

Features

# Affleck leaves activist spirit as legacy to St. Joe's House

By Lee Strong

If St. Joseph's House of Hospitality had a motto, it might be "the more things change, the more they remain the same."

Since opening in 1941, St. Joseph's has consistently offered hot meals, clothing, shelter and a sympathetic ear to the hungry and homeless members of the Rochester community. Even the house's address, 402 South Avenue, has been a source of consistency: St. Joseph's is the world's oldest Catholic Worker house operating continuously in the same location.

Amid the consistency, however, the house has witnessed remarkable changes: the comings and goings of countless staff, volunteers, guests and directors.

The latest round of staff changes will conclude with the departure of Michael Affleck, director of the house since 1984. In July, Affleck will take over duties as the coordinator of justice and peace programming for the Center for Social Concerns at Notre Dame University.

Replacing Affleck as director will be Sister Marilyn Pray, SSJ, who is leaving her position of head of the theology department at Nazareth High School. Sister Pray will join Kathleen Ross, who's been on staff since April, and John Sergeant, a Becket Hall student who will work at the house for part of the summer. In the fall, Xaverian Brother John Hart is scheduled to join the staff in the newly created position of house manager.

Affleck's departure — and the arrival of the new staff — marks a complete turnover of house personnel within the last year, an occurrence that has been fairly common during the house's 47-year history.

"That's the way it's always been with the house," observed Pat Mannix, who will serve as the house's interim director until Sister Pray assumes her duties in July. "It changes, but it goes on."

"A couple of years ago we had eight on staff," said Mannix's husband, Dick, who is a member of the house's board and has been involved with St. Joseph's since the mid-1970s. "Staffing needs are enormous because of the burn-out rate."

"It's not just (that) you come in and feed the people and leave," he explained. "It's a lot of outreach — sitting down and listening to the people, eating with the people."

Affleck was a prime candidate for burn-out. During his tenure as director, he simultaneously coordinated protests at the U.S. government's nuclear testing site in Nevada — a job he's held since 1981. Because of his two jobs, Affleck regularly flew back and forth between Rochester and Las Vegas, all the while attempting to maintain a semblance of normal family life with his wife and two children.

"It was agony," he acknowledged. "The burden of activism falls most heavily on my family."

Nevertheless, he will continue coordinating the Nevada protests even after assuming his duties at Notre Dame.

"(My wife and I) believe the pursuit of truth in our lives is the most important thing we are about," Affleck explained. "I'd rather have my children know we'd done something than stayed at home doing nothing."

It is hard to imagine Affleck doing nothing. A track star at Syracuse University in the early 1970s, he seemed to race through life after graduation — marrying in 1975, completing a doctorate in education in 1978 and beginning a teaching career at the State University of New York College at Cortland the same year.

Following the year at Cortland, however, he took a trip to Mexico where he experienced a sudden awakening in his life.

"It was a beginning awareness that there were people who were really poor," Affleck recalled. "I had never been exposed to that kind of poverty."

The trip led Affleck to "question everything I'd been taught about the world and God," he remembers. "How can I have been so highly educated and learned nothing about such poverty?"

He began pursuing theology studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, while at the same time taking other people down to Mexico to see the poverty and suffering he had seen. By the time he earned his master's degree in 1981, Affleck — who had previously described himself as a conservative Catholic — had been transformed into an activist.

In 1982, the Franciscans at Berkeley hired

Affleck to organize the first Lenten Desert Experience at the Nevada test site. The Lenten experience later evolved into the Nevada Dessert Experience, through which hundreds of Catholics have been arrested protesting the U.S. government's defense policies. Affleck has been arrested repeatedly.

Protesting nuclear weapons and feeding homeless people may on the surface seem to be unrelated — even conflicting — activities, but Affleck believes that working for peace and performing the daily works of mercy are inseparable components of the Catholic Worker philosophy. He traces his belief to the example of Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, who punctuated her years of serving soup with days spent in jail as a result of protesting war, nuclear weapons and injustice in U.S. society.

Likewise, during his time at St. Joseph's, Affleck constantly sought to link social activism with the social-service components of Catholic Worker philosophy.

Perhaps the connection was made most clear last November when Affleck and fellow workers at St. Joseph's launched a campaign of protests and civil disobedience designed to focus public attention on the plight of Rochester's homeless population. The protests led to greater public awareness of the homeless issue, and efforts are currently underway to purchase and open a permanent, 24-hour shelter.

"He's a prophetic character," noted Tim Sigrist, a member of St. Joseph's board of directors. "He's publicly dealt with difficult issues."

As board members praise Affleck for the spirit of activism he has brought to St. Joseph's, they also point to his efforts to work with other activist groups as a positive effect he's had on the Catholic Worker house.

"I think it's absolutely essential these days that we take care of our allies if the world's going to change," Affleck explained. "We have to be willing to work with a wide number of people on a range of issues."

The purpose of this coalition building and mutual support is "to expand the circle of resistance to the dominant cultural values of consumerism, militarism, selfishness — a litany of horrors," the director noted.

Now, Affleck will take his ideals and activism to the Notre Dame campus, where he hopes to "help students understand the ethical considerations of the studies they are about."

"What we're looking for is the students to get their hands dirty, to get into the field and integrate academic skills with real people's needs in ways that are ethically appropriate," Affleck noted.

In an effort to give the students the social awareness he himself did not discover until after graduation, Affleck plans to arrange for them to visit such places as Appalachia, Mexico, Central America and the Nevada test site.

