



CORNUCOPIA

NEWSLETTER OF ST. JOSEPH SOCIAL SERVICE CENTER & THE ELIZABETH COALITION TO HOUSE THE HOMELESS



Winter 2008

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.

Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

~ Margaret Mead

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Stone Soup

By Amy Travis

Two mysterious travelers make their way to a small town. They are poor and hungry. All they carry with them is a large, empty cauldron. They scour the village for somebody willing to give them something to eat, but their pleas are refused at every turn. Rather than give up, they announce that they will make a delicious soup with nothing more than a stone. The villagers are skeptical but watch with curiosity as the strangers drop a stone and pour water into the cauldron. The travelers casually mention that certain vegetables would make great "garnishes" for their stone soup. One by one the villagers return with something to contribute

to the pot. In the end, the community shares a delicious, seemingly miraculous meal.

The details of the story vary but the moral is always the same: greater good is achieved when we all work together. Like the mysterious travelers, we depend on the support of a large and diverse community. Thankfully, at St. Joseph's and the Coalition, we don't have to resort to trickery to find compassionate volunteers to share their time, talents and resources.

Help comes to us in many forms. One example is the Catholic Heart Work Camp who has come to St. Joe's and the Coalition for the past four

years. This summer they beautified our gardens, volunteered with the children's program and helped organize our storage space. Another example, is the huge group of people that make our Saturday soup kitchens possible. Every week dedicated teams from churches and synagogues cook and serve nourishing meals for 100 to 200 people. We are also grateful to the families, scout groups, churches and schools that donate sandwiches. You are one of the many unsung heroes of our daily work.

This issue is dedicated to the compassionate community that makes our work possible.



Catholic Heart Work Camp volunteers posing in the lovely Peace Garden they created.

Making a House a Home

By Sr. Maryanne Tracy with Leah Geoghegan

Leah Geoghegan, Westfield resident and Junior at Mount Saint Mary Academy, has recently completed her Gold Award in Girl Scouting. An active person both in and out of school, Leah's Gold Award reflects her values and interests. Leah is a member of St. Helen's Youth Ministry group, volunteers at Children's Specialized Hospital and Sister Pat's Camp for kids with cancer. She is a member of the Mount Track team and is a Peer Facilitator. In the future, Leah aspires to become a nurse and further help those who are sick and in need.

For her Gold Award, Leah landscaped "Ryan House", a Hospitality House run by the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless. This is a non-profit organization whose goal is to provide homeless families with safe, sanitary transitional housing and to assist them in securing permanent housing for the future. Leah became interested in this cause after her experience attending The Sleep Out for the Homeless, a program sponsored by St. Helen's Youth Ministry.

Leah created gardens for the front

and backyard of the Hospitality House while also repairing an existing deck and swing set. She designed a schematic reflecting her ideas and consulted a master gardener and numerous landscapers for advice and assistance. Additionally, she taught a local CCD class about the issue of homelessness and the importance of service and giving back to the community. For an activity, Leah taught the class how to make stepping stones which were used to adorn the garden. In addition, Leah received donations of plants, soil and mulch from local landscapers and nurseries. She also collected over 300 toiletries and cleaning supplies from the Westfield Girl Scout Service Day which she gave to the families living in the transitional homes. When asked how she obtained all these supplies, Leah replied, "This process was very long and tiring. However, everyone I reached out to was very responsive and willing to help. The enthusiasm of the community gave me hope that I could get this project done."

Leah also received immense help from more than 20 hardworking

volunteers who dedicated their time and effort to helping her successfully execute her plan. She would like to personally thank: Hilary Abramowitz, Jackie Baldino, Kim Beattie, Emily Beattie, Fran Bove, Christine, Rod and William Geoghegan, Sophie Greene, Dan Hannon, Carrie Hanson, Emily Harris, Marybeth Harris, Ronald Holohan, Mark and Margaret Kuehn, Ingrid and Richard McKinley, Bob and MaryLynn Parsloe, Corrine Parsloe, Jeffrey Pate, Claire Ruswick, Donna and Bruce Vasel, and Alison Wade.

Leah would also like to thank the numerous landscapers and nurseries who generously donated plants, food, and supplies to her cause. She received over \$1500 worth of plants, landscaping supplies and food from these hospitable companies:

William's Nursery, Parker Gardens, Amberg Perennial Farm, Westfield Lumber and Home Center, Mario's Italian Deli, Dreyers Farms, Colorscape, Scape-abilities, Smith and Hawken, Terril Road Country Market, Home Depot and Lowe's.

Don't Ruin My Dream

By Harold Boyd

Last March, a Westfield Girl Scout Troop gave a presentation to the parents and children of Bernice's Place on "Stranger Danger". Accompanying the scouts were some of their siblings. Both our youth and the scouts had a wonderful experience, but one of the scout's siblings was deeply moved. Her name is Emily Bloomfield. Emily wanted to do something for the kids she saw, but she wanted to do something personal. When she heard about "Sponsor-a-Child", she

decided that this was what she would do: raise \$1,000 to sponsor one child in the program. Her mom, proud of her 8 year old's compassion, felt it important to put in a dose of reality. After all, who would think that such a young person could raise \$1,000. "Don't ruin my dream!" was Emily's response. So, after Hot Dog parties, appeal letters and lemonade stands, she raised the \$1,000 needed to sponsor one child in the program. What a gift Emily is to our world.

Thank you Emily, for challenging us to dream!



Notes from the Ignatian Volunteer Corps

By Nancy Gordon

I knew for a while that I wanted to retire. I also knew that once I retired, I would do volunteer work. I also knew that I wanted to enhance my spiritual life. I wasn't sure how it would all come together. In October 2005, while I was on retreat at Loyola in Morristown, I spoke with Fr. Moutenot who gave me an Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC) brochure. I kept the brochure for about a year and a half before I used it.

In April 2007, my employer presented an earlier retirement package to a group of employees who had the requisite years of service and were 60 or older. In May, I made my decision to accept it and, at the same time, I submitted my application to the IVC. While I'm sure that I could have knocked on any agency's door and volunteered, I liked the spiritual aspect that the IVC provided. I had my interview with Liz McMahon and then she provided me with a list of agencies.

I interviewed with the Elizabeth

Coalition to House the Homeless in July 2007. There was something about the Director, the others that I met and the agency's mission that spoke to me. I felt that the Coalition was the place for me. Since September 11, 2007, I have been volunteering two days a week.

I was a bit concerned... would there be enough to keep me busy, would I be using my skills and would I feel like I'm making a difference, would I fit in, could I adjust to a not for profit organization after having been in the corporate world for 22 years?

I assist Linda with the administration of the agency. One of my duties is the Agency's Annual Appeal: mailing out the letter, processing the donations, sending out thank you notes and managing the mailing list and the donor spreadsheet. I was the administrative support for the Awards Dinner in June. I didn't need to worry if there would be enough to keep me busy... there's

more than enough... I am using my MBA and my organizational skills. The staff is amazing. They are caring and dedicated. When they talk about a client, it is as if they are speaking about a family member – it is with love and compassion. Working in the loft, I observe the children who are attending Bernice's Place. It is wonderful to see and hear Mr. H and the volunteers working with the children – guiding them through a lesson or an art project. Shortly after I began working here last year, one of the families in the Hospitality Houses was moving out to a home of their own. I was overwhelmed by the support, love and encouragement showered upon them.

I love what I am doing. Working here reminds me how blessed I have been and continue to be. I am extremely grateful for all that I have been given.

No wonder I feel so blessed!

URGENT: WE NEED FOOD AND TURKEYS FOR THANKSGIVING!

We are very concerned that we will not have enough food and turkeys for our families this year. Please consider donating turkey and/or canned goods on the Monday and Tuesday of Thanksgiving week.

HOLIDAY DONATIONS

Donations of new clothing for holiday gifts can be dropped off at Connell Hall at St. Mary's Church in Rahway between November 30th and December 14th.

Please clearly label the size and intended gender of the item(s) you are donating. Kindly, **DO NOT WRAP** the items. Although we appreciate the effort and beauty we've had too many problems with inappropriately labeled items. All wrapped items are unwrapped when they are sorted and packed for distribution to families.

