

THE ROCHESTER CATHOLIC WORKER

Vol. 77 No. 1 Winter 2017-2018 Price: 10¢

HOMELESSNESS AS DEATH SENTENCE: FINDINGS FROM THE HOUSE OF MERCY

By Harry Murray

Anyone who entered Sister Grace Miller's office in the old House of Mercy on Hudson Avenue could hardly fail to be struck by the fact that the walls were covered with funeral brochures and obituaries. Some of the brochures were stained and crinkly with age, deteriorating at the edges. Others were colorful and recent. The faces on the brochures reached out to the viewer – sometimes conveying great sadness and suffering; at other times, pure joy. If one looked more deeply, one often discovered that the image of the face came from years before the person's death, perhaps a high school photo of someone who died in their forties, the only image remaining by which to remember this person. Many of the papers, of course, had no photos; they were sometimes only prayer cards inscribed with name, dates of birth and death, and the name of the funeral home. Others were clipped newspaper obituaries, a brief, photo-less paragraph to summarize a human life.

The individuals on the wall each have a unique story, and it may be helpful to briefly describe a few of these persons before addressing the

statistics that form the core of this report. One of the earliest to die was Woodrow Pugh, fondly known as "Papa Smurf" by those who knew him. He was a diabetic who died in his sleep at the House of Mercy at age 54 in 1991. He moved to Rochester in 1959 after being discharged from the armed forces. Sister Grace gave his eulogy. One of the latest obituaries was that of Monica Sherman, a colorful woman of the streets whose body was found behind a business on Lyell Avenue on July 24, 2017. Although newspaper reports stated only that she had died "of multiple stab wounds," even the House of Mercy staff was shocked at the brutality of the murder and the condition of her body.

Being a sociologist, I proposed to Sister Grace that I quantify all this data to document the life expectancy of homeless persons associated with the House of Mercy. She accepted, and I began the project several years ago with the help of two students. I spent many hours sitting with Sister Grace, Sister Rita, and C.W. - the long-term staff at the House of Mercy - to identify which of the funeral brochures belonged to folks who had

Continued on page 5



Sister Grace Miller in front of her bulletin board at the old House of Mercy location (photo credit: Shawn Dowd)

THE REBIRTH OF A TENANT MOVEMENT IN ROCHESTER

Just 16 days after going public with the demand of Housing Court, legislation was submitted to the New York State Assembly



St. Joe's community members Ryan Acuff and Kawanais Smith speaking at tenant's press conference outside 960 Dewey Avenue on January 8, 2018

By Ryan Acuff

On the morning of January 3, 2018 Jesus Miranda woke up with a notice on his door. The notice said that he must leave his apartment because the city had condemned his building. He and many of the other tenants had not had working heat or gas for cooking. Instead of fixing up the building or offering any genuine support, city officials ordered him to go to the Division of Social Services (DSS) and apply to check into a homeless shelter. To add insult to injury, when Jesus went to DSS they turned him away. They said that they could not offer him any services because he was working. It seemed Jesus had nowhere to turn, nowhere to go...until he found the tenant movement.

Jesus' New York City-based absentee slumlord Peter Hungerford has been running down the apartments at 960 Dewey Avenue for months (if not years). Tenants throughout the building have been without heat, hot water, cooking gas,

and sometimes even without electricity. And 960 Dewey Avenue isn't alone. This slumlord has been running down buildings throughout the city (North Street, Thurston Road, Bremen Street) for a simple reason: to make a profit.

Unfortunately, slumlord economics and the for-profit system of housing are nothing new. What is new in Rochester, however, is an organized force of tenants, like Jesus, speaking out against their poor living conditions, an unjust system, and demanding solutions that change the balance of power between landlords and tenants in the city.

On January 8, 2018 tenants held a press conference in the courtyard of 960 Dewey Avenue decrying the unjust housing system and calling for systemic solutions. Jesus spoke about the poor conditions in his building and Kawanais Smith of the Southview Towers Tenant Union described the deplorable slum conditions in her building (Southview Towers, 500 South Avenue): bursting

Continued on page 3

ALEX HOUSE

By Trudy Scahill

Greetings from the Alex House community!

We are pleased to report that all our units are occupied, and each tenant is well. During the summer Mike Childs, our new fix-it man, orchestrated the daunting task of getting the house painted. It is now bright yellow with hunter green trim. We are planning our annual holiday meal to be held at Linda’s house upon her return from Ireland. We are fortunate to have a willing and supportive group of community members at present. We wish all peace in 2018.

MEMORIALS CO-OP

By Tim Sigrist

Dorothy Day House (across the street) has 12 respectable tenants who were formerly homeless. They have responded to a good apartment by working with an advocate to seek a way to pay for it. Now many are ready to work, pay their own rent, pay taxes and plan for a future that is financially independent.

A stop along the way is training; enter Memorials Coop. This is their training program and an effort that makes caskets and urns to commemorate the passing of people and pets. People without adequate means will receive one free.

We’ve located in the Hungerford Building on East Ave. and Goodman. Six men have passed their intake and are about to enter safety training and job readiness.

St. Joseph’s House has helped the project with seed money and an encouraging contingent of volunteers offer their professional skills. But to start any project like this (we call it the Dignity Project!) there’s a need for start-up capital and plenty more support volunteers: workers, social workers and any and all caring people with extra time.

MIGHT THAT BE YOU?

LEGACY HOUSE

By Wanda Minor

We are proud to announce the opening of our new Legacy House at 1382 Dewey Av.

Legacy House will house men and women in crisis, and will be open 24/7, 365 days a year. Our volunteers hope to help residents break the cycle of homelessness by assisting them in working on their spiritual growth, mental health, and addiction problems during their stay. We also aim to provide assistance with social service applications, scheduling appointments, and transportation.

Legacy House also offers rooms dedicated to the housing first model, in which people can live with staff support and community-based services for up to a year while they learn the life skills needed to live independently. Residents pay minimum rent for a single room in shared housing setting. Help finding long-term permanent houses will be provided by the Legacy house staff.

We are dedicated to The Works of Mercy and seek to offer hospitality to the homeless, food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and clothing to the naked as Christ has asked us. Anyone who feels the call to help in this endeavor is encouraged to contact us. We are in need of donations of food, volunteers, and paper products. Please contact: 585-254-2302

COMINGS & GOINGS

Oct. 17-19: Workers traveled to Binghamton to attend the 2017 Faith for a Fair New York Conference and Poor People’s Campaign Mass Meeting.

Nov. 8: Mass was celebrated by Fr. Bob Werth at St. Joe’s on the anniversary of Dorothy Day’s birth.

