

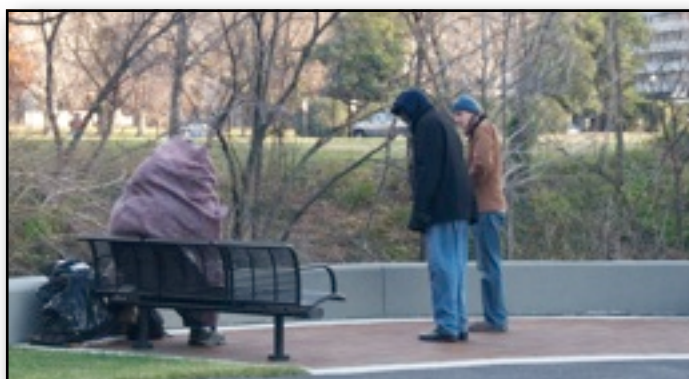
GMC NEWS



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GEORGETOWN MINISTRY CENTER

A HOUSING SUCCESS

Last June the staff and volunteers from Georgetown Ministry Center and other programs around the city engaged in an ambitious three-day effort to find and interview every single



Roy Witherspoon and Nathan Clark (R) talk to homeless man (L)

homeless person living on the street in DC. For three days we arrived at our center at 4 a.m. and then struck out in every direction, searching in alleys, under freeways, and behind buildings, leaving no stone unturned, so to speak. We knew that the Mayor planned to begin providing housing to people based on this survey. The most vulnerable would be selected first. The list came out by the end of the summer, and 10 of our regulars were on it. Among them was AL.

At first it was just a matter of locating AL and then connecting him with the appropriate worker who would then facilitate his housing. Things moved forward slowly. The worker at Neighbors First said that AL was not answering his phone. (Did you know that many homeless people actually have cell phones?) He said that he tried to call her back and just got her answering service. Still it moved forward with regular facilitation from us. We hit a roadblock around Christmas when it was determined that he needed a birth certificate—but he was born in Germany. Our stalwart advocate Roy Witherspoon used his charm and his experience (Roy served in Germany while he was in the army) to locate the office in Germany and get the birth certificate. Still it took over a month. Because we thought

Housing Success, cont. on p. 2

INTERNATIONAL HOMELESS

I don't know if it is different in Washington than it is in other parts of the country, but our homeless population is international. For years I worked with a young Nigerian man who slept under the Whitehurst Freeway. We were finally able to get him into housing, and the very next day after moving into his new place he decided to visit the INS to update his visa. He was detained, and I assume he was sent back to Nigeria. I have no idea what mental health treatment is like in Nigeria, but I doubt he has access to the medications we have here.

Another Nigerian man haunts the libraries and parks, working feverishly on "academic papers." We talk to him regularly but seldom get anywhere because of his mental illness.

Around Washington Circle there are four different Asian men. They are often in the Circle at the same time, but I have never seen them interact. One is from Thailand, one from Korea, and two from Japan. They all seem equally mentally ill. All of them have screamed, unintelligibly, at me at one time or another for saying hi to them.

A couple of years ago we had two young men from Russia in our shelter for a short time. As I recall, they were traveling here and were robbed. They used our shelter until they could get money wired to them.

There is an old guy from Switzerland who owns a house in the Alps and whose family stays in touch with him regularly. He pushes a huge cart around the city, limping badly as he makes his way from one resting area to another. He is a former baker who believes that anybody touching him or anything he has touched will be doomed to his tragic fate. So he can't accept even his own money from the bank nor get on an airplane to return home to Switzerland.

A former Egyptian diplomat who somewhere along the way began to see himself as a political refugee and outlawed journalist is a regular at our center.

Recently there has been an uptick in the number of homeless Hispanic men in our office. They are probably not representative of any new trend. They all seem to be well known to each other. They just discovered us as a group.

