

Local News

Geneva low-income houses open as 'wounds heal'

By Lee Strong

Following a legal battle with Geneva city officials and opposition from local residents, the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry has completed construction of five low-income rental houses in Geneva.

As of November 1, three of the units had already been rented — the William Street house, the Greenhurst Street house and one of the two houses on Garden Street. The other two houses — one on West High Street and the other Garden Street house — should be rented soon, according to Giovina Caroscio, director of the social ministry office.

Completion of the William Street house was put in doubt last January when the newly elected city administration attempted to halt its construction because the dwelling was being built on an undersized lot. In March, however, the Geneva zoning board ruled that construction could continue.

In the midst of the legal battle over the house, all five houses faced vocal opposition from the community. City officials and neighborhood residents claimed that because of their unusual energy-efficient design, the houses were unattractive and would, as Geneva mayor Jack Starr said at the time, "stand out like a sore thumb in a neighborhood of ranches."

City officials and local residents also expressed concern that despite its expressed intention to use the five houses as rental property, the office of social ministry would instead turn

them into halfway houses for, as Starr said, "people on drugs or alcohol — or for battered wives."

Many of these misunderstandings and ill-feelings have now been resolved, Caroscio said.

"People called here and we talked with them," she reported. "We also invited them to the open house (held October 23 in the William Street house). Quite a few neighbors came to see the house."

The five houses were built with a \$289,000 grant from the New York State Homeless Housing and Assistance Program. According to the terms of the grant, Caroscio said, the houses could only be used as low-income rental units, not as halfway houses. In addition, she noted, the lots on which the houses were built were zoned single-family residential, making it impossible for the office of social ministry to build halfway houses without first obtaining the approval of the city zoning board.

Caroscio noted that complaints concerning the houses' appearance had been made during the winter and early spring, when the houses were still under construction and had not yet been landscaped. Since their completion, "we've heard people saying, 'They're not as bad as I thought,'" Caroscio said.

She added that another factor helping to ease tensions in the community is that some of the new tenants are from Geneva. "This is a small town," she said, "so the people in the neighborhoods already knew the people (moving into the houses)."

Yet according to Starr, some tensions about the houses remain.

"It's going to take some time to heal the wounds," the mayor observed, noting that he still hears complaints about the houses — including comments on their appearance. "It's still a weird looking building," he said of the design used for all five houses. However, he believes that in time people will grow used to them.

Starr acknowledged that the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry had tried to ease community worries. "They met with people, and they also sent out notices to the council about the open house."

The mayor said he would like to see a healing of wounds take place for the sake of the people living in the houses. "What I would hate," he said, "... is to have people move in there and be ostracized because they're living in those houses."

Caroscio pointed out the staff of the office of social ministry believes it is important for the tenants of the houses to feel comfortable in their new homes and neighborhoods, noting that these families already have experienced problems associated with Geneva's lack of affordable, low-income housing for large families. Some low-income families are forced to live in overcrowded or substandard houses and apartments, she said.

Caroscio added that in Geneva, the housing crunch is aggravated by the presence of Hobart and William Smith colleges, whose stu-

dents drive up rental prices and occupy many of the apartments that would otherwise be available to low-income families.

"Clearly the housing stock in this community and a lot of communities has not kept up with the demand," Caroscio observed. "Because of cutbacks in (federal) housing programs since 1981, there has been very little done to build new units and repair old units."

Fortunately, she said, New York state has made more money available for housing through such programs as the Homeless Housing and Assistance Program, the Housing Trust Fund and the Affordable Home Ownership Program.

Despite the need for more low-income housing, the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry has no plans at this time to build more houses, Caroscio said. "We still have an awful lot of work to do with these houses," she explained. "We feel at this point we need to concentrate on managing this program."

Nevertheless, she said she was happy to have been involved with constructing the five houses.

"Without a doubt, it's been one struggle after another," Caroscio said. "It's something you don't take on unless you're willing to put in the effort."

"But," she added, "to see how happy they were to get a house was worth the effort."

Local cyclists end trip to benefit homeless

By Lee Strong

Chris Cardinali has put his law career on hold for a while.

The 1982 McQuaid graduate has had a few other things to do — like bicycling from California to Massachusetts as part of the Coast to Coast for the Homeless Project.

Cardinali was one of five cyclists — including fellow McQuaid graduate Jim Brennan — who pedaled more than 3,000 miles in a trek that began September 1 in Venice, Calif., and ended October 30 in Boston.

On Wednesday, Nov. 2, Cardinali and Brennan arrived at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester. With them were Greg Lysko and Sue Costello, two of their fellow riders, as well as Pauline Doherty and Kathleen Cooney, the support team who drove a rented van that accompanied the riders. The fifth rider, Greg Barker, remained in Boston.

The seven met in California during the last year while working as Jesuit Volunteers on a variety of social-service projects. The goal of the trip was to promote awareness of the problems faced by homeless people in the United States and to raise money for the homeless service center in California where Cardinali worked.