For information on toy donations please see page six!

HOLIDAY VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

St. Joseph's is in great need of volunteers to help sort and pack gifts in Connell Hall at St. Mary's in Rahway. Donations will be processed from Friday, December 5th to Thursday, December 18th. Hours of operation are 10am to 4pm and 7pm to 9pm.



If you are available, please contact Sharon Kessler at 908-272-5586 and let her know the date and time you are available.

Reflecting on My Time as a “JV”

By Claire Ruswick

When I first started my year off in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in Newark, New Jersey, the only thing I could think to say to my friends and family back home was “it’s a completely different universe here.” Sometimes first impressions hold the truest, and after a year of living and working in the Newark area, I still stick by that first observation. This year I have participated in somewhat of a study abroad program, except I’m not living in a foreign country, I’m living in my own country, four hours from where I grew up. I came into the Jesuit Volunteer Corps expecting this. I wanted to understand another side of America that I only heard about but never experienced. By living in Newark, and working at the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless, I accomplished just that. I’ve learned so much this year I don’t know where to begin, living in Newark, living in community (its more like being married to 5 people), working with clients and the children, driving to work, fixing cars, filing police reports, taking public transit, etc. It seems like almost every day I can pick out something new I’ve learned.

My job at the Coalition is to help in the housing advocacy office, tutor children in the after-school program, and assist Sr. Maryanne with the Hospitality House program when I’m needed for grunt labor and special projects, like party shopping or picture framing. I enjoy the fact that my job is fluid enough it allows me to experience all the different facets of the Elizabeth Coalition. It allows me to see the different forms of homelessness, and how it affects people of all ages, from the adults that come to the advocacy office, to the children in the after-school program. I’ve

learned how there are many different types of homelessness, and how you can never tell that a person is struggling with housing just by their appearance. I’ve also seen the

“...we are all in this together, and I have to help out others in need because ultimately we are both in the same situation, the only reason I have an advantage is because of the environment in which I grew up...”

different approaches to solving a client’s housing dilemma. Sometimes, all a client needs is rental assistance. Other times, a client is chronically homeless, and the problem is much deeper. Mental health, substance abuse, and immigration status, are all factors that can coincide with a housing crisis. It is in these instances that the advocates that work at the Elizabeth Coalition are not only housing advocates, they are life advocates, fighting to get their clients’ lives back on track.

Through working in the advocacy office I have often become depressed and bitter towards the state of our nation. Why is it that a person who works hard at their job all day long, barely has enough money to pay their rent and feed their children? Or why is it that a person who wants so badly to work, is not able to find a job, or get a second chance at having a comfortable life? It’s these types of scenarios that make me believe the world is heading down the drain.

However, I have also seen hope at

the Coalition. I am constantly amazed at the generosity that flows into the Coalition and St. Joseph’s. From donations, to people who volunteer their time, whether it’s teaching classes at the job program, or sitting on the Coalition board. One of the first things I learned from working at the Coalition is to take joy in life no matter what your situation. Some of the clients and volunteers that come into our office are friendly as can be. They seem to be enjoying life, even though they don’t have a lot of material wealth, and many times are living in precarious situations. I have so many things to be fortunate for in my life, many of which were given to me from birth.

Many times people come up to me when I’m at home or during family gatherings, and tell me that they are so impressed that I am giving up a year of my life in service to others. Although, I’m appreciative of their kind words, I don’t feel worthy of the praise. This experience has helped me grow as a person, just as much as I am helping other people. Furthermore I am only involved in this volunteer program for a year. I know I will carry this experience with me for the rest of my life but it bothers me that I have the power to leave the poverty and grunge behind me if I want to and never look back, while many of our clients would not have the resources to do so.

When I was so distant from poverty and homelessness, it was so easy to think of these as concepts, issues that existed but only as blobs of ideas and information in my brain.

Call for Help

By Amy Travis

On the clipboard hanging outside my office clients print their names and the types of services they need. It becomes a kind of “Clif’s notes” version of my day— the people I saw and the stories I heard all condensed into names and needs. Lately, the little sheet outside of my office silently screams FOOD.

In my three years at St. Joseph’s, I’ve gotten to know “the regulars”. “Mr. Lago”, a quiet, 40-something man, sustained serious back and wrist injuries a few months ago and is no longer able to work. He is waiting to be approved for Social Security Disability. Until then, he has to live off of \$140 cash assistance and \$140 food stamps from Welfare. Usually by the third or fourth week of every month, “Mr. Lago’s” name is scrawled on my clipboard. He always asks for “just a few cans”.

Lately, however, I have seen a record number of new faces. “Mr. Smith”— a young, well-educated man— recently came to me because he lost his job, spent his entire savings and had nothing left for food. All we had on hand were some canned beans and tomatoes. When I handed him the bag he began to cry and explained that he felt relief and shame. Relief because he would eat that night. Shame because he never imagined being in such a dire situation. Unfortunately, “Mr. Smith’s” situation is becoming very common at St. Joseph’s.

Every month, the line for our monthly food pantry grows. By the time I arrive at work on a “food day”, the line is already around the corner. People stand for hours to receive a single bag of groceries.

We buy much of our food from the

local food bank. Unfortunately, food prices are rising in tandem with client demand while private food donations are decreasing; our monthly food bags are becoming skimpier and skimpier.

Other local food pantries are facing similar conditions. The Salvation Army— a much larger operation than St. Joseph’s— can usually be depended on for emergency food referrals at any time. I made a call in mid-September and was informed that they ran out of food and wouldn’t have anything until October. Linda Flores-Tober recently told me that another neighborhood food pantry had sent a desperate, mass e-mail to other local organizations desperately seeking food.

Please consider organizing a food drive at your school or church or donating as a family. Every little bit helps!

Reflecting on my Time as a “JV” (continued)

However, now they are so much more than that! Homelessness is people I know and it is people who I can imagine as myself. I am so afraid that I after I leave the Coalition, I will forget the people I’ve met, or they will fade in my memory so that I can no longer remember who they truly were. It’s very important to me that this doesn’t happen, because then I’m afraid I will lose touch with the part of myself that is human in this world, just like everyone else. The part that knows we are all in this together, and I have to help out others in need because ultimately we are both in the same situation, the only reason I have an advantage is because of the environment in which I grew up, and possibly the genetic

lottery.

As my time in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps comes to a close, I have bitter-sweet feelings about saying goodbye. On one hand it has been hard for me living in Newark, in an environment where I don’t feel completely comfortable. I’m looking forward to moving on to graduate school, and starting a job I’m excited about. However, I know I will miss all the people I’ve met this year at work and through my community in Newark. Although the memories of this year might fade, I know that I’ve learned and experienced so much this year that I will never be able to ignore the impact it has had on my life. I said in the beginning that living and working in

the Newark area was like studying abroad in a different country. If that is the case, then I hope to be an ambassador for the rest of my life, continuing to volunteer for social justice and bringing other people to help out.

Holiday Donation Guidelines

We are grateful for the donated toys we receive each year for the holidays. Without this kind of support, many of the families we serve would have nothing to give their children on the holidays. However, as many of you already know, we do ask donors to follow two guidelines. First, we cannot accept toys that promote violence or exploitation. Second, we cannot accept toys that have been

recalled.

For many of the children we serve, violence is a part of daily life. Through our holiday gift program, we hope to promote learning and creativity and to avoid reinforcing the negative examples seen on television, in the street and even at home.

Some suggested toys and games are: educational toys, board games, baby dolls (of all ethnicities), books, crayons, coloring books, sports equipment, stuffed animals, building blocks, puzzles, cars and trucks, and arts and crafts. We will not accept: G.I. Joe, Star Wars, Rescue Heroes, Power Rangers, Battleship games, anything with guns, Barbie dolls, Bratz, etc.

It Takes a Village

By Claire Ruswick and adapted by Amy Travis

Paulina came to the United States from Colombia in the late 1990s. Despite an ongoing battle with mental illness, Paulina was able to learn English and eke out a living in the U.S. In March of 2006, she came to the Center because she was behind in her rent. Fortunately, the Coalition had rental assistance funds at the time and was able to help Paulina avert homelessness.