Nov. 12: Workers traveled to Lyons, NY to attend the Liberation Retreat: Undocumented, Unafraid, Unapologetic; a training for allies of those impacted by immigration policy.

Nov. 12-15: Workers fasted in solidarity with Felix Cepeda of the Dominican Republic CW who bore witness outside the gathering of the U.S. Catholic Council of Bishops calling for a Sanctuary Church in every U.S. Catholic Diocese.

Nov. 13-19: St. Joe’s partnered with the House of Mercy to host a week of events leading up to the first ever World Day of the Poor including a

round table discussion, an interfaith prayer service, a bowling night for shelter guests, a winter coat drive, an open-mic night, and a march followed by mass and dinner.

Dec. 9: Workers traveled to Maryhouse, a New York City Catholic Worker house, to attend a vigil for Yemen and a planning meeting for the Catholic Worker 85th Anniversary Gathering to be hosted in Rochester.

Jan. 3: Workers & guests traveled to Albany to attend the launching of a statewide campaign for Housing Justice. Attendees participated in a rally and protest outside the State Capitol building prior to Gov. Cumo’s State of the State Address.

Jan 25: A Town Hall Meeting on Housing Justice was held at St. Mary’s Church, during which concerned tenants and victims of homelessness voiced their questions and concerns to a representative sent on the Governor’s behalf.



Organizer Wille Baptist leads a conversation at St. Joe’s about the potential for building a Homeless Union in Rochester

Ryan Acuff joined the St. Joe’s live-in community as a Catholic Worker in October. Ryan has worked as a social worker at the House of Mercy and for most of 2017, volunteered with Movimiento Cosecha, a national movement for immigrant rights.

Wanda Minor moved out of the live-in community at St. Joe’s House in January to move into and help run the newly formed Legacy House on Dewey Avenue (see the Legacy House update in the sidebar). She continues to be part of the St. Joe’s community and our work in the city.

COMING TO THE WORKER (& TO AMERICA)

By Darian Gläser

I arrived four months ago from Germany to live and work for one year at St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality in Rochester. After a short introduction, many people want to hear my story and about why I came to the United States. I would prefer to talk about now being part of the Catholic Worker Movement.

Originally, I was looking for a place for to spend my gap year. I finished high school in March and wanted to take a break before going to college. I wanted to engage social issues. One day I stumbled upon the Catholic Worker Movement and it impressed me. I thought this would be a perfect fit for me.

After almost a year of preparation, including applying for a position at St. Joe’s, acquiring a visa, booking flights and making other travel arrangements, I finally arrived in September. After a few weeks I noticed that I had not done my homework properly. I knew about Dorothy Day and I knew how soup kitchens worked - I had volunteered at one in Germany - but I didn’t know about the Works of Mercy. I didn’t really know who Peter Maurin was. There was so much I didn’t know.

After a few more weeks, these gaps in knowledge started to be filled in - not by being taught, but by working. Well, now I know *some* more. I guess I will never stop learning. I regret that I didn’t properly inform myself before I came, but I’m glad that I’m getting to know these concepts now - the concepts of indoctrination, personalism, and living in community.

When I first started working at St. Joe’s, I was overwhelmed. It was exhausting - not physically, but mentally. I had never experienced work like this before. I felt like I didn't have any breaks and the work seemed never-ending. My fellow workers inspired me a lot. They always showed so much patience with me and with guests...and they just kept working. They have faith and patience, and it seems like they are ready to serve our guests at any moment. They are doing it unconditionally. I have gotten a sense of what it means to really care for others, to show mercy. A small glimpse of what it means to practice

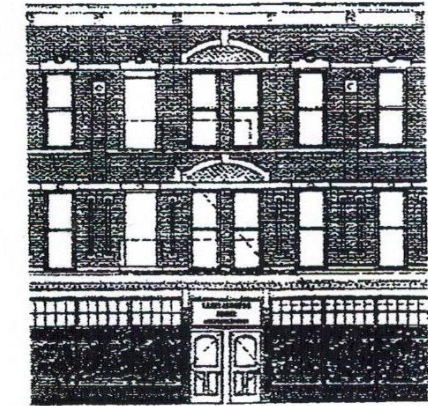
personalism, to do the works of mercy and to strive for equality.

I am glad to experience the daily work, to learn every day, and to be inspired by roundtable discussions, our guests, and my community. I enjoy working at St. Joe's. For the first time, I am passionate about working.

I’ve been an idealistic person in past years, and probably still am, but I never *did* anything. I had protested for equality and participated in rallies, but I think to really pursue equality, I need to show humanity first. I had never done that. Thinking and speaking are important, but personally, I think *doing* is the real way to effect change. This is the important balance between the Worker and the Scholar, one of many things I've learned about the Catholic Worker philosophy.

In order to reflect on my daily experiences and to prevent getting lost in it, I am writing to my family and friends in Germany. Every 3-6 weeks I send a long report; usually a collection of stories and my thoughts. The feedback has been incredible. No one had ever heard of the Catholic Worker movement before, but still, many people have shown interest in participating or contributing somehow.

I feel guilty that I will only be staying at St. Joe’s for one year, but I definitely want to stay part of the movement in Germany. I want to keep participating. I want to keep learning. I want to spread the word. I think that there are many people who would like to participate, but simply don't know how or where. I will continue to share my experiences in writing, hoping that people will see why their participation is important - for themselves and for others.



REVELATION ROCHESTER

Revealing the Artist Within

By Richmond Futch, Jr.

Inspired by my faith, I began the journey of manifesting a long held dream to bring the healing joy of making art to our community's homeless shelters early in 2017. My collaboration between Debra VanWert-Sneeringer of RocCityART has now become a thriving art workshop known as “Revelation Rochester – Revealing the Artist Within” at both St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality and the House of Mercy.

Every Wednesday, participants are provided art ‘freedom’, supplies and encouragement – all at no charge. Some request instruction, others only the peace of mind and restorative silence that comes from the power of connecting with their previously unimagined creative self. All are given an unrestricted and open space to express themselves in a non-judgmental and positive environment.

Initially there were few takers. Limited interest and suspicion finally gave way to curiosity and curiosity to acceptance of the outreach. To date, the workshops on average have over a dozen emerging artists, some frequent flyers and others new to the program. What has been consistent however is that each person that enters the art space is treated with dignity and respect - and it is returned.

One participant, while making his own art, agreed to let me draw his portrait for a print in return. (A weekly practice that has yielded an unparalleled trove of sketches and paintings of our community’s forgotten that will soon be on exhibit in 2018). That individual, so taken with his likeness as captured, insisted



that he wanted to give it as a gift. That portrait, matted and framed, is now a treasured possession of Sr. Grace Miller. It proudly hangs in her office at the House of Mercy.

Ultimately, it is the intention of Revelation Rochester to make the “invisible, visible, through art “in as many ways as possible.

As volunteers with The Dignity Project of Memorials Co-op at St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality, VanWert and I are dedicated to creating and obtaining original art that will be permanently affixed to the hand crafted burial casket; an ancient custom once reserved only for the wealthy and those held in high esteem.

For more information on The Dignity Project go to www.RocTheDignityProject.com

For more information about Richmond Futch, Jr. and Revelation Rochester go to <https://artsrichmondfutchjr.com> or to get involved, please call Richmond at 585-729-9916. Art and framing materials and /or other cash or in-kind donations gladly accepted.

RocCityART is concentrating on identifying paying pathways for these individuals to sell their work, creating a “hand up, by their own hand” where they will receive a substantial commission, like any other working artist. www.evidencebasedartnewyork.com




THE HOUSING REPORT

TENANT MOVEMENT (continued from page 1)

pipes, icicles *inside* people’s apartments, mold, broken elevators, and rodents living in their apartments (without paying rent).

These tenants are members of the newly formed City-Wide Tenant Union (CWTU) sponsored by Take Back the Land Rochester with the critical support the St. Joe’s House of Hospitality. This new union was formed in December 2017 for the purpose of uniting tenants throughout the city to organize their buildings for better conditions and to address the systemic problems affecting all tenants. The CWTU is following the model of Martin Luther King Jr.’s



Notice posted on Jesus Miranda’s door

Chicago Freedom Movement of 1966. In this movement, the Anti-slums Campaign organized tenants into some of the first tenant unions in the country and organized actions that dramatized the struggles tenants face living in poor conditions. Through the dramatic actions of the tenants, they not only forced landlords to sign just collective bargaining contracts with tenants, but also popularized their housing agenda to win their demands.

Currently, the tenants of the Rochester CWTU are making demands that shift the balance of power between tenants and landlords around dignified housing, security of housing, affordability, and tenant control of their housing. One of the demands highlighted at the January 6 press conference was for a Housing Court in Rochester and across the state that can empower tenants to enforce dignified living conditions. Currently in Rochester landlords can take tenants to court (e.g., for eviction), but tenants cannot take landlords to court for major issues like lack of heat or water, even though they are illegal. While Buffalo and New York City have Housing Courts where tenants can proactively bring cases into court when a landlord violates habitability requirements, those rights have been denied to tenants across the state. Jesus called



Broken windows at 960 Dewey Avenue

for a Housing Court in Rochester because if the tenants on Dewey Avenue or South Avenue had access to a housing court where they could present serious health and safety issues, they would be in a position to get necessary repairs done, or to have a receiver appointed to take over the building who can.

In a remarkable turn of events, the tenant movement has been able to grab headlines in the papers, radio, and TV, raising awareness of the problems and solutions. Slumlords have been forced to make emergency

repairs that they had neglected for months and years in just matter of days. Just 16 days of going public with the demand of Housing Court, Assemblyman Bronson submitted the Rochester Housing Court Act to the New York State Assembly. In addition, Vice President of City Council Adam McFadden has called for a task force on rent control - the first time those two words were uttered by a public official in Rochester in decades.

Not only have we seen immediate action from both slumlords on conditions and elected

officials on policy, but Rochester’s newly minted tenant movement has also struck a deep chord with the broader community. The response has been overwhelming. In a matter of days, tenants in 15 buildings across the city have reached out for support to organize within their buildings for better conditions.

Currently, the City-Wide Tenant Union has joined with St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality and other community groups to take on Governor Cuomo, who has presided over and acerbated the housing crisis across New York. Under Governor Cuomo, homelessness has increased by 41%. Across the state, over 88,000 people wake up in homeless shelters every morning. The governor has continued to support massive tax breaks that enrich developers but leave the homeless and tenants of the state behind. In order to take on Governor Cuomo, the City-Wide Tenant Union and Take Back the Land Rochester have helped form a statewide housing formation called the Upstate Downstate Housing Alliance.

Currently the City-Wide Tenant Union meets on the first Wednesday of every month in the common areas of Southview Towers at 500 South Ave. For more information you can call 585-653-8352 or find us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/RocTenantUnion>.

SHELTERS & SANCTIONS: MONROE COUNTY’S BROKEN SYSTEM “Lord, we wanted to shelter you, but you were sanctioned”

By James Murphy

For the past five years I have assisted in running the St. Joe’s Winter Emergency Shelter. Before I began volunteering here at St. Joe’s, I had never interacted with the Monroe County shelter system in any capacity, but over the past few years I have begun to understand how people in need get placed in area shelters...or *don’t* get placed. I am writing this article to share what I have learned about how our local shelter system works (as operated by the Monroe County Department of Human Services [MCDHS]) and to make more widely known the problematic role that “sanctions” play in barring people from receiving shelter. Before my time at St. Joe’s House, I wasn’t aware of any injustice in shelter placement for those in need, but in the last five years I have learned a different story, and I believe our shelter system needs serious and thorough reform. Monroe County needs a new and better way to help people find shelter and ultimately, housing.

What is a Sanction?

DHS is where you apply for a variety of benefits such as food stamps, Medicaid, and emergency cash and rental assistance. The process to receive these benefits begins with a 25-page application. Without wading too deep into how complex, frustrating, and inefficient DHS is, I’ll just say that it seems as if the agency does everything possible to make receiving assistance more difficult and less achievable. This is where sanctions come in.

Once an applicant has successfully navigated the 25-page application, been present for all scheduled appointments, and has fulfilled all necessary requirements, they are eligible to begin receiving emergency assistance. In many cases,



this assistance comes with strings attached. For example, if someone struggles with addiction, they must attend treatment sessions on a weekly basis in order to keep their benefits active. In other words, if you are an addict in need of rental assistance, DHS will pay your rent as long as you participate in mandatory substance use treatment sessions. If you miss a certain number of sessions or test positive for substance use a certain number of times, you will be removed from the treatment program. If you are kicked out often enough, DHS will sanction you and your rental assistance is cut off. Repeat this process enough times, and you will find yourself slapped with a “treatment sanction” for up to 6 months (this is known as a “Durational Sanction”).

In the above example, the sanction imposed means that the applicant’s rental assistance is terminated for 6 months *with no regard for the applicant’s actions during this period of time*. For 6 months, there is nothing this applicant can do to receive necessary benefits from DHS, and after DHS stops making rent payments, this sanctioned person will likely face eviction, lose their apartment, and eventually experience homelessness.

It is important to note, that while MCDHS is the agency sanctioning the person, MCDHS claims they are simply following state regulations from Albany. It is also important to mention that the above example is a worst case scenario. Not all sanctions are durational, nor are they all centered on addiction. Many sanctions can be lifted by complying with the requested requirements. Other types of sanctions include failure to comply with employment requirements, failure to cooperate with Child Support Enforcement Unit, or simply failing to make an appointment or submit proper documentation. If you are interested in learning more (or if you are having trouble sleeping) you can read the 900 page *Temporary Assistance Source Book* posted online by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

County Beds, Hospitality Beds & Sanctions

In order to understand how sanctioned people are impacted by our local emergency shelter system, I will first try to explain how that system works.

First, Monroe County does not have any county-run shelters. Private agencies, many of them Christian-affiliated, provide all emergency shelter beds in the area. The county provides these shelters with funding on a person by person basis for each bed that is filled by someone referred to the shelter by DHS. For the sake of clarity in this article, we will call these “county beds.” Examples of agencies that have contracts with Monroe County include Catholic Family Center, Salvation Army, and Volunteers of America.

Second, there are two types of shelter beds: the county beds, as explained above, and “hospitality beds.” Hospitality beds are offered to

THE MUNICIPAL LODGINGS

By: Peter Maurin

That is why you who are in need are not invited to spend the night in the homes of the rich. There are guest rooms today in the homes of the rich but they are not for those who need them. And they are not for those who need them because those who need them are no longer considered as the Ambassadors of God. So people no longer consider hospitality to the poor as a personal duty. And it does not disturb them a bit to send them to the city, where they are given the hospitality of the “Muni” at the expense of the taxpayer. But the hospitality that the “Muni” gives to the down and out is no hospitality because what comes from the taxpayer’s pocketbook does not come from his heart.

anyone in need of shelter, and the organizations offering these beds do not receive any funding from DHS for filling them. Privately funded and Christian based organizations that exclusively offer hospitality beds include St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality, Bethany House, House of Mercy, Dimitri House and the Open Door Mission. The Catholic Family Center, Salvation Army and Volunteers of America, offer some hospitality beds, but mostly offer county beds.

So, what happens when DHS sanctions someone who is in need of emergency shelter?

The first call most people make once they find themselves homeless is to DHS requesting emergency shelter. DHS will look them up in their system and say something like, “*Sorry, you have a six-month sanction and we can’t place you in a county bed; call 211 (the local emergency services hotline) and see if they can find you a hospitality bed.*” Now, the sanctioned

person calls 211 and asks for a hospitality bed. The 211 operator will then call the hospitality shelters, searching for an open hospitality bed. County beds are not offered to people who are sanctioned. As a result, placement in Catholic Family Center, Salvation Army and Volunteers of America is rare. There are not enough hospitality beds in shelters in our county to provide room for people who are sanctioned and cannot be placed in county beds by DHS. This leads to overcrowding in hospitality shelters.

To those who run our Monroe County Shelter system, we at St Joe’s say this:

“Your policy of terminating access to emergency shelter when a sanction is put in place must be ended. A sanctioned person’s food stamps and healthcare are kept active, but access to housing and emergency shelter is denied. What you are saying, is that food and healthcare are essential, but shelter is not. Every

Continued on page 5

AMERICA & HAITI: A COMPLEX HISTORY

By Sarah Brownell

I wasn't surprised by President Trump's comments. I already knew who he was and how he felt about Haitians. I knew last November when he ended the Temporary Protective Status (TPS) of those who came to the US fleeing damage from the earthquake, the hurricanes, or the coup d'état's orchestrated, in part, by our government. I knew when he deported Reginald Castel, a Haitian immigrant who previously lived in Rochester with a wife and two kids and insulin dependent diabetes, who last saw Haiti at 8 years old and speaks no Kreyol. I knew when the tentacles of the Trump administration in the consulate denied visas for upstanding Haitians with full time jobs, beautiful houses, families, and productive lives in Haiti the chance to visit the US to share their expertise with my students—despite the fact that other administrations have let Haitians with fewer qualifications come in the past. And of course, I already knew that Trump was, in general, crude and racist...so I felt that his comments were underserving of my time.

But reading Roxane Gay's op-ed in the NY Times, "No One Is Coming to Save Us" and considering here on the eve of Martin Luther King Day, King's reminder that "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter," I decided that something must be said...Something must be said, not for Trump's sake, but for the sake of the Haitians I love, for the beautiful town of Borgne that I have come to think of

as my second home (if it will have me), for those who did the majority of the rescue and recovery work after the earthquake with only their bare hands on rubble and by sharing the bits they had when little outside aid came, for those who have lost their lives to poverty (like my little friend Jeffry) or resistance (like journalist Jean Dominique) over the decades, and, finally, to counteract the standard narrative in the media that Haiti and Haitians are something to pity or to be saved.

Haiti's history is complex, full of heroes and betrayals, a great source of pride to Haitians as well as impetus to many others who value freedom. It is a country of firsts, both inspiring and tragic—the first land "discovered" by Columbus in the new world, the first genocide of indigenous people, the first global economy, the first (and only) country founded by a successful slave revolt, and the first black republic. The histories of the U.S. and Haiti have been united since the beginning. The success of Haiti as a colony allowed France the funds to support the American Revolution leading to our win, and a few years later the Haitian Revolution so strapped France's resources that they were forced to sell the Louisiana Territory to the U.S. on clearance. Since their revolution in 1804, Haitians have supported movements of liberation across the Americas. They were the main funder of Simon Bolivar's quest to free Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia and fought in the American Civil War. Frederick Douglas was ambassador to Haiti and

Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston visited for inspiration and consolation. Haitian immigrants and descendants continue to serve the US in leadership positions at all levels.

Yes, Haiti suffers grinding poverty and environmental degradation, but much of that is a result of a long litany of racist actions and structural violence by outside forces including boycotts intended to keep former slaves from being successful, indemnities paid to France for loss of property (aka slaves), occupations, embargoes, extortion, election manipulation, and forced open markets. Also, there are the internal issues common to the abused when they gain power and imitate their abusers; forced labor, corruption, mistrust, and human rights violations stem from the sharp divisions between the small percent of 'haves' and the large population of 'have-nots.' But what it lacks in monetary wealth, Haiti makes up for in sense of community, solidarity, sharing, hard work, spiritual strength, creative resistance, and resilience. We as Americans would do well to learn from them about these riches.