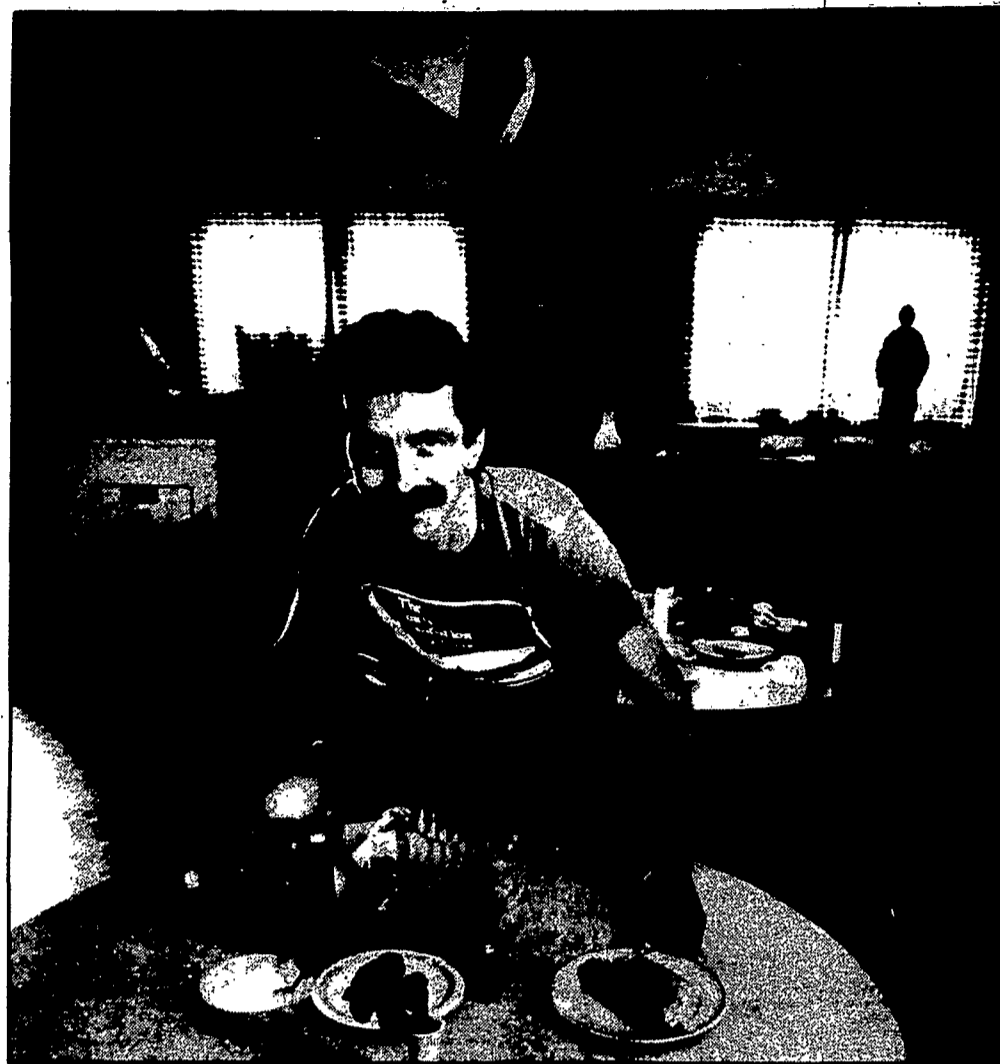
Yet as he plans his future, Affleck also has been looking back on his four years at St. Joseph's House, and recognizes that conflicting commitments prevented him from giving enough attention to the house. "I could have done everything I have done better," he remarked.

One area that has suffered from inattention is the sense of community among the staff. "I guess I felt there's a great amount of room for developing a more intimate living community," Affleck observed. "I think we've shared our work well, but we could have shared on a more intimate level."

The board, too, recognized the need for a stronger sense of community, both within the house and with the community at large. Sister Pray and Brother Hart are both experienced at living in and fostering communities, and according to Sigrist, their proven abilities to live in community and to work well with people were factors in choosing them for their new positions.

The board divided the duties of the director, creating the new position of house manager, because the work had grown too large and ungainly for one person to handle and still have time for community life.

Under the new house structure, Sister Pray, will be responsible for social action and community outreach. She will publish the house newsletter, serve as spokeswoman for the house, and oversee the overall operations and staffing of the house.



Michael Affleck, director of St. Joseph's House of Hospitality since 1984, will leave July 1 to become coordinator of justice and peace programming for Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns.

As house manager, Brother Hart, who for many years operated the St. Joseph Indian School in Chamberlain, South Dakota, will manage the day-to-day operations of the house, coordinating volunteers and general house maintenance.

Meanwhile, the staff is working to improve communication with the outside community. The house's newsletter, published irregularly in recent years, will be given new priority. Under Pat Mannix, the house has already inaugurated a Wednesday-night volunteer program so that people who work during the day can donate their time to house projects. These volunteers will perform some of the repair and cleaning work needed to keep the house run-

ning smoothly, and will free the house's staff for interaction with the guests.

Affleck applauds the new direction the house is taking. "I'm very optimistic. I see the Holy Spirit working here and calling on the gifts of the community," he said.

After four years at St. Joseph's, Affleck recognizes the amount of effort and energy needed to keep the Catholic Worker house running.

"It takes a lot of people," he reflected. "It takes a community in the house, board members, and volunteers all working together to expand the possible options of people to serve others and to live more simply without expecting return."

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