There are tensions and misunderstandings around which we must navigate. This is the Catherine’s Center experience, too. In many ways, it’s a “normal” home. There’s the necessary routine to help the program flow.

The women rise early for morning prayer, meditation and breakfast. They go to a nearby recovery program for most of the day. They come home for some down-time, chores and one-on-one meetings with staff. After dinner, and special programs or relaxation, they go to bed and start again the next day. What makes a functional household a home, though, is that there exists an underlying sense of security, belonging and purpose. There is a basic awareness that, no matter what happens, every member will always be embraced.

For these women, who are committed to recovering from pain, trauma and shame far deeper than most of us can fathom, this is extraordinarily difficult to believe. Doubts



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about themselves, one another, the program and God arise constantly. "If you knew everything I did, you wouldn't really want me here" or "I've never been truly loved in my life - why would that change now?" or "I snuck out last night and relapsed. Are you going to kick me out?" SVdP's Catherine's Center is committed to affirming the dignity and worth of these women no matter what is in their past - loving the women right here and now, fully and completely.

Over the years, I've witnessed these women entering with doubt and fear. They hold back, and then make some mistake. They are forgiven, held accountable and challenged. They start to sense that they are someplace different – that they are with people who believe in and want for them. They begin to trust, and gradually open up. They hold on tightly to one another, the women who have gone before them, staff members and volunteers. They turn to God, to their spiritual core, in hope and faith, realizing they are not alone in this journey.

They start to recognize that they are beautiful creations, and that they are worthy of full lives. Some have to cross deep chasms between themselves and their children. Some are stymied by the challenge of carrying a felony on their record while trying to secure employment. Others must overcome the stigma of a diagnosed mental or physical illness. They receive active physical, emotional and spiritual support as they strive to do this.

SVdP's Catherine's Center is a "transitional home." The program is designed so the women can explore the love that God has for them. It offers an anchor for these women, where they can experience safety and respect. The hope and prayer and work for these women is that they will graduate from Catherine's Center, healed enough to be able to create new and lasting homes where they can flourish.

I'll always remember a comment one of my graduate school professors made many years ago. He had conducted an experiment, living as a homeless man in three different cities for several months. The hardest thing for him to endure, he shared, was the refusal or inability of others to look him in the eye. At SVdP's Catherine's Center, these women are beheld and held. They are honored. They are loved. They are home.

Kathy Curran was introduced to the Society of Helpers through a friendship with Sr. Laetitia Bordes, a staunch advocate for social justice. She is the community service coordinator at Mercy High School, San Francisco. She and her husband, Jim McGarry, live in Pacifica with their 3 children: Tom, Maggie, and Michael. You're welcome to contact her at kathycurran2011@gmail.com.

Spiritual Homelessness: Gift or Curse?

by Bridget Purdome



"It is a gift to be spiritually homeless."

A few years ago, my spirituality professor wrote this irritating comment on my paper. How could a priest, living in a community of like-minded men, present spiritual homelessness as a gift to a lay woman? It felt more like a curse to me!

At that time, I was a volunteer lay minister at a suburban parish and the spouse of a deacon. Parishioners probably considered me well established at this church, but I didn't feel like I belonged. After journeying through four years of diaconate formation training with my husband, my gifts and talents weren't being fully affirmed and utilized.

I had recently transitioned from a wonderful ministry at a day shelter. I loved being present to people who were homeless, mentally ill, and struggling with addictions. I also had frequent opportunities to lead their weekly ecumenical worship service and had been surprised to discover that I was able to offer reflections that urban African American men found relevant to their lives. I had found a spiritual home!

Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures he makes me lie down; to still waters he leads me;

He restores my soul. He guides me along right paths for the sake of his name.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me.

You set a table before me in front of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Indeed, goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life; I will dwell in the house of the LORD for endless days.

I continued volunteering there for months after my internship ended, but sadly, it became clear that I needed to move on. When my professor made his aggravating comment, I was still grieving the loss of this community.