St. Joseph's House has supported a food program for the elderly and disabled in Borgne, Haiti since 2008 called Pen ak Pwason, loosely translated as Loaves and Fishes. It isn't just a food aid program. At its roots, it is a shared vision of Haitians and Americans who lived in Borgne during the food crisis of 2008 to provide for the poorest of the community. The elderly and disabled were begging desperately in the streets when the price of rice tripled in

a three week period, pricing almost everyone out of the food market. For our program, all the food that can be purchased in Haiti is sourced locally so that the money goes back to the farmers rather than to US industrialized agriculture. All the workers are Haitian women who use their incomes to send their children to schools staffed by Haitian teachers. All the love goes to building up the community and strengthening the ties between Rochester and Borgne. Four Rochester Catholic Workers have visited Pen ak Pwason, and, if the consulate would grant some visas, we would love to have Pen ak Pwason volunteers visit St. Joe's. It isn't likely to happen under this administration. If you are interested in joining this extended community,

consider supporting Pen ak Pwason by becoming a member of "80 for Haiti"—80 people willing to donate \$10/month to provide healthy, locally sourced food to one of our guests. Find us on Facebook or email Penakpwason@gmail.com for more details.

Americans owe a lot to Haiti and Haitians for our own freedom and success. The least we can do is educate ourselves on Haiti's unique history. We need to understand the root causes of why some places don't look quite as nice as Mar-a-Largo. Being on the receiving end of racism tarnishes the surface, but ignoring, endorsing, and propagating racism rots the core. As we remember King, we must also remember that silence is not an option.



Author Sarah Brownell in Haiti

A GOOD SAMARITAN WITH A GUN

By Harry Murray

*'A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half dead. . . But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He immediately drew his sword, chased down the robbers, and hacked them to pieces.' Luke 10:30-34, New Testament, NRA Version**

I first became aware of the phrase "Good Samaritan with a Gun" after the horrific shooting at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas in November, 2017. The phrase was used to describe a man who grabbed his gun from his truck, shot the attacker, and then followed him when he drove off. The police reported that the attacker died of a "self-inflicted" gunshot wound. A little internet research, however, revealed thousands of "hits" on the phrase "Good Samaritan with a Gun." I've read enough to establish that the phrase wasn't invented to describe the Baptist Church shooting; rather, the phrase has been used for some years, apparently in an attempt to imply Jesus' approval of guns.

I read a dozen articles published between 2014 and 2017 which used the phrase "Good Samaritan" to describe someone who used a gun to come to someone's rescue (all for different incidents). All incidents involved a lone man with a gun intervening to rescue someone else who appeared to be in peril from another man (or men). In five of the cases, the victims were women. None of the articles mentioned the race or ethnicity of any of the actors ("Good Samaritans," victims, or perpetrators). In all cases but one, the "Good Samaritan" pulled his gun. In the other, he let the perpetrator see his gun. In five cases, the "Good

Samaritan" fired his gun and in three cases, the perpetrator was killed. In one case, the "Good Samaritan" accidentally shot the victim in the head, although not fatally. The situations in which "Good Samaritans" intervened included attempted rape, carjacking, robberies, assaults, hit and run, stabbing, shoplifting, and an argument.

Three of the above articles were found in "The Armed Citizen" column of the National Rifle Association (NRA)'s official publication, *The American Rifleman*. This indicates that the NRA is actively involved in constructing the notion of the "Good Samaritan with a Gun." True, these were the only three out of 484 archived articles going back to October 2009 in which I found the phrase. The majority of the articles were about citizens who used guns against persons trying to attack or rob them. In one of the three articles, the "Good Samaritan" actually killed his target. Since these articles were brief, I will quote the entire article to give you a sense of how such "Good Samaritans" are presented.

A Good Samaritan came to the aid of a neighbor during a domestic dispute that ended in the death of the aggressor. In Gonzales, La., a man in his home heard people arguing outside. He went to investigate. The neighbor approached the two people—a man and a woman—who were arguing and was accosted by the male. The instigator pointed a handgun at the good Samaritan, who in turn drew his own firearm and shot. When police officers arrived, they determined that the man who had been arguing with the woman was dead. The police said that charges would not be filed against the armed citizen, saying that he ended a dispute that might have led to the death of the woman. (ABC 2, Gonzales, LA, 8/20/16) (I Nov 25, 2016 issue)

These three articles

constituted less than one percent of the articles in the archive (most of which were about citizens who used guns against people attacking their selves or families); however, it does show NRA involvement in the construction of the concept.

Sociologist Angela Stroud, in her 2015 book *Good Guys with Guns*, studied the culture of Concealed Handgun License (CHL) owners in Texas. Although she never mentions a "Good Samaritan" with a gun, she does note that gun owners frequently refer to themselves as "shepherds" (perhaps another Biblical analogy?) who are ready to protect the sheep (non-gun owners like myself) from the "bad guys." The gun owners she interviewed rarely used explicitly racial or ethnic language to describe "bad guys"; however, she concludes that their worldview was very much racialized - in their stories, they gave clues that when they thought of "bad guys" they often thought of racial and ethnic minorities.

Why does the language of "Good Samaritan with a Gun" trouble me enough to write this article? After all, Biblical scholars are in almost unanimous agreement that Jesus' parables are meant to have multiple interpretations, are "multivalent." The vast majority of the parables are not allegories in which everything stands for something else. Rather, they are stories that begin with the familiar but soon introduce a factor which turns the familiar world upside down. The point is to cause the listener (or reader) to question his or her assumptions about the way the world works - in a way that opens the heart and the mind to the grace of God. There is no single "correct" interpretation of a parable - it can raise questions and point to answers about many situations. So why isn't "Good Samaritan with a Gun" a legitimate interpretation? Although scholars generally

agree that there is no one correct interpretation of a parable, they also agree that some interpretations are simply wrong. John Donahue, SJ, for example, argues that some interpretations are "patently false," (in *The Gospel in Parable*, p. 213). If I were to argue, for example, that Jesus meant the Parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16: 1-8) to legitimate embezzlement, you would be quite justified in saying I was dead wrong. Similarly, when Ronald Reagan used the parable/question of the king preparing for war (Luke 14: 31-32) to justify his nuclear weapons buildup, he was, I am convinced, distorting the meaning of the parable.

I would argue that the notion of the "Good Samaritan with a Gun" is a pernicious, distorted interpretation of the parable for two major reasons.

First, the biblical Good Samaritan parable is about compassion. The Samaritan bound up the traveler's wounds, took him to an inn, and told the innkeeper he would pay for his care there. Compassion is about healing wounds, not inflicting them, even in the protection of others. One can call the protagonists of the "Good Samaritan with a Gun" heroes, but not Good Samaritans. If someone invoked the story of the Lone Ranger and called these folks "Lone Rangers," I would have no objections. The Lone Ranger did use violence, repeatedly, to protect innocent victims from "the bad guys." The story fits. The Good Samaritan story, however, has no hint of the protagonist using, or even threatening, violence. The difference between the Good Samaritan and the Lone Ranger lies at the core of the Gospel.

