



GMC NEWS

The Newsletter of the Georgetown Ministry Center



Maybe shelters are a Solution

In a contentious meeting on encampments at St. Mary’s Court organized by the Mayor’s Office on July 30th, I was struck by Jack Evans’s recollection of the former Foggy Bottom Trailer shelter. He described it as dirty and dehumanizing. In 1991, a 92-bed shelter occupied the very site where the encampments are now. It was hidden behind an six foot tall stockade fence. There were about a ten trailers--the kind you might see behind a big rig on the highway.



Encampment under the whitehust Freeway

My recollection is different than the councilmember. I remember the site director Roy Walker as a man who genuinely cared about the people who slept there. He ensured that the place was spotless and well-managed.

There were trailers and three-level bunks beds, with 18 people per trailer. But they were clean and people were treated with respect. Eighteen people in a trailer is not dignified, I realize, but those 18 people came back each night. They lined up in an orderly manner and waited to be let in. They were fed a hot meal and took showers before bed. There was laundry as well, as I recall. These were services that met the most basic needs of people who have been cast off by a mental health system short on capacity. These were not people who

Joel

On June 19, Joel Johnson was murdered as he slept in his usual spot outside of St. Luke’s Mission Center at the corner of Calvert Street and Wisconsin Avenue.

Joel came to GMC almost daily, set up his laptop at his usual spot in our center, and helped staff stack the chairs at the end of the day. He was a gentle, quiet man of few words, but all of us remember his smile and his quiet laugh. Joel was always polite and always said hello to staff when he arrived.

An article about Joel in the Washington Post that was published shortly after Joel’s murder recalls Joel as a quiet photographer who kept in touch with his family, many of whom live in Maryland. Joel never told them he was homeless, but even though he didn’t have a place to call home, his mom told the Washington Post: “I want you to know that my son was not a nobody.”

The days following news of his murder, the atmosphere in our center was somber and quiet. Many people were thinking, “What if I’m next?” and a few were remembering Yoshio Nakada, a homeless man whose murder on Christmas Eve, 2008, remains unsolved. It is hard to provide comfort in moments like this-- the only thing we could do was listen if people wanted to talk and empathize with them. We will remember Joel fondly and think of him every time we glance over at the corner where he used to sit. We hope he is resting in peace.



Joel Johnson

—Stephanie Chan

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needed short-term help. These were--and are--people who will always need some care.

Right now in that spot about 30 people are peeing and defecating yards away from where they are sleeping. The place is contaminated and unsafe. They are completely unsupervised, as they eat food that may have been sitting out for days. Among them are addicts using heroin, synthetic marijuana as well as alcohol. But everyone of them, addicts and non-addicts, have one thing in common: they have at least one major mental illness.

Two weeks after the meeting in Foggy Bottom and after several false starts the area was cleaned up on August 13th. As the dust settled the tents went back up. These massive cleanups have happened at least five times since 1992.

Before I heard Council member Evans's characterization, I was thinking that this would be a good time to bring back that trailer shelter.

Would not a well-run, thirty-bed shelter, with day services including laundry and showers and competent case management, medical treatment and psychiatry be better than what is there now? Could, perhaps, the provider be given authority and responsibility to keep the area clear of campers? Would not everyone be better off?

Just a thought.

—*Gunther Stern*



Ross Goodwin, MD

Dr. Goodwin, Psychiatrist

This summer Dr. Michael Morse, our George Washington University psychiatric resident, finished his placement at GMC and started a fellowship at Children's Hospital. Though we will miss him, we are really excited to welcome to GMC Dr. Ross Goodwin, our new psychiatric resident!

Dr. Goodwin is in his third year in residency and has been working with us since July. Already, he has made a big impact at GMC. He starts off his day sitting with our guests, sharing coffee and getting to know them in an informal setting. He has been able to connect with many of our guests because of his warmth and approachability. After being with GMC for a month, we sat down to talk about his experience so far seeing patients in the center and doing street outreach.

SC: When you were starting to work with us, both in

our center and during street outreach, what kind of mindset did you try to adopt to prepare yourself?

RG: I feel like I'm entering the space, whether it's the center or the street, as a guest, and so I feel like it's incumbent upon me to ask permission to enter that space. I'm definitely going in without presumptions or an expectation that I'm going to be welcome.

SC: Have you had any memorable moments so far, or have you learned anything particularly impactful so far?

RG: The first time I went out, we discovered a man who was lying on a bed under the overpass, and he was all alone. He could barely talk and was on the verge of losing consciousness and was very ill. We were able to call an ambulance and get him to the hospital, and knowing that we can make that difference and see him out of the hospital two weeks later is incredibly rewarding.

But just as important is encountering someone who is sitting on the sidewalk, and the difference between walking by and stopping and acknowledging the person and having a relationship with them is really powerful. Someone told me today that the worst thing is feeling invisible to people, and the added benefit of having professional services to offer is an added benefit.

SC: What do you hope to learn during your time with us at GMC?

RG: I'm really hoping to understand and appreciate a community's interconnectedness and how people's individual experiences and stories make up a community, and how a community also impacts individuals. I really want to try to understand their needs and to see what services are available and how they could be improved. For example, there was a man on a mattress near the Kennedy Center with tongue cancer who did not want to go to the hospital. How do we balance someone who needs help, but is not receptive to our idea of help? We are grappling with our best intentions and autonomy and our own limitations of what we can offer and how we can help. These sorts of questions can be unsettling, but they should be.

—*Stephanie Chan*

Stephanie Chan

After four years of service to GMC, Stephanie Chan is leaving us to become a Program Specialist at Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. For much of the past three years Stephanie has been the voice of GMC through our Facebook and Twitter as well as through our newsletter. Stephanie has been a trusted friend, adviser and co-worker. We are sad to lose her but we are proud too. Stephanie found a new challenge and chance to continue to grow. We knew, sooner or later, it would happen, but it just feels too soon. We will all miss her.

—*Gunther Stern*

A Time to Reflect

As I look back to when I first started at Georgetown Ministry Center in the Spring of 2014, I am reminded of a couple of the examples of GMC making a difference.

There are instances such as when I coached Lorenzo on how to present himself during a job interview, and the importance of a first impression. We role-played an interview, and practiced not only what to say, but how to say it. He did not get that first job, and we talked about why, but he went to his next interview better prepared and with a renewed confidence, and was hired. I made a difference.

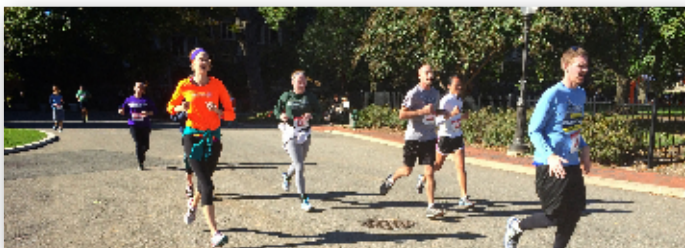
I have also learned a great deal about the character of some of our regular members. Last winter, a new person came into GMC cold, wet and without adequate clothing for the weather outside. As soon as he entered, Alem took note. He brought out an extra coat that he had stashed away, some socks and other things, and offered them to this total stranger. He said "Hey man, here you go. No one should be out there like that." Alem does not have a lot himself, but he too made a difference.

The people, members and staff alike, are undoubtedly what make GMC special. Together, the people make a difference.

—Beau Stiles

Save the Date: Georgetown 5k Race Against Homelessness

This year, on October 17th at 9:30 am the Georgetown 5k Race Against Homelessness is going to be bigger and better than ever before! Last year, the race sold out a week and a half before the event, so this year we are growing the event to 500 runners and are working on acquiring the permits that will allow us to have an awesome course on the towpath. Additionally, this year's post-race celebration will be combined with Georgetown University's football tailgate party. Registration is now open for the Georgetown 5k Race Against Homelessness. Secure your spot today at www.georgetown5k.org



Approaching the finish line in 2014. Look at the smiles!

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From the community

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Psychiatry
Ron Koshes, M.D.
Ross Goodwin, M.D.; Psychiatric Resident (*with GWU*)

Family Practice

Catherine Crosland, M.D. (*with Unity Health Care*)

Gunther's 25th anniversary as Executive Director

There is sometimes a joke in our center that GMC really stands for "Gunther's Ministry Center," and that's because Gunther Stern has spent the past twenty-five years serving as GMC's executive director.

When Gunther became director of GMC 25 years ago, the center was a tiny room inside Grace Church where people who were homeless came for case management. There was no bathroom, no shower, no place for a respite from the elements.

In 2003, Gunther worked with Grace Church to carve out a space underneath the church for a shower, bathroom, and administrative offices. While there was more space, it was still cramped, and there was only one small waiting room for guests. It was literally a space to drop in, take a shower, and leave. Gunther had bigger ideas for GMC and envisioned a place where people could come and stay for the day and be a part of the community. He saw GMC as a clubhouse where people belong, share responsibilities, and participate in the decision-making process. And so, in 2011, GMC knocked down walls in the center to open up the space, moved administrative offices out of the center, expanded its hours, and re-opened as a clubhouse where people

could hang out, wait for services, and be welcomed for who they are.

What has remained constant during all of these changes, though, is Gunther's dedication to doing street outreach and building relationships with some of the most vulnerable and service-resistant individuals. For the past 25 years, Gunther has walked the streets of Georgetown and Foggy Bottom, usually with a doctor or psychiatrist in tow, to build trust with people who typically distrust services providers. He has made his mark on GMC and on the larger Georgetown community. It is only fitting that this year, we are honoring Gunther at the 2015 Spirit of Georgetown Benefit. Please join the Spirit co-chairs, Jocelyn Dyer and Page Evans, in celebrating and honoring Gunther's achievement and dedication to GMC on October 17 at the home of Ellen Charles. RSVP today at www.spiritofgeorgetown.org.

—Stephanie Chan

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