Where is my home?

This question plagued me as I struggled to find my way in an institution that doesn't fully embrace the gifts of women. At the same time, God continued to lead me to the margins of the Church and to invite me into solidarity with those who were suffering.

I began leading a weekly spiritual group for men and women with HIV/AIDS at a transitional home. During an initial session, as we engaged in a spiritual reading of Psalm 23, the sharing took on a richness that I hadn't anticipated. One man commented that he had hit a point over the weekend in which he just didn't feel like being around. He shared that he had previously tried to kill himself a couple times, but he now recognized that for some reason, God wants him here. There wasn't a dry eye in the group.

Another man shared that he wasn't sure that he was going to survive AIDS, and that he felt like God was calling him to get things in order for his family. As his tears flowed, a woman sitting next to him took his hand in hers. He responded by stretching out his hand to me. I extended my other hand to the man on my right, and he reached out to the man next to him. Soon, the entire group was holding hands and praying together. Afterwards, nobody wanted to move. We could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit hovering in the room among us.

Had I found my new spiritual home? The men and women had embraced me, the Holy Spirit had affirmed me, and yet, as a part-time volunteer, I didn't feel like I fully belonged.

Home is in me.

Today, I am a staff member of this ministry. Surely I've found my spiritual home. Not really. Each week I seek temporary shelter by driving to three different locations to be with those who are suffering from homelessness, HIV/AIDS, material poverty, addictions, gang violence, physical and mental illness, prostitution, the alienation of being gay or transgender, etc. The men and women welcome me and share their gratitude and their struggles with me.

I love this ministry, and yet I know that it's not my true home. Through contemplation, I've come to know that home is not a ministry, a parish, or an institution. Home is where the Holy Spirit dwells deep inside of me. It is the place that I'm awakened to each morning, and the place that I'm invited back to each night. I'm often in touch with a longing to enter more fully and more deeply into this space and even to stay there permanently, but God keeps calling me back out to the world to experience the Holy Spirit in those who are suffering.

Is spiritual homelessness a gift or a curse? For me, it often feels like both.

Bridget Purdome is the spiritual care coordinator for a ministry that serves those with HIV/AIDS, a spiritual director, and a retreat leader. Bridget holds an M.A. in Pastoral Studies from Loyola University and is currently completing a joint master's degree in divinity and spirituality. Bridget's daily reflections appear at TheSpiritToday.com, and she can be reached at Bridget@TheSpiritToday.com.





When I arrived at Su Casa Catholic Worker Community in the summer of 2007, I think I expected that living in voluntary poverty in solidarity with the homeless would somehow erase my privilege. Much to my dismay, living at Su Casa made me more aware of my privilege than I had ever been, and I realized that I could never change the factors that contributed to my privilege: that I was white, educated, from a family of means, an American citizen, etc.

As I lived and worked at Su Casa, I realized that while I could not escape my privilege, there were conditions under my control that were binding me and preventing me from living fully. Among the idols I named as my influences for joining the Catholic Worker were Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi and Dorothy Day. Yet, when I was honest with myself, among the idols that I continued to worship in practice were money, security, and power. In living and working with the homeless, the false idols began to dissolve and life was distilled down to its essence – relationship.

Money

Living with the homeless, I witnessed a depth of love and loss that I had never experienced, and I was invited into that experience with them. My life had been joyful by and large. But through living in voluntary poverty,

I came to understand that money had very little to do with that joy, and in fact often distracted me from what really matters. When I stepped outside of the upper-middle class world in which I had been raised, I saw how many decisions were driven by money. While there's nothing inherently wrong with money, our society's propensity to let money govern all can be debilitating. The message I had received from society was that part of my value rested in what I owned and bought. However, I gained freedom in learning that I am not defined by what I own or what I can buy, but by how deeply I love.

