

Catholic Worker community continues the work of caring

By Teresa A. Parsons

The work is what lasts at Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospitality.

There has never been much permanency about the people. Staff members and volunteers come and go so frequently that house director Michael Affleck is unable to even estimate how many individuals he has served with during the past three years.

The same is true of guests. Some return day after day, then abruptly disappear. Others stop in just once or twice.

Regardless of who happens to turn up at 402 South Avenue on a given day, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the friendless are welcomed and the cared for are cared for, as has taken place at that address for nearly 50 years.

"It's not a very complex message," Affleck said. "I think the world would be better if we all took care of somebody."

The work of caring at St. Joseph's centers around a daily meal, served at noon to anywhere from 20 to 100 people. Staff members ask no questions about guests' eligibility. Nor do they spend their time soliciting funds, applying for grants or shopping for provisions. Whoever is on duty simply cooks whatever is on hand in a 30-gallon pot and serves it to the hungry people who never fail to arrive.

Equally predictable as the guests are the checks that turn up in the mail and the food that arrives at the door each day. Last Friday morning, as the aroma of the "stew of the day" began to draw the first few guests to the sidewalk in front of the house, someone from the Open Door Mission dropped off several bushels of corn-on-the-cob. On other days, lunch comes from a family's garden or from a parish food drive.

Although preparing and cleaning up the daily meal requires the bulk of staff members' time and energy, the meal is by no means the only work of the house. At St. Joseph's, guests can find clothing, showers and a chance to shave, transportation, help with rent or bail money, advocacy, or someone to talk to. The house is also the site for a drop-in health clinic several times a week.

Last winter, a shortage of staff members forced St. Joseph's to scale back its emergency winter shelter, which had opened during 1981 to serve 12 to 16 homeless people. The staff did continue to shelter a few individuals who required minimal supervision. "We're ready

and willing to reopen the shelter any time we find a volunteer willing to run it," Affleck said.

Although Affleck and three live-in staff members are the nucleus of St. Joseph's community, it actually incorporates many more volunteers and benefactors, some of whom gather each month to pray and offer support to one another. "The house doesn't live because of the staff," Affleck said. "What exists here exists because of the good will of hundreds of people."

Enabling the relatively affluent to care for the destitute has always been the work of St. Joseph's House as well. "We try to be not only a place that takes care of the poor, but also a place that helps care of people who are blessed with the world's wealth," Affleck said. "We know our guests are needy. But we also know that we are needy and our benefactors are needy. Maybe St. Joseph's can be a place where everybody's needs can be met."

Beyond bringing such disparate groups of people together, St. Joseph's House has also served to mobilize activity from the wider community on a range of issues, all of which are somehow life-related. "There are not very many organizations trying to be consistent about life," Affleck said. "Whether it's the death penalty, abortion or the arms race, life needs to be protected wherever it is."

Providing hospitality, food and shelter, and relating the Gospels to the need for social action were elements of the message Dorothy Day preached when she visited Rochester in 1933. One of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, Day delivered a speech that inspired members of several local study groups to start a "breadline" serving those left penniless during the Depression. After moving from site to site for several years, the breadline found a three-story home on South Avenue in 1941.

Countless numbers of other seekers have found a home at St. Joseph's for a week or a year or many years. Marty Larch left his job with a Michigan investment firm three years ago because he wanted to do something with

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Michael N. Aydogan

Guests at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality don't have to demonstrate their eligibility to enjoy a hearty lunch of stew, cheese-and-tomato sandwiches, and corn-on-the-cob. The Catholic Worker community at 402 South Avenue has served rich and poor alike with no questions asked for nearly 50 years.

SOUND ADVICE

By: John Crandall —
Hearing Aid Specialist



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