A former Mexican welterweight fighter regularly pedals his bicycle to our door for a shower. There is a debonair quality to

International, cont. on p. 3

HELP THE HOMELESS

We received our check from our Help the Homeless program participation this past week. It was over \$78,000! We have a number of people to thank for this huge success. Over the past years Claire Spencer-Spears, our indefatigable grant writer, insisted on including a grant request along with our Help the Homeless application. It will never work, I challenged, but she insisted. And I was always right—until this year. Claire's perseverance won us \$36,000 in unallocated funds this year! On top of that I want to thank Howard Smith and Walker & Dunlop/Green Park Financial for again including us with the other worthy organizations they supported this past year. We also received \$10,000 in walker incentives. This was money tied to the number of walkers we could muster for the big walk and all of our mini-walks. Many of our supporting congregations held mini-walks, and Hyde and Stoddert Elementary Schools' participation pushed our total walkers over 500, the magic number needed to get a \$10,000 walker incentive award. The remainder was the walker fees paid by individuals signing up to walk for us.

Thank you all so much!

INAUGURATION DAY

Who will ever forget Inauguration Day 2009. What a day. Millions of people converged on Washington to celebrate, but our 10 shelter residents, while excited about the new President, were not looking forward to sallying forth into the record cold with absolutely nowhere to go. Thanks to the generosity of the people at St. Stephen the Martyr and St. Paul's K Street we were able to keep our residents inside all day on Monday, January 19th, Martin Luther King's Birthday, and the next day, on Inauguration Day.

Housing Success, cont. from p.1

that would be the hardest way to get it, we also tracked down a family member. Eventually the brother sent us proof of AL's naturalization at age 5, which was very helpful.

AL joined us in the shelter this winter was a model resident. He was always quick to step in when assistance was needed. He set up and broke down cots without being asked. One of our women staff members told me that she felt a little more secure when AL was there.

At the end of March as the shelter was about to close, we turned up the heat a little with an email to the Deputy Director of the Department of Human Services and the Ward 2 coordinator for the Mayor. I have to say, I have revived faith in government. I wrote the email Saturday evening and received a response from both on Sunday. By Thursday we received word that AL had been awarded his housing voucher, and it was now just a matter of days before he would be housed.

YOUTH OUTREACH

What more can we do? What else is needed by our community and how can we meet those needs? These are questions that we are constantly asking ourselves. Our public education efforts, particularly our efforts that focus on youth engagement, are proving to be a successful way to expand and compound the good work that we do. We embraced youth engagement several years ago as a part of our Help the Homeless initiative, and it is a growing part of GMC. We now enjoy partnerships with Holy Trinity School and Visitation High School in Georgetown, Georgetown Day and Sidwell Friends a little farther away, and Amizade, a non-profit organization that provides global service-learning and volunteer programs.

Our youth programs start with a presentation made for youth about homelessness and the mission and services of GMC. Then the young people work alongside our Outreach team, checking in with our friends on the streets and delivering sandwiches. But our public education program, just like our Outreach program, is much more than handing out sandwiches. It is about creating an environment for sincere, authentic learning based on significant service opportunities. As we walk our street routes, we ask, "How do you know if someone is homeless? What do homeless people want? Who is responsible for assisting the homeless?" We urge youth to be honest with themselves and to recognize and confront the stereotypical assumptions they have about the homeless. Youth have told us that as a result of these programs, they see homelessness not as an issue but rather as real people, lives, and relationships. When they leave they view themselves not only as students but also as community members who are responsible for and accountable to their fellow community members.

THE ECONOMY AND GMC

We are hearing of tough times all over the country. Yesterday there was a report on NPR about the tent community in Sacramento, California. Today there was a story about the decline in political donations. I have heard others talk about a decline in donations, but that has yet to be the case for us.

In fact, we saw a rise in generosity in December reflecting, I think, an increased appreciation for what we have and for what we have not lost in this time of crisis, as well as an expectation that the need will increase.

We have not yet seen homeless middle class people forced from their housing due to foreclosure. They must be out there but I haven't seen them yet. Quite the opposite. The Mayor's initiative to house 400 chronically homeless individuals has made a significant dent in the homeless population, at least for the time being.

We don't know what the future holds. Will there be a wave of new homeless? GMC will be ready to do its part.

FROM OUR NEWEST STAFF

When I came to interview with the GMC team, I walked into a lively waiting room of homeless people who were receiving a variety of services. I then entered the office area where Gunther was giving a young man a haircut so that he would look presentable for his upcoming job interview. The phones were ringing and Roy was referring someone to housing. Nathan and Bram shook hands with me as they raced out the door to encourage people to visit the health van that was parked on Wisconsin Avenue. A group of schoolchildren were just leaving after making sandwiches and learning, firsthand, about homelessness and how they can make a difference. I knew right then—I was home.