Security

Growing up, I was taught to serve the poor. Yet, I was also taught to make sure I locked my car door when

I went through a bad neighborhood. There's no denying that crime rates are generally higher in economically poor neighborhoods, but it's hard to demonize someone – even those convicted of a crime – once you know their names and stories. The fear of “the other” is dehumanizing for the people on both sides of the equation. In my fear of getting hurt, I had literally and metaphorically been putting a fence around my heart. Risking my “safety” to be in a place to form relationships with those who seemed so different allowed me to feel at a depth I never had before.

Power

Living and working with the homeless taught me that I am not in control. I had to listen to stories of immense heartbreak and pain, and then admit that I could not fix anything. The greatest gift I could give was to be there and share in the suffering of

those who had entrusted me with their lives and their stories. My “tribe,” the educated, middle-class in the United States, often believes it is in control. People who are economically poor have kept me rooted in a faith that knows God is the only one in charge, and that any illusions of control are just that - illusions.

I have a long way to go, but insofar as I have begun my journey toward liberation, I owe an infinite debt of gratitude to my most influential teachers – the homeless of Chicago. The idols began to dissolve; relationships were formed, and therein came the greatest transformation. In our life together, nonessential parts of our humanity fell to the wayside. In our best moments, we loved each other not because we did or did not possess things like money, privilege and power, but simply because we existed together as human beings. We became human together in loving one another. We restored dignity to each other.

For the last year and a half, Chantal de Alcuaz has served as director of the Society of Helper's ministry Casa Esperanza, a homeless shelter for women and children on Chicago's southeast side. Before joining Casa, she lived and worked at Su Casa Catholic Worker Community for three years. In addition to her ministry with the homeless, Chantal works in carpentry and is active with Witness Against Torture, a campaign to end torture and close the detention facilities at Guantanamo. Chantal can be reached at c.dealcuaz@gmail.com.



Gaining in the Process of Losing

by Maria Camarena



In 2006, I came to Chicago from my home in Mexico where I had studied clinical psychology. I arrived in Chicago with a deep pain in my heart and was looking for something to help me overcome the loss of a beloved friend. For this reason, I began my pilgrimage in search of a new home.

I lived with my best friend and her family for a few months when I first arrived in Chicago. I eventually moved to my own place and my immigration process began with this first step. My friend did not have time to support me like I needed. Now, it is clear to me that even with her friendship and

support, I had to travel this journey on my own. I studied English in Mexico, but it was not enough to communicate effectively in the U.S. This reality made it more difficult to find a job, but I did. However, my salary was not enough to pay the bills. I quickly realized that my own economic instability impacted my sense of security.

In Mexico, I traveled freely throughout my country. I knew the transportation system well. It was a great shock to me when I could not get around easily in Chicago. One evening, I was downtown and I missed the last bus. The only bus I could take was to an unfamiliar and dangerous part of the city. It was 11:00 p.m., and I was scared to be alone on a dark street. I asked myself, "Where am I?" This was a question which in reality pertained to my entire life.

I called my best friend to ask for a ride home, but she wasn't able to help me. It hurt me so much to know that the one person I counted on couldn't help. I knew at this moment that I was completely on my own. In retrospect, standing there on a dark and lonely street was a metaphor for my life at that point in time. A bus driver saw me as she was passing by and stopped. She asked me where I needed to go and was kind enough to drive me to a safer place where I could catch a bus home.

When I arrived at my apartment, I sat on the floor and cried from the depths of my soul. The flood of tears that streamed down my face was not only for the anger and frustration I felt from the situation, but also for the brokenness and emptiness within me. It was the first time that I had cried since the loss of

my friend from Mexico that had driven me to Chicago. I realized that when my friend died, I lost my home. I lost the place where I felt completely accepted and valued for who I am. I could express my love in his presence with total trust and knew that it would be returned. It didn't matter how much support I received from my other friends - I became homeless when my friend died.

After this experience, I confronted the reality of my situation. I knew that I had to reflect on it more to discover the meaning of it all. The bus driver who rescued me was a sign of God's love for me. In the darkest experiences of my life, God has been present through people placed on my path.

During this time, I met Sr. Dominga Zapata, SH, when someone invited me to volunteer in CAVA (Chicago Archdiocesan Vocation Association)-Latina. We connected from the moment we were introduced. Her warm, friendly welcome made me feel at home. It was a big change in my life because in Sr. Dominga I found a great friend and sister. In my friendship with her we agreed, disagreed, celebrated, argued and laughed together. I began to recover the joy and enthusiasm I had for life. Eventually I also met Sr. Margaret and Sr. Jean who were also kind to me, as all Helpers I have met have been.

Later I began attending classes at the Mary Ward Center with Sr. Christa Parra, IBVM. It has been a blessing because Sr. Christa not only teaches me English, but also lets me begin each week with deep sharing through our conversations. She is a wise woman who has a wonderful sense of humor. She is respectful and compassionate. Each of the sisters at the Mary Ward Center makes a difference in our community with her presence.





I am grateful to experience these friendships in the midst of my homelessness because it reminds me that God's love and care is always with me. Although at times when we are in darkness, we do not see this very clearly. Thanks for being "Voices of Hope" in my darkest time. Thank you for being "Helpers" when I most needed it. I now work with foster kids and try to share with them this same hope. It is not only a job for me, but also a way to give back what I have received. Yes! I have found through

this process a way to recover from my loss and to renew my hope.

Maria Camarena came to the United States from Mexico in November 2006. Her background is in clinical psychology, and she currently works in a shelter with foster kids who have been removed by the Department of Children and Family Services. Within her work, she often finds that the children arrive with physical or emotional trauma and through her activities with them she tries to help them to heal by recovering their joy and sense of security as children. Maria can be reached via email at camarenamaria@yahoo.com.mx.



Faith illuminating the hard path

It's a Matter of Being Missed

by Elizabeth Sivek



I am privileged to know many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities including autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy with a developmental delay, seizure disorders, and learning problems. My reflections on homelessness revolve around the many people with these mentioned challenges who live without the spiritual life of the family of God.

One of these people is my cousin, Judy, who is now almost 55 years old and is a person with Down syndrome. Loving? Definitely. Stubborn? Absolutely. Judy lived with her family - my aunt and uncle - a mile from my home until her father died a few years after her mother. After his death, Judy was placed in a group home owned by the same agency that provides her workshop needs. It is located a half of a block from her family home in the same parish where she grew up.

Another example is my friend's daughter, Rebecca, who is 44 years of age and lives with cerebral palsy and a developmental delay. She now gets around using a wheelchair. A true witness of faith? Definitely. Compassionate? Absolutely. I have known Rebecca since she was two years old. Her mom, dad, brother, uncle and I have spent many hours with her during hospital stays over the last few years and weeks of rehab at a local facility.

"If the weak and vulnerable are excluded from Christian community, there is no community. It may look and feel like community but it is no community at all because people are not looking to Jesus."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Both of these women reside with others in a group home setting. These homes are staffed by a private agency that also provides day programming and workshop experience.

Through baptism, we are initiated into the family of God and bonded with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our nourishment in that spiritual life comes from knowing this family through belonging to a parish where we can grow in love for one another as disciples of our Lord Jesus. Without this connection to a parish, we are lacking opportunities to worship and share in the sacramental life of our

Church. The reality is that many of our friends, as I call them, are without this spiritual home because they can't get there or even know its location.

For 37 years, I worked for SPRED (Special Religious Development, Archdiocese of Chicago) in a 400-bed state residential facility in the south suburbs of Chicago called the Elisabeth Ludeman Developmental Center. This residence is much like Misericordia, a facility in Chicago which supports more than 600 children and adults with developmental disabilities. On the Ludeman Center's 60 acres of land, there are 50 ranch style homes. Each houses eight people with round-the-clock staff. My role was to visit local churches to find adult volunteers to nourish their faith through the SPRED program.

Over the years many of these residents moved into smaller types of residential facilities within the Archdiocese of Chicago. Besides group homes, similar to where Judy and Rebecca live, there are CILAs (community integrated living arrangements) where four to six people reside in a purchased home that looks like any other home on that same block in a neighborhood. Others live in apartments where one or two people reside in a complex available to other renters. Within the Archdiocese of Chicago, there are hundreds of these settings where thousands of our friends now live. The spiritual needs of those living in these residential settings should be an integral part of their lives.

In the near future, Judy will be moving from her group home of 16 into a CILA home for six on a lovely street in LaGrange, IL. She will be a half block from her new local church, but her new parish does not have a SPRED program. So I must ask, "How will she be introduced to that church? Will the staff register her? Who will bring her?"



Rebecca's 44th birthday celebration

In the group home where Judy still resides, 12 of the 15 people are Catholic and live next door to the local church. So I further ask, "Do they get to church? How can anyone rely on staff to take 12 people? What about the religious identity of the other four? Are they Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, or Presbyterians? How do they get to their respective churches? Are the staff members even of the same denominations as any of the residents? Is their Sunday morning programming a factor in discerning whether or not someone goes to church? Or, is it just a day to sleep in, have a leisurely breakfast and hang out?"



Elizabeth with her cousin Judy

The Christian community has a role in eliminating the spiritual homelessness of these people. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "If the weak and vulnerable are excluded from Christian community, there is no community. It may look and feel like community but it is no community at all because people are not looking to Jesus." He further states, "To be included in a parish, you just need to be there. To belong you need to be missed. To miss one another we need to learn what it means to love with the passion of Jesus." Rebecca's parents faithfully take her to church every Sunday where she is known and would be missed by her pastor and others. What about those parents who live far away, who are frail themselves and can't get around so easily?

For Judy and Rebecca, belonging to a small faith community through the SPRED program has been a real treasure. This catechetical program offers them a place to belong until they are well into their senior years. The program is offered at a parish near their group homes. SPRED is a faith development program specifically designed to meet the spiritual needs of these people. They are welcomed and belong to a small faith community within the larger faith community of a parish so they can be known, loved, and nourished in faith. This happens through a one-on-one relationship with an adult catechist within a small community.

The mission of SPRED is to include our friends in the larger worshipping church by developing a sense of the sacred, a sense of church, a sense of God, and a sense of Jesus. We need to be vigilant in locating apartments, CILAs, group

homes, and other types of residential settings within our parishes. We need someone to be the pastor's representative which we call the SPRED chairperson. This person reaches out to these people, registers those who are Catholic in the parish, and works to provide the SPRED program. SPRED nurtures their spiritual life and provides a place where they feel they belong to the family of God and would truly be missed.

Elizabeth works for the Archdiocese of Chicago SPRED agency as a community religious worker. She recently celebrated 40 years. Elizabeth strives to open the doors of parishes for our friends with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She assists these parishes in starting the SPRED program of life-long faith development through catechesis in small communities of faith. She works to identify those living with their families, and those living apart in residential homes, to belong to a SPRED community. Elizabeth's email is e.sivek@sbcglobal.net.

A Humbling Taste of Homelessness

by Nicholas Weir



During my sophomore year in college, I got a firsthand experience of being temporarily homeless. During my freshman year I lived in the college dorm, but when I could no longer afford to do so I found myself either begging two friends to share their room or sleeping in the computer laboratory on campus. To make matters worse, I was simultaneously going through social homelessness in the sense of isolation from people I thought were my friends.

I remember walking, usually around 12:40 a.m., with my laptop and backpack to the basement of the library where the computer lab was located. I remember some nights my eyes would be burning due to lack of sleep; however, there were times I could not sleep because students would still be in the computer lab until about 3:00 a.m. At times, I would be worried that someone would disturb me while I was sleeping. I would always set my phone alarm at 6:04 a.m. so I could get up at least 10 minutes before the janitor came to clean the computer lab room.

