

TROUBADOUR

The Newsletter of St. Francis House, New London, Connecticut



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Faith in the Bigger Plan

by Christine Guarnieri-Benham

THE HOLIDAYS ARE AT HAND and most people are busy preparing for time off work, turkey dinners (with all the trimmings), football games, parades, and visiting with friends and family.

For many others, a holiday is another day, in a succession of days that means little to no food or income, no electricity, no heat, and no companionship. There are shelters and soup kitchens working very hard to help those in distress; unfortunately, there aren't enough and all too often it comes down to no room at the inn. Holidays are very tough. Many neighborhood groups and community service agencies go the extra mile and make up holiday food baskets for families in need. Volunteers deserve a huge "E" for effort, but they cannot take care of everyone.

There are some people, however, that fall between the cracks. They are not the stereotypical image that the media propagate: street person, uneducated, drunk, addict, grubby, hungry, mentally challenged or some combination thereof. Who are these people? They are just like you and me, people from all walks of life with a myriad of mishaps and needs.

My name is Christine Guarnieri-Benham and I arrived at St. Francis House in August, homeless. How did it happen to an intelligent fifty-one year old woman and what am I doing about it? It started in January three years ago. Terribly stressed, I went into a deep depression that required medication and bi-weekly counseling. Ten months later I had a second lumpectomy. It was the first of six surgeries in a nine-month period: I was left with a medical disability. In November that year, I learned first hand about domestic violence. That August I had the last surgery and my spouse checked into alcohol rehabilitation, which proved to be the impetus to end over 20 years of marriage. I made the decision then that I needed to do something strictly for myself. My life was in turmoil and a change for the good must come out of the pain.

College, which in the past had always seemed just out of reach, became a reality. I considered many options before selecting the Applied Prior Learning course at Three Rivers Community College. Financial arrangements in place I remained in my Preston, CT, home and went to school. Working on my first degree I developed a taste for learning, a sense of accomplishment, and creativity. I felt the degree would validate my knowledge and allow me better employment opportunities. Most important, I gained a sense of who I am, where I have been, and what I can do. I felt that the bumpy road was finally behind me and my future looked bright.

The final straw, a ten-foot fall at work, broke several bones and much of my spirit. Financial arrangements changed abruptly; the bank foreclosed. On July 17, 2000, I walked out of my home, a 16 room Victorian that I painstakingly spent seven years renovating and restoring to open as a Bed and Breakfast. The goal was to work out of my home doing what I love best. I closed the door on my life, dreams, and possessions. In less than seven weeks my life unfolded like a badly written novel. My daughter, Pollyanna, was in a serious car accident and spent a week in ICU. A month later the death of my dearest friend and future husband.

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How did I come to be at St. Francis House and what does it mean? The Rev. Mark Robinson, in answer to my call, arrived at Lawrence & Memorial Hospital quickly the day of Pollyanna's accident. At one point Mark suggested that I might benefit from a trip home and a hot shower to soothe my stress. My response: "I'd love to, only I don't have a home. I lost it three weeks ago in a foreclosure, along with most of my stuff. Besides, it doesn't matter right now; Pollyanna is my only concern and as long as she is in the hospital I will have a roof over my head."

"True," he replied, "but at some point you will need a place to go so that you can sort things out. If you are interested, I can put you in touch with temporary shelter and some terrific people." Mark took the nod of my head to mean yes. He rang up SFH, made a brief statement, and handed the phone to me. And so it began.

St. Francis House and its loving members became an island of gentle caretakers in a sea of pain and despair after ten days at L&M. I wasn't what SFH expected when they formed a plan to help the community. But that didn't stop them. Everything that SFH stands for has been put to the test. It has given me the opportunity to take an inventory of my life – where I want it to go – and itemize the possibilities to accomplish the goals I set. In addition, it means that supper, usually a huge pot of soup, is always hot and ready to eat when I get home from night classes at Eastern Connecticut State University, where I am a senior. I am truly grateful.

Would I change things if I could? Would I like to wake up and find this all a dream? No, not really. I am here at SFH for a reason, even if I don't understand what it is. I have faith in the bigger plan:

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 100:4-5

Faith, to me, is an important part in understanding this transition. I am learning new things daily. My life is pleasingly richer, because of the people who have come into it these past few months. Also, I have the opportunity to share a part of me with others at SFH: strength when they feel weak, hope when there is disillusionment, food to abate hunger, algebra formulas when called for.

There is no "quick fix" answer to homelessness, but society needs to acknowledge the different faces of it, in order to develop better solutions. Not everyone is out on the street. Some people are simply alienated from their families and that causes them to be homeless. For others, everywhere, facing the debilitating experience of homelessness, whether physically, emotionally, or mentally, I pray for us all to remember to do our part and for many more St. Francis Houses to be available to meet neighborhood needs. The human plate is full. Letters marked "urgent" can resemble (by candlelight) a mountain of mashed potatoes. A foreclosure or eviction notice is like an overwhelming chunk of white or dark meat, irrespective of the neighborhood, all drowning in everyday life, like viscous turkey gravy, blotting out tiny peas and pearl onions on a dinner plate. Cranberry sauce and chestnut-dressing are extras in the feast of life, like a dead battery, breast cancer, or a child in the emergency room after a car accident – not necessary, but costly to mankind. Though grieving and uncovering my new direction, I look forward to the holidays because of my place here at SFH. My appreciation for all your help and prayers. Benjamin Franklin said: "The next thing most like living one's life over again seems to be a recollection of that life, and to make that recollection as durable as possible by putting it down in writing."

"WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR" SERIES CONTINUES ON FRIDAY NIGHTS

Anne P. Scheibner

This fall we have been hosting an every other Friday night series of prayer, Bible study, supper and conversation on the theme of "Who Is My Neighbor?" It has been a wonderful way to get to know our neighbors and to get a feel for our ministry in New London as we head towards the Episcopal Urban Caucus assembly in February 2001. Emmett started us off on September 8 with a reflection on the Good Samaritan story (see TROUBADOUR Vol. 2, No. 3). Unlike our series last year, we did not plan the topics in advance but have invited the Spirit to guide our work as an ongoing process.

We continued with a conversation with Hispanic neighbors focused on the trade-offs involved in keeping separate cultural identities and entering mainstream life in church and society. The next gathering coincided with our semi-annual board meeting. About 30 people gathered to reflect on hopes and fears each of us carries concerning public education. Dr. Julian Stafford, Superintendent of Schools, and two members of the Board of Education were among those participating. This was an occasion for St. Francis House board member Dr. Linda Powell to get a feel for issues in New London as she prepares to lead part of the Assembly on urban education reform. We are planning a follow-up series on education in the new year. As election time drew near we focused on civic life in New London with two City Council members. Most recently, a multi-faith group from Connecticut College came to reflect on community issues in their lives as students. We anticipate a conversation with people for whom housing is a concern as well as one on agriculture in the region before ending the year with a party.



EPISCOPAL URBAN CAUCUS TO MEET IN NEW LONDON

Readers of TROUBADOUR know that Anne and Emmett have become coordinators of the Episcopal Urban Caucus, a 20 year old network of urban ministers in the Episcopal Church of which they have both been members since the beginning. The Caucus began in response to urban hearings held around the USA in the 1970's which asked the Church to "stay in the city" and stand with the poor. Over the years it has helped establish Jubilee Ministry in the Episcopal Church, a national ministry of economic justice, and anti-racism work. It has always been a "caucus," a group within the Church that exists to push the institution in creative, Gospel-based, justice-oriented directions.

In addition to putting pressure on the institution, we hold an annual meeting of our network, called an "assembly." Like-minded ministers, often isolated in their

A LOT IS HAPPENING. . .

A LOT IS HAPPENING at St. Francis House! For one thing, there are now seven of us. Fr. Armando Gonzalez continues to live here as he does his ministry as Hispanic Missioner at St. James Church and in New London County. Christine Guarnieri-Benham (see her article on the front page) is living in the Calvary Hermitage and helping to renovate the lower apartment, which she calls "The Cottage." And Fr. Julius Bwambale, an Anglican priest from Uganda, is staying with us while in the USA on a "Calvary Fellowship." The folks from Calvary, who furnished the Hermitage, have now completely renovated the guest room on the second floor, where Fr. Julius is staying. Nate hosted Fr. Julius at a lunch meeting of the Multicultural Club in his school. And in September we briefly welcomed Fr. Emsley Nimmo, rector of St. Margaret of Scotland, Aberdeen, Scotland, who was visiting his companion parish of St. James, New London.

dioceses or regions, come together for mutual support, stimulation, and conversation. This year's assembly will be in New London. The theme is **Defining the Church's Agenda for the New Global City** and our keynote speakers are Andrew Davey, coordinator of the international Anglican urban network, and Linda Powell, an old friend who is a practitioner of urban education reform in the USA. We hope to do both theological work on understanding globalization and practical work creating a base for local organizing. Part of the new reality everyone faces is the confrontation between local people and global corporations with no mediating national structures to protect them. The presence of Pfizer, the international pharmaceutical company, as well as Electric Boat, which manufactures nuclear submarines makes New London in fact a "new global city."

Friends of St. Francis House may wish to attend next year's assembly, February 21-24. Phone, write or e-mail us and we'll send you registration materials.

Emmett's work at Connecticut College included a weekend workshop on centering prayer called **Resting in God**, led by his friend Bruce Gardiner, of Contemplative Outreach. And Emmett led a retreat in Maryland for the Men of Ascension Church (one of our former parishes) on **Gospel-Based Discipleship**.

Sarah's new school is St. Mary's, just around the corner, and her teacher, a member of the New London Board of Education, ran for state representative and gave Sarah her first taste of electoral politics. And the education concern arising out of our "clarification of thought" sessions and planning for the EUC assembly is leading Anne to start thinking about the possibility of schools that take the land seriously. More about this is sure to come.

As we continue to discover, our ministry evolves in ways we couldn't imagine and didn't plan. We are trying to stay open to "doing whatever Jesus tells us," and he's telling us a lot!

***"While all things were in quiet silence,
and the night was in the midst of its swift course,
your almighty Word, O Lord, leaped down
out of your royal throne, alleluia."***



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Christmas Greeting Insert

The Diamond Sutra Doesn't Mention Feet

for Matthew Gibson

I saw eighteen pairs
Of feet walk slowly
Around the meditation hall
Last Friday –
Mostly old, the feet
Of people who have
Lived a long time
Without paying attention:
Callused male feet
Hiding aggression,
The painted toes
Of female feet attracting
Men, blistered athletic
Feet, long feet,
Narrow ones, wrinkled,
Priests' feet, nuns' feet,
The prophet Isaiah's
"Beautiful on the mountain"
Feet – I watched them
Walking naked
In the circle. The suspicious
Feet of contemplatives
Watched me in turn –
They said: "try to develop
A mind that does not
Cling to anything" –
Not even feet.

Emmett Jarrett

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