Second, and just as importantly, the real parable is a challenge to ethnic and religious prejudice. The Samaritans were an ethnic/religious group despised by orthodox Jews, largely because they did not acknowledge the Temple as

the central place of worship. Jesus made the protagonist of this parable a Samaritan precisely to challenge us to see the reality that those we most despise may be the ones who act as our neighbors. James Douglas, in *The Nonviolent Coming of God*, challenges us to put ourselves in the place of the beaten traveler and imagine who would be the *last* person we would want to see coming down to help us. *That* is a fruitful way to approach the parable. Perhaps if today the parable were entitled "The Good Terrorist," it would have the same effect on contemporary Americans that the original had on First Century Jews. The problem with the "Good Samaritan with a Gun" is that it emerges from a discourse which divides the world into "good guys" and "bad guys," when the point of the original parable is to challenge our notion that the world can be divided into "good guys" and "bad guys." Further, as Angela Stroud has shown, that "good guy" discourse is highly racialized - even when those who are using it are careful to avoid racial terms. The Good Samaritan calls us to overcome racial and ethnic prejudice, to recognize the goodness in every person.

The fact that the notion of a "Good Samaritan with a Gun" seems to be spreading is problematic. It is a distortion of the parable, a distortion of the Gospel, a distortion of Christianity. I might even go so far as to call it a dangerous heresy - NRAism. I pray that our bishops, as official teachers in our dioceses, will study and teach on this issue. We must be faithful to the nonviolent Gospel of Jesus Christ.

** Not really. It's the author's imaginative reconstruction of how an NRA version of the Bible might read.*

THE GIFT OF POWERLESSNESS

By Chava Redonnet

A few months ago, I visited one of our elders from the nursing home in the hospital. A retired pastor, he was struggling with being on the receiving end of compassion.

“I’m no longer one of the people who count,” he told me. He was grieving the loss of his power! He had gone from being a person who “mattered,” a person others listened to, with responsibilities and authority, to being one of hundreds of patients, dependent on others for the most basic tasks.

I found myself thinking that this might not be a bad experience for us pastors to have at the beginning of our ministries, rather than (or as well as) at the end.

My experience this past May, visiting Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, then a whirlwind trip to Boston, involved something of that sort of role-reversal. Driving home, somewhere between Albany and Syracuse, I realized I felt competent again. Driving in Boston had not been a pleasant experience and I was coming home minus about half a bumper, with every last nerve-ending frazzled. When at last I was on familiar roads, I began to feel more competent and more “myself” than I had felt since leaving the airport in Mexico City, fifteen days before.

Everywhere I went in Mexico and Central America, I was accompanied by people who knew what they were doing much better than I.

“Pastora, no!” they would shout, “Chava, watch out!”

The first time Tonia’s sister took my hand while crossing the street – as you would with a small child – I realized I needed that. I entered buses confused, not knowing how much money to use, or what to do with it, or what the rules were. I sat in the wrong seat. I dropped my change, not knowing if what I was losing was the equivalent of a few pennies, or a few

dollars. I had to have things explained to me, constantly.

But I had people to explain things. I did not have to be afraid of police officers. I had a place to sleep at night, and money to buy food. I had identification. I was a US citizen, thus one of the powerful of the world. Even in my vulnerability, I had layers of protection.

Have you ever thought about what it is like to lack all that? What is it like to live in a country where you don’t understand what’s being said – or how to use the things you encounter, like elevators. How much courage does it take to get through a day when you have no protection but your own wits, and maybe the company of some friends or cousins with as little knowledge of the place you are in as you?

I want to honor the people who do that. I want to honor their grit and perseverance, the courage they summon each day to keep on going.

Years ago, I was praying for a friend. He had just come out to me as gay, after years of close friendship. This was a time in my life when I was “open,” “tolerant,” “accepting” of the gay people in my life and thought myself quite progressive for that. But in prayer, I received a revelation. God wasn’t tolerating my friend. God was delighting in him. God was rejoicing that he was who he was. God was dancing with joy!

God isn’t tolerating undocumented people, either. God isn’t sympathizing with their plight. God is in there with them, putting one foot in front of the other, keeping on, day after backbreaking day. God is in

the voice that whispers inside, “Keep on going, because you count! Your life matters!” God is in that thing inside that fights back, that is in the struggle.

Maybe that’s why I think pastors should experience powerlessness. Senators and congresspeople too, and judges, and lawyers, and all of those with voices of authority. We need to know in our bones that being a person that counts is not about titles and authority, but simply about being a person. We need to look at each other like God does – rejoicing, believing, encouraging, celebrating the worth and dignity, the absolute beauty of every person we encounter on this earth. We need to be in awe of each other, aware of the God in ourselves, the God who knows we are each walking around shining like the sun.



(photo credit: Jean-François Salles)

OBITUARY Jean-Louis Maurin

By James Murphy

Jean-Louis Maurin of Oultet, France and great-grandnephew of Peter Maurin, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement died on November 26, 2017 at the age of 59. Jean-Louis farmed the land that, by some accounts, has been in his family for 1,500 years. He and his wife, Solange, raised their son (Franck) and daughter (Eléna) in a house they built next to Jean-Louis’ childhood home, the same home his great-uncle grew up in. Franck Maurin will continue to farm the Maurin land.

Jean-Louis was also the unofficial greeter to Catholic Workers from around the world who would occasionally show up unannounced in search of Peter Maurin’s home. I met Jean-Louis in December 2016 when I visited family currently living in France. Like many others before me, I showed up in search of Peter’s home, and it was Jean-Louis who met me, gave me a tour, and spent two hours answering my questions. He told me that over the last 15 years he has met 8 people, but he suspects others came while he was working. At the end of our visit, I showed him a copy of Marc Ellis’ biography of Peter Maurin, *Peter Maurin: Prophet in the Twentieth Century*. Jean-Louis grabbed it from my hands and exclaimed in joy that in all the years and all the folks he had met he had never seen a book with his Great-great uncle’s name on it. I asked him if he wanted to keep it and he said no because he didn’t speak English. I think his great uncle would have been proud of the hospitality he showed me that day and showed other curious strangers in search of Peter Maurin. I was grateful for his hospitality and the time he took to speak with a complete stranger. May his soul rest in peace.

Jean-Louis Maurin, pray for us.