I remember one night tears came to my eyes because I could not believe that I was in this predicament. But I knew I would not allow any obstacle to prevent me from reaching my goal of becoming a medical scientist, so I just said to myself, "Easy...hush Nick....don't worry," and then went to bed—well not bed, since there was none, but three chairs pushed together. I knew then that my determination keeps growing with a deeper resilience in moments like this. It has thus far made me get on a plane a few months after graduating from high

school and travel to another country leaving behind family and friends with just a few hundred dollars in my wallet.

Being homeless changed my outlook and empathy for individuals who are experiencing temporary homelessness. According to one of my biology professors, the main reason people need to sleep is to rejuvenate their immune system; if someone does not sleep for approximately seven days straight, the individual would die. Several times during my homelessness, I would only sleep for four hours each night during the weekdays. Bearing in mind I was taking mostly science courses that required plenty of study time and I had a back-to-back schedule each day, this was quite a challenging situation. I found I was forcing myself to keep my eyes open in my night and day classes. As the weeks progressed, I kept learning more efficient ways of keeping up with my weekly schedule given my situation.

My experience has made me more humble and grateful for whatever I possess. Apart from the weekday nights when I would usually sleep in the computer lab, other nights my friend (now girlfriend) would share her room with me. While being homeless, I still somehow felt blessed and happy. Even though I had to sleep on the chairs, at least I had somewhere to sleep.

"One should strive and demand better or change, but in the meanwhile one should be grateful for what one already possesses." - Nicholas Weir.

Nicholas Weir is a pre-M.D./Ph.D. college student. He came to know the Society of Helpers by way of a college mate who invited him home where the friend lived with Sr. Geraldine and Sr. Teresa. He eventually explained his living situation to both sisters, and subsequently they provided him with a room to stay while he continues his studies.



Casa Esperanza: A Time, A Place, A Program for Homeless Women and Children

by Sr. Jean Kiely, SH



In August of 1992, a building belonging to the Society of Helpers became available. I proposed that, instead of selling the building, we transform it to second-stage shelter for homeless women with children. Trusting the experience I gained through working with homeless families at Catholic Charities and at St. Sylvester's transitional shelter on the north side of Chicago, the Provincial Council approved

the house for the project and recommended that I take the necessary steps to begin the process.

In September 1993, we launched the Casa Esperanza Project. Through experience, I had become aware that the three to four month limit was not enough time to develop personal, job-related and parenting skills that would help these women move away from the cycle of poverty and move toward independence.

Due to my full-time position at Catholic Charities, I was unable to take on the day-to-day operations of Casa Esperanza. Luckily, Sr. Sally Brennan, RSCJ was on a sabbatical from her job as principal of Sacred Heart Academy and she volunteered. She took on the responsibilities of augmenting the screening process and writing the handbook, and by September 1996 the board agreed to hire Sr. Sally as the executive director. She set the educational components, implemented the mentoring program, and began outreach to other organizations in the south Chicago area, all while overseeing the remodeling projects designed to accommodate more participants and create satisfactory space for classes and study for the women and children.

In 1994, Sr. Mary Ellen Moore, SH, began publishing the newsletter *A Dwelling Place* to increase awareness and to educate others about the complex issues involved in the problem of homelessness. By 1996, the Casa Esperanza Project had also designed a webpage, creating an online presence to reach a larger audience and continue the conversation about this important social issue.

Helpers seek to recognize the dynamic presence of God in our world and affirm that presence by responding to the needs of those who suffer and whose human dignity is injured. This year, as Casa Esperanza celebrates 20 years of providing "a time, a place, a program for homeless women and children," we con-

sider this project a continuing reflection of our mission. By providing housing and a holistic program of personal growth to homeless women with children, the Helpers see Casa Esperanza as a means to restore the dignity of homeless women and children and enable them to fulfill their potential.