For most of my adult life I have been an active and regular volunteer with soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and other non-profits that focus on homelessness and poverty. GMC is unique in that it concentrates on the total person. With services that provide for everything from hygiene to psychiatric care and a significant array of much-needed and necessary basics in between, GMC has found a formula that honors and dignifies all in need. Those who are serious about rising out of homelessness find a willing and competent partner in GMC. Those who are unwilling or unable to change their situation find continuity of services, respect, and understanding.

I bring to my new position many years of finance, accounting, and entrepreneurial experience. I am very excited to work with Gunther, the team, and the board to streamline the office and to provide decision-quality information so that this vital work can thrive and grow.

—Phil Brentwood

International, cont. from p. 1

this wiry man in his forties. His English is good and his manner easy. It is hard to guess why he is homeless.

There are several men from the West Indies, but the one I have come to know best has lived on the streets of DC for over 20 years. He says that he worked as a tailor in New York's garment district for many years until the immigration laws became so tough in the mid-eighties that no one would employ him. I believe that he suffers from chronic depression and that this condition combined with his inability to get work has left him emotionally paralyzed. I talk to him about returning to Trinidad but he says forlornly, "There is nothing for me there either."

It is not all hopeless as you might know from the story of Mike in our previous issue. Mike, a refugee from Laos, came here over 20 years ago. He had all the correct credentials to be here and we were able to get him into housing this past year. He used to make his bed on a pile of rocks, but now he sleeps in a real bed. He has come a long way in just the last year! We are working on renewing his legal status here.

What the homeless "internationals" all seem to have in common is they fell victim to the same things that our homeless are victimized by: mental illness and addiction. We try to help them address their addiction and mental illness, but because their legal immigration status is questionable, we are unable to make connections to housing. While DC is more hospitable to undocumented immigrants than other nearby jurisdictions, we still do not offer housing to them. They are stuck on the streets or in shelters.

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St. Paul's K Street	Joe Manson
St. John's Episcopal Church	Nick Elgin Jocelyn Dyer
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And from the community...

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Development Director	Claire Spencer-Spears

SHELTER REFLECTIONS

The shelter is coming to a close again after another successful year. The staff and veteran volunteers agree that we had a low-key but very good group of people this year (OK, there might have been one really intense guy in the group).

During my visits to the shelter I found that the nights when there were more than four volunteers had the best ambience. There was almost always someone free to interact with the residents (and believe me, they crave this interaction) while others prepared food in the kitchen.

For some congregations, just getting every evening covered even with two volunteers is tough. For others there is no shortage of volunteers. While many congregations have given up trying to get overnight volunteers, at least one church makes me count cots to ensure everyone will have one when they supply two or three overnight volunteers.

The congregations that provide the best environment make it a social event as well as a volunteer opportunity, often bringing children who will frolic about as they help. At Christ Church, Dorothea Hammond Capello brings a dozen of her best friends on the Monday nights the shelter is there. It is a dinner party, and everyone there is made to feel welcome. Dorothea always prepares the main dish true to the *cucina italiana*. Her late husband, Oliviero, was a native of Italy attached to the Italian embassy here.

At the beginning of each meal Dorothea, an actress, calls everyone together into a huge circle, all holding hands. She tells a story, then offers a prayer that is almost always as delightful and creative as the story. Over the years it has been the same group of people working with Dorothea, and you can tell that they just have a wonderful time. They stay late into the evening, outlasting the residents, chatting as they finish cleaning up the kitchen.

A word of caution

While we are all in this to improve the condition of the people we serve in our shelter, it can be very dangerous to enter into a helping relationship with one of the residents outside of the shelter and without the guidance of GMC staff. This occasionally happens, and it is always ill-advised.

Young volunteers are welcomed with their parents, but there needs to be someone designated to keep an eye on the kids. The residents are screened as best we can, but they are homeless for a reason. There is nothing more precious than our children. They should not be left alone with strangers...even our homeless residents.

Georgetown Ministry Center
1041 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20007