THE UPDATED & ANNOTATED WORKS OF MERCY

The Corporal Works of Mercy:

- Feeding the hungry¹
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Clothing the naked
- Offering hospitality to the homeless²
- Caring for the sick³
- Visiting the imprisoned
- Burying the dead⁴

- 1) Background checks must be performed on all volunteers serving food.*
- 2) Due to liability issues, church property is not to be used for the homeless, undocumented, refugees or marginalized folks. If operating a shelter, the majority must be paying customers and approved by Monroe County.*
- 3) While we want to help addicts, the mentally ill and the sick, all folks we care for should have insurance.*
- 4) This is to be done in dignity for the rich. The poor must do what is cheapest.*

The Spiritual Works of Mercy:

- Admonishing the sinner⁵
- Instructing the ignorant⁶
- Counseling the doubtful
- Comforting the sorrowful
- Bearing wrongs patiently
- Forgiving all injuries
- Praying for the living and the dead

- 5) Admonish, but don’t say or do anything that may lose donations. Protect government funded programs by not criticizing too loudly. Catholic ordained men are discouraged from attending or praying at public protests; leave that to our Protestant, Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters.*
- 6) Instruct the ignorant, but continue to keep Catholic Social Teaching the Church’s best kept secret*

HOMELESSNESS (continued from page 1)

been homeless. While the very idea of quantifying the stories of these human beings seemed sacrilegious, certainly anti-personalistic, doing so revealed a crucial part of the story: homelessness is not only lack of shelter, but a slow death sentence. Persons who are homeless can expect to spend decades less time on this planet than the average American citizen. Homelessness is, quite literally, a life-threatening condition. I had known this intuitively from the years I have spent with the Catholic Worker, beginning at Unity Kitchen in the late 1970’s, but putting it into numbers shocked me. We documented 193 homeless deaths over the course of the last quarter century, and the findings were striking.

The average age at death was 52.5 years, compared to life expectancies of 73.6 years in the 14621 zip code (in which the HOM was located for nearly all of this study) and 78.2 years for Monroe County as a whole. Perhaps the most disturbing finding was that the life expectancy for homeless women was only 42.2 years, more than a decade lower than that for homeless men (55.0) and only a little over half the life expectancy for women in Monroe County (81.7). I found no significant difference in average age of death by race or ethnicity; however, because the vast majority of the sample was Black, this comparison may not have had the power to find a real difference.

The results from the House of Mercy are, unfortunately, pretty representative of average age of death of homeless persons in other U.S.

cities (Boston, San Francisco, LA, and Seattle) which have conducted similar studies. These indicate a range of 43.3 to 56 years as the average age of death. In all these cities, the average age of death of homeless persons is more than two decades below that of the average American.

Finally, out of 190 countries reported in the 2016 UN Human Development Report, only SIX have a lower life expectancy than homeless Americans in the House of Mercy sample: Ivory Coast, Chad, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Lesotho, and Swaziland. No country has a lower life expectancy than the homeless women in the House of Mercy obituaries.

Homelessness is a prime example of structural violence. A city, a nation, which allows its most vulnerable citizens to die decades before their time is committing an act of violence on a massive scale. Our nation and our community have the resources to house everyone. We simply lack the will to take the words of Matthew 25 seriously.

For anyone wishing more detail, the full report is available at the St. Joseph’s House website.



SHELTER (continued from page 3)

night, emergency shelter is withheld from people who are sanctioned - a population of people who often suffer from mental illness, alcoholism, and/or addiction. In short, the people who are most in need of help are cast out to the streets and overcrowded hospitality shelters. These people must be provided for.”

To Christian-affiliated shelter providers, we at St. Joe’s say this:

“You cannot serve God and Mammon. God has a preferential option for the poor. This means that God is always on the side of the poor and oppressed, “not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman

situation that is contrary to God’s will” (Gustavo Gutierrez, *On Job*). In our current shelter system, sanctioned people represent the poorest of the poor. To refuse them shelter because the county will not pay you for providing it is to ignore the gospel. We implore area shelters to seek alternative funding sources and work towards ending sanctions, especially sanctions that block people’s access to emergency shelter. No person should be denied a safe and secure place to lay their head.”

Saint Joe’s will host a round table discussion on the topic: “Sheltering the Homeless & Christian Hospitality” on March 16th at 7:00 p.m.

SAVE THE DATE The Catholic Worker Movement turns 85!

WHEN: July 27th thru 29th, 2018

WHERE: Nazareth College, Rochester, N.Y.

WHAT: “Drawing on Our Roots, Reflecting in Our Times”
Let us explore the themes of our founders
Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day regarding Cult, Culture, Cultivation

More information will be coming as registration is set up, committees are formed, and the event is organized.

“We can find no
social or moral
justification, no
justification
whatsoever, for
lack of housing”

– Pope Francis

THE ROCHESTER CATHOLIC WORKER

A Publication of:
Saint Joseph’s House of Hospitality
402 South Avenue
Rochester, NY 14620
585-232-3262
info@saintjoeshouse.org (our email has changed!)
www.saintjoeshouse.org

St. Joseph’s House of Hospitality Mission Statement: *We are committed to extending hospitality by feeding, clothing, and housing our brothers and sisters in need. We are a spiritually centered Catholic Worker community that personifies non-violence, compassion, and personalism.*

Community: George McVey, Tim Sigrist, Harry Murray, Chava Redonnet, Don Strickland, Diana Nielsen, James Arnold, Sarah Brownell, Tom Malthaner, Adam Uzelac, Annie Horras, Pat Dupont, Jasmin Reggler, James Murphy, Wanda Minor, Darian Glaeser, Linda Condon, Alisia Holmes, Mary Driscoll, Kawanais Smith, Richmond Futch, Sharon Brown, Marj Matzky, Todd Sellers, Phil Childs, Jose Gonzalez, Ryan Acuff, Mike Orman

Managing Editor: Pat Dupont
Artist: Richmond Futch, Jr.

Hospitality & Meals:
Monday-Saturday: 9:00-12:15 a.m.
Lunch served at 11:15 a.m. & 12:00 p.m.
Sunday: 1:30-4:45 p.m.
Dinner served at 4:00 p.m.

Shelter:
7 days/week
Doors open @ 8:00 p.m
Curfew @ 8:30 p.m.