Casa Esperanza currently houses eleven residents - six adults and five children. Two adults and two children belong to the same family, one adult has no child, and the other three women have one child each. Casa Esperanza's mission is to help our residents overcome the cycle of poverty and homelessness, offering a home and opportunity for personal, social and professional development. The program:

- Identifies women, current residents of shelters, who have begun to take serious steps toward personal change.
- Offers these women a shared housing experience for a period of about two years. Most often these participants are women with children.
- Provides these women with a holistic program of training and growth that facilitates lifestyle changes.
- Extends holistic program elements to other women in the local community who could benefit from this training.
- Utilizes the latest research developments in learning skills for women.

Over the past 20 years, many Helpers have been involved with the development of Casa Esperanza in various ways. Sisters Catherine Tighe, Dolores Blahaus, Joan Granzeier, Mary Ellen Moore and I have served on the Board of Directors. Sisters Sukla from India, Antoinette from Rwanda and Kriszti Albert from Hungary have volunteered at Casa while living in Chicago. Casa Esperanza has also been blessed with committed board members and faithful donors. We thank everyone who has helped make this project a continuing success and look forward to the next 20 years of service.

To learn more about Casa Esperanza, please visit casaesperanzachicago.org.



Helper History: The U.S. in the 1940s and 1950s

by Sr. Mary Ellen Moore, SH

With the report on the foundation of the Helpers' house in Chicago in the last issue of *Voices of Hope*, we completed the U.S. houses/cities where there are still Helpers. There were two other "foundations" which are now closed: Chappaqua, New York, established in 1922 as the American Novitiate (yes, long before Bill and Hilary bought their property a few blocks away); and Los Angeles which was opened in 1940 and closed in 1980.

The U.S. entered the Second World War on December 7, 1941. This global-wide conflict dampened any enthusiasm for new houses. Communication was cut. Letters to the Generalate in Paris took very long. Travel was not safe. Some of the sisters who traveled to Europe for stages of formation were interned or confined in camps, and others were not able to go to Europe because of the difficulty of travel. History has it that one sister interned in a camp in France was sent home to the motherhouse because of very ill health. She was told she had to return to the camp when she recovered. She spent the remaining time of her European stay in the motherhouse in Paris ready to jump into bed and be "sick" whenever the authorities came to check on the state of her recovery.

The post-war years in the 1950's witnessed a flourishing of new vocations to religious life. Many congregations were bursting at the seams. New novitiates were built and the Helpers profited from this vitality. Our numbers grew. By 1959 there were hints of an ecumenical council. Theologians, cardinals and bishops began to prepare. Change was about to happen on a global scale for the Church.

The impact of the council was profound on the Church and on religious congregations. It touched almost every element of their lives from the way they prayed, to the way they lived in community, and to the way they went about their ministry. It changed the way they thought about themselves as religious, and the places they went, and what they did when they got there. Vatican II changed just about everything from theology to spirituality to ordinary life.

One of the more visible changes for the Helpers (beside change to lay clothes) was the movement away from large houses to small teams. In the upcoming issues of *Voices* we will try to share the life, the vision and the hopes and dreams of what the Helpers did as they responded in generosity to the call of Vatican II. You will hear about Costa Mesa, Orange, Mater Dolorosa, Fredrick Street, De Porres, St. Anne's, Webster Groves, St. Thomas, Smet, Annunciation, Casa Esperanza (this issue), Casa Maria, Pueblo de Dios, and others as we explore the history of the Society of Helpers.