In December of 2007, companies began telling Paulina that her work authorization had expired. She had no income, was evicted from her room and placed in Operation Warm Heart. Pam, Ana and Victor researched her case and discovered that her legal status had indeed expired. Despite the fact that she had paid notaries and lawyers to handle her case, her legal status had never been renewed.

She thought the 2011 expiration date on her passport was the same as the expiration date on her work authorization.

The Coalition staff consulted with Legal Services and were told that little could be done and Paulina was at great risk of being detained and deported. The staff knew Paulina's mental condition would rapidly deteriorate in immigration detention and desperately sought other options.

Amazingly, the global community came together. With the patient help of Sr. Jacinta, Paulina made many calls back and forth to her son in Colombia. Despite his own financial difficulties, he was willing to welcome his mother home. Paulina was ashamed to return to Colombia empty handed and feared for her safety. Sr.

Mary Eleanor brought Paulina to the Colombian embassy in New York to allay her fear of returning. She also helped her find clothes and food to bring as gifts to her family. Teresa Marin, a member of St. Anthony's Church and a regular traveler to Colombia, provided a great deal of support and guidance, helped Paulina plan her trip and even took her to the airport. Over the years, Mary Ann Costanza, a member of St. Mary's in Elizabeth, provided a great deal of emotional support and many resources. She very generously paid for Paulina's airfare home.

Ultimately, this was the best option and without community intervention from various levels, Paulina would most likely be in immigration detention at this very moment.

Our Wish List

In recent months many of the items we regularly distribute to clients have hit a record low. Please consider helping us by donating the following items:

- Non-perishable food items (especially cereal, tuna fish, tomato sauce, and pasta)
- Diapers (especially size 3, 4, 5 and pull-ups)
- Baby toiletries
- Baby food and cereal
- Deodorant
- Men's razors and shaving cream
- Soap, shampoo, conditioner, lotion, etc.
- Over-the-counter cold and pain medication for infants, adults and children
- Digital camera for Project Ready

Help Us Update Our Mailing List!

Please let us know if your contact information has changed or if you would like to be removed from our mailing list!

Name: _____

Previous Address:

Current Address:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

_____ Please check here if you would like to be removed from our mailing list.

Send your updated information to:

St. Joseph Social Service Center / 118 Division St. / Elizabeth, NJ 07201

Don't Forget—The Cookbook Makes a Great Holiday Gift!

Please consider buying cookbooks for the chefs on your holiday gift list this year. The book is chock full of delicious recipes provided by the friends and family of the Coalition and St. Joseph's. Support our fundraising efforts, while doing something nice for your own friends and family!

Please send me _____ cookbook(s) at \$25.00 each + \$5.00 shipping and handling (total \$30). Your organization/church can place a bulk order and we will deliver to your site so that you save \$5.00 S&H per book. *100% of all proceeds will go to vital Coalition programs that are fully tax deductible.*

Name:

Address:

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Make checks payable to: The Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless

St. Joseph Social Service Center
Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless
118 Division St.
Elizabeth, NJ 07201



Non-Profit Org.

U.S. Postage

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Permit No. 403

Elizabeth, NJ

St. Joseph Social Service Center is a multi-service organization providing assistance to the poor and homeless of Elizabeth. St. Joseph's provides counseling, job training, weekly soup kitchen, food, clothing, medication and other necessities to the population it serves.

The Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless is a service organization for the homeless families and individuals of Union County. The Coalition provides advocacy and assistance in finding shelter and permanent housing. The Coalition also has a children's program and transitional housing program and offers community education.

St. Joseph Social Service Center and the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless need your financial support to continue our work. As government and private aid continue to shrink, donations are a large part of our budget. Your contribution will make a difference.

_____ I would like to make a contribution to St. Joseph Social Service Center and the Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless. Enclosed is my contribution of:

_____ \$10 _____ \$25 _____ \$50 _____ \$100

_____ I cannot make a financial contribution but I would like to get more involved. Please keep me informed about your activities and I'll make a donation when I can.

Please make your check payable to:

St. Joseph Social Service Center or
Elizabeth Coalition to House the Homeless
118 Division St., Elizabeth, NJ 07201

Thank you for your generosity! May God bless you.