House Needs:
Food: Coffee, Butter, Sugar, Jelly/Jam
Household: Laundry Soap, Bleach, 39 gal. Trash bags, Bath Towels, Toilet Paper, Pillows, Sleeping Bags
Clothing: Men’s Underwear, Boots/Sneakers, Jeans, Hoodies, Large Jackets, Gloves/Hats

5:00 p.m. Tuesday Worship Celebrants:

- Feb. 13 Zainab
- Feb 20 Pat Dupont
- Feb 27 Tim McGowan
- Mar 6 Deacon Dave Palma
- Mar 13 Minister Mark
- Mar 20 Stergios Skatharoudis
- Mar 27 Fr Bob Werth
- Apr 3 To be announced
- Apr 10 Kathy Mryzirka
- Apr 17 Fr JohnColacino
- Apr 18 Fr Jim Callan
- May 1 Stergios Skatharoudis



Celebration of Mass at St. Joe’s

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER CELEBRATES THE
YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST 2017-2018

Drawing on the words of Dorothy Day

When Bishop Matano announced the *Year of the Eucharist* last June, several Catholic Workers and outside community members here at St. Joe’s discussed ways that we could celebrate and draw attention to the Eucharist in our personal lives, as a house, and in our community. We celebrate Mass at St. Joe’s on the last Sunday of every month at 5:00 p.m.. Before our opening song, we have been reading short excerpts from Dorothy Day’s writings on the Eucharist, followed by a few moments of silence. We have found this experience to be helpful. It makes us more mindful as the celebration begins. Dorothy Day writes beautifully on the Eucharist.

Another way we celebrated the *Year of the Eucharist* was by holding a roundtable discussion entitled: *Dorothy Day’s Writings on the Eucharist*. Elizabeth and Mary Pietropaoli led a group discussion

attended by over 20 people. We began the evening by celebrating Mass with Fr. Bob Werth and went right into a discussion following the celebration.

We will be hosting other events in the upcoming months to further our celebration. Find us on Facebook for announcements. In the meantime, below is a short sample of Dorothy Day’s words and thoughts on the Eucharist:

"It took me a long time as a convert to realize the presence of Christ as Man in the Sacrament. He is the same Jesus Who walked on earth, Who slept in the boat as the tempest arose, Who hungered in the desert, Who prayed in the garden, Who conversed with the woman by the well, Who rested at the house of Martha and Mary, Who wandered through the cornfields, picking the ears of corn to eat."

"We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know him the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet too, even with a crust, where there is companionship."



POPE FRANCIS FIELD HOSPITAL:
SLEEPING IN A CHURCHYARD

By Annie Horras

One aspect of the life of a Catholic Worker here at St. Joe’s is participating in homeless outreach. About once a week, a group of us go out late in the evening and look for those living in tents, sleeping on benches, under bridges, and so on, to see what needs people have and what help we can offer. Every time I have done outreach I notice a sinking feeling of sadness wash over me. As I witness those living in tents and on the streets, I wonder why it is that I am not among those sleeping outside. How have I made it through my life so unscathed? I don’t have a satisfying answer to that question, but feel that in response, I must do something with the life that has been given to me. For a long time, these evenings of outreach would always wake me up to realize that there was still much I didn’t know about homelessness.

I didn’t know what it was like to live on the street or in a tent for a night. I wasn’t sure I was brave enough to sleep out on the street, but I challenged myself to build up the courage to stay in a tent. I shared my idea with one of our guests and without giving me any satisfaction of feeling as if I am doing a selfless act, he answered, “The difference between you staying in a tent and someone who is homeless staying in a tent, is that you still have the choice to live in a

home.” I do have a choice. There may be no way for me for me to fully grasp the oppression of homelessness, but I do understand that being trapped in homelessness or poverty is not a choice. It is among the list of life’s sufferings that are unjust and unfair and I wanted to share in a small piece of this struggle. Summer faded into fall and soon I would get that chance.

Our winter shelter opened in the beginning of October and we were all immediately shocked by the number of people that were showing up at our door each night. After meeting our maximum capacity of 19 people, person after person continued to flow into our house. We would make numerous calls to the Department of Human Services hoping to ensure that every individual would have a place to sleep at night. After many failed attempts to get DHS to address the problem, we publicly called upon Catholic churches to open their doors to provide temporary shelter. A formal letter was sent to the Catholic Diocese of Rochester asking for one church to provide hospitality beds for the homeless. The response came and stated that any concern we have about emergency shelter could be directed to Catholic Charities and/or Person Centered Housing Options (a local non-profit whose mission is to house homeless individuals). Our frustration with the complacency of the church led us to



Our “Pope Francis Field Hospital” sign in front of St. Mary

imagine an action. We would stay the night in tents on church property with a sign reading “St. Francis Field Hospital,” in reference to Pope Francis’ quote: “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle...” This was an opportunity for me to not only protest the fact that those seeking shelter were being refused and dismissed, but also to gain a new perspective that sees more clearly the lives of the people we serve in our shelter. For one night I was going to experience city living from

the viewpoint of the marginalized, the forgotten and mistreated.

The plan was to have four of us, two Catholic Workers and two guests, sleep in two tents in the churchyard of St. Mary’s church. Early in the morning, we would rise and attend Mass. Two of us set up the tents in the dark and rain, preparing for a night of protest. Once we had all settled in for the night, my mind was racing. I lay on my cot, staring up at the ceiling of the tent, watching intently as one water droplet after another would fall and land on the thin fabric leaving small puddles behind. As I studied this, I kept imagining what it would be like to have to stay in this tent every night. What would I do? I thought about how this type of living could perpetuate neglect, mental disabilities, physical disabilities, and loneliness. I was in a constant paranoid state for fear, worried that someone would see us and call the police. Although we were in a tent, my socks were drenched from simply walking from the car to the tent and my body was unable to produce enough heat for me to sleep. I thought of all the people I knew who suffer from homelessness, mental and physical disabilities, loneliness and neglect and saw for a split second life through the eyes of the poor. If this became my life, what would I have left to hold on to?

The next morning we came back to St. Joe’s and stood patiently in line for oatmeal with the rest of the shelter guests, warming ourselves before heading out to attend daily mass at Blessed Sacrament parish. We entered the church and all sat close to the front, still drenched. I was pleased to hear the priest thank us for all the work that we do with the poor. It would be nice to see a dramatic response from the church, like clerics joining us in our tents or the opening of a shelter. It did appear that our action had an impact and would at least stick in memory. The reaction of others, however, was astounding. Activist after activist reached out to us conveying how they would join us the next time we wanted to pitch our “field hospital.” This was an encouraging response that demonstrates the importance of community and standing up for what is right and just.

Even though the action has not changed the Catholic Church’s stance on opening their doors to the poor, it inspired me to not lose hope. I feel strongly influenced and changed by this experience and desire to continue to resist the denying of shelter for those in need. This is an issue that will not go away as long as there are people who passionately care for the poor.