Book Review: *Waters of a Lifetime*



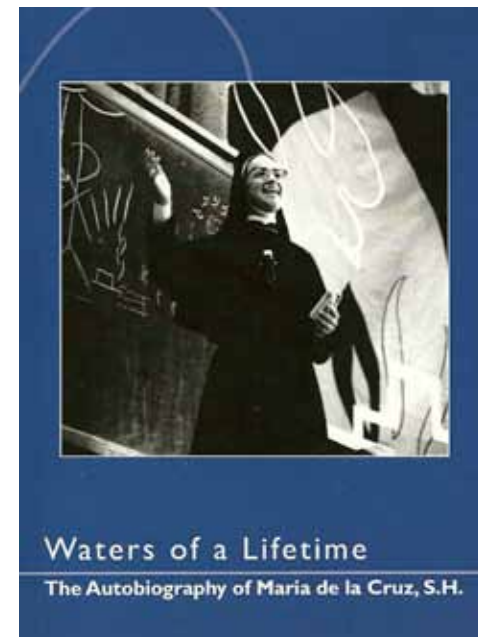
Waters of a Lifetime is the autobiography of Sister Maria de la Cruz Aymes of the Society of Helpers (1919-2009). From her early days as a child in Mexico, through the years of Vatican II and the following decades, *Waters of a Lifetime* offers an intimate history of a remarkable catechist that spans more than half a century.

Her contribution to religious education was rooted in human experience, enlightened by her faith in a loving God, broadened and deepened by the spirit of Vatican II. Published by William H. Sadlier in New York between the years of 1957-1962, her *On Our Way* series of religious education books for children became a runaway best-seller throughout the United States and was translated in more than 12 languages.

Waters of a Lifetime invites you to listen to the stories of this remarkable woman who worked with Popes Paul VI and John Paul II and was able to hold her own with members of the Roman Curia. Her work demonstrates the role her insights and creativity brought to the process of renewal in the Church, heralding a new era in the religious education of children and the formation of religious educators not only in the United States, but throughout five continents.

If you are interested in purchasing a copy of *Waters of a Lifetime*, the cost is \$25.00 and you can email Sr. Laetitia at laetitiabordes@att.net.

Laetitia Bordes, Editor





Sr. Mercedes Reygadas, SH
(December 8, 1924 - March 5, 2013)

Born in Mexico City on December 8, 1924, Sr. Mercedes Reygadas came to the U.S. in 1943 to join the Society of Helpers. She made her first vows on September 8, 1946, and her final vows on August 13, 1952. Though she traveled widely between Alaska, France and Mexico, she spent most of her life in California attending to a variety of ministries. She was an active member of the Hispanic community and counseled youth, couples, the elderly and the ill in a range of settings.

Present at the forefront of the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco, Sr. Mercedes' ministry shifted to the first wave of those suffering from the mysterious new illness, which sparked an enduring affinity for the patients that would span decades. She served in San Francisco's Kaiser Hospital AIDS Dementia Unit, where she witnessed the suffering and eventual death of thousands patients.

"I have carried them in my arms and taken them in my heart," she said. "Yes, these friends have been a grace for me and I thank God for them."

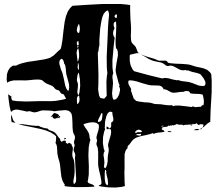
Tireless compassion and a desire to bring God's love and healing to those whose suffering touched her so deeply led her to study flower essence therapy. She learned about traditional practices from family and friends, developed a passion and furthered her studies with the Flower Essence Society. She eventually created a successful partnership with San Francisco-area psychotherapist, Sr. Bernadette Heslin, RSM. They partnered in a holistic practice that also offered a thriving mail-order flower essence therapy consultation which reached clients all over the world.

It fills me with joy to know that where my heart and prayers go, the flowers touch the lives of those who suffer in China, Haiti, Brazil, Japan, Angola and other countries.

—Sr. Mercedes Reygadas, SH

The Helpers welcomed Sr. Mercedes to Chicago in 2005 and she began her retirement at south suburban Homer Glen's Marian Village in 2006. She passed away on March 5, 2013. The dimension of Sr. Mercedes' rich experience and various ministries helped her weave an inimitable blend of faith and healing, contributing to her reputation as a gifted and loving spirit. She will be missed deeply.





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