"The issue has always been close to me," Cardinali said. "I thought the trip was a good idea seeing that it would benefit the center where I worked."

St. Joseph Center — where Cardinali had worked for two years — is an agency that offers homeless people a variety of services, including a lunch program, a daytime drop-in center, and a referral/counseling/advocacy center. During his first year at the center, Cardinali worked as a Jesuit Volunteer. The second year, he was one of the center's 40-member paid staff.

Brennan had suggested the idea for the trip in May as he approached the end of his volunteer work with juvenile offenders at the California Youth Service Bureau in Tulare.

"I still wanted to do something in social justice," Brennan said. He chose to spotlight the problem of homelessness because "a lot of people don't know the problem exists. Our main focus was to make people aware of the problems that permeate our society — homelessness, but also poverty in general — it's the catalyst for the homeless problem."

Brennan also saw the trip as a way to live out his faith. "Christ has a lot to do with it," he remarked. "Basically, we're called to help our brothers and sisters, and I think that our society has forgotten that. You're a human being before you're anything else, and you should be treated as such."

When Brennan proposed the idea of the trip to his fellow Jesuit Volunteers during one of their regular retreats, Cardinali and the others readily agreed to join the effort.

"I really thought (the trip) was a great challenge," Cardinali said. "I could bring an expertise along the route because of my experience (working with homeless people)."

After the group decided to make the trip, they began searching for sponsors. Among those who provided money to get the trip started were friends and family members; such sports personalities as Mike Smrek of the Los Angeles Lakers and Pete Houlihan of the Los Angeles Rams; HBO Comic Relief; and such corporations as Budget Rent-A-Car and Nike, which supplied clothes and sneakers for the riders.

The group had optimistically hoped to raise \$50,000 for the center, but managed to raise only about \$2,000 above expenses. Cardinali noted that people across the country were hesitant to give money to a program in California when they had local programs to support.

He pointed out, however, that the main point of the trip was not to raise money. Team members were more concerned with raising people's consciousness about the extent of homelessness in this country.

Along the route, the group contacted local

media to talk about homelessness. In Washington, D.C., they visited congressional representatives and lobbied on the Capitol lawn. As they passed through major cities, they stopped at homeless shelters, speaking with the staff, often spending the night. They also regularly stayed at rectories and in churches, and spoke in Catholic elementary schools and high schools.

"We were able to speak with a lot of classes and a lot of students," Cardinali said. "We enjoyed them the most because they were interested. I think we left a real impression on them."

The trip and the preparations for it were also eye-opening experiences for the team members. Massachusetts-native Cooney, for example, said that prior to becoming a Jesuit Volunteer and teaching at a largely Hispanic school in Los Angeles, she hadn't really been aware of the extent of homelessness in this country.

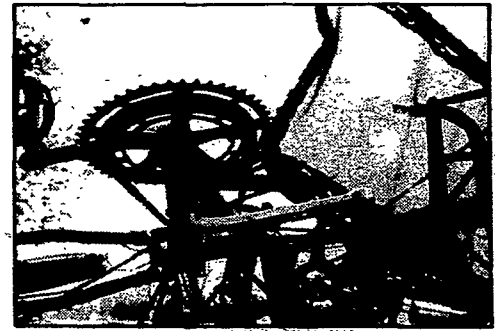
"I used to take the bus to the school," Cooney said. "I'd see the people on the streets, and I just couldn't believe that people have to live like that in the United States."

On the first night of the trip, she recalled, the group camped out in the hills east of Los Angeles. During the evening, homeless people who were living in tents in the hills visited the campsite. "You think of homeless people as living in the city," she remarked. "I didn't know people were living out in the hills. And they don't get counted in the figures about homelessness — we don't know how many people out there don't get counted."

Cardinali, too, discovered a side of homelessness different from what he'd experienced in Venice.

"In larger cities, homelessness is more a substance-abuse problem," he observed. "In the Midwest, there's a lot more unemployed people who become homeless — people who are used to working, people who are used to paying their own way."

He also noted regional differences in the ways communities have responded to home-



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal
This out-of-commission bicycle was perched atop a support van, as the cyclists for the homeless returned to Rochester last week.

lessness. Some shelters — like the one the cyclists visited on Staten Island — are informal, imposing few restrictions on their guests.

But in Roanoke, Virginia, the group found an altogether different approach to providing shelter for the homeless.

When the van's transmission broke down, the group was forced to stay in the city for a week while repairs were being made. On their first night in Roanoke, they stayed at a shelter where they were required to pray for an hour before they could eat dinner. After dinner, they had to remove their clothes, then walk naked through a room in which they were fumigated. They were then given hospital-type gowns to wear to bed, while their own clothes were cleaned. For the rest of the week, they stayed with some college students they had met, rather than return to the shelter.

Brennan acknowledged that the strict control was maintained to prevent violence in the shelter, but said the experience gave him an idea what some homeless people have to put up with to find food and a place to sleep.

"I felt I wasn't free," Brennan said. "I felt I was being contained. I liked the people who ran the shelter, but they were infringing on the rights of the people, and I didn't agree with that."

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