

SUMMER
2008

Box Seats

A View from the Steps



Dear friends of the Step Ministry,

Thank you for your generous support of our beloved Step Ministry.

- † With your help, each night we are able to provide a safe haven for 16 homeless people from our neighborhood.
- † With your help, each night 16 of society's most marginalized persons will be able to lay their heads down to sleep knowing that they are loved and cared for.
- † With your help, each night 16 homeless folks will feel a little less "homeless." And that can mean everything!

We have always thought of the Step Ministry as being a "family," albeit a very *large* family. So, in the interest of drawing the members of our family who so kindly donate funds closer into the family fold, we will be sending out a quarterly newsletter. In this newsletter we will share with you some of the current "goings on", some stories from the past, and spiritual writings on the topic of homelessness.

The title of our newsletter, "Box Seats," is derived from a standing joke that developed during our very beginning on the front steps of the church. As you may know, flattened cardboard boxes are used by homeless folks to cushion the unforgiving hardness of the concrete and also as insulation from the dampness that seems to rise up out of the ground like a malevolent spirit when the sun goes down. Each evening guests and Step Ministers alike would sit on the top step of the church on flattened cardboard boxes sharing the details of their day and watching the hustle and bustle of passersby finishing up their respective days. Upon the arrival of an additional guest or minister someone would always flop down a vacant piece of cardboard and beckon the new arrival up with the greeting, "Hey, come on up. We've got *box seats*. The view is great!" All would laugh no matter how many times this scene was repeated.

And the view was, and is, great. To experience the Step Ministry is to experience all the good, the bad and the ugly in life, only in *concentrate* form. It is a microcosm of the macrocosm. One of the lessons of the Steps is to learn to accept and say "yes" to all life has to offer with love and humility and heartfelt gratitude to the Creator of it all.

So, "Come on up. You've got box seats and the view is great!" Welcome to the family.

Blessings to all,

Nora Sanguinetti

Volunteer Coordinator of the St. Francis Step Ministry

A Brief History of the Step Ministry

February 6, 2008 was the fourth anniversary of our Step Ministry's move to the Parish Center courtyard. The first five (or so) years of the ministry's life was lived out on the front steps of the church. Each evening a number of homeless folks from our neighborhood would gather to sleep in the arms of St. Francis and in the relative safety that their "community of numbers" provided.

Over the years, the number of those seeking nightly shelter swelled to almost tsunami-like proportions. The steps of the church could no longer accommodate all those in need, and the remainder spilled out onto the sidewalk, other areas of the church grounds and onto adjacent properties. And as word began to spread throughout the larger community of the nightly presence of the homeless on the steps of St. Francis, we began to experience an ever-increasing amount of harassment from folks who chose to strike out at these most vulnerable souls.

The incidents ranged from shouted obscenities and horn-honking, to hurled objects, to one incident of small-caliber gunfire. These occurrences, along with the attendant issues arising from the ever-growing swell of homeless folks into the neighborhood, were naturally of concern to our immediate neighbors and the police department. Seeking a solution to the concerns of all affected parties, we entered in to a mediation process with representatives of our neighborhood sectors. Ultimately, an agreement was made to move the ministry into the Parish Center courtyard and to employ a night security guard (a Shepherd) to watch over the guests and the entire grounds.

An attractive canopy was built to cover the patio where the guests would sleep, and the fencing and gate in the alley were moved to allow guests' access to a restroom via the back door to the Parish Center. Over the years, the Step Ministry has provided shelter to over 600 homeless individuals. Since our move into the courtyard, we continue to attract almost 100 new guests each year, in addition to accommodating many of those whom we have served in the past.

Creating a Safe Haven

In the courtyard, we are not able to serve as many guests each night as before (now 16 instead of 25); however, we are able to serve them better. The courtyard walls provide much more privacy and security. The guests know that when they close their weary eyes, their Shepherd is standing a watchful guard over them, and no harm shall come to them as they sleep. As a result, our homeless guests are less stressed, better-rested, and therefore have a greater capacity to develop caring relationships with each other. If one among them is ill or elderly or otherwise infirm, the others try to tend to his or her special needs, whether it be an extra blanket, food, medicine, or the touch of a gentle hand.

Each evening several members of the Step Ministry welcome the guests as they arrive at the courtyard gate. We try to create a safe haven in which they can experience the love and comfort of a caring community while they gather the strength and wherewithal to connect with available social services or to save enough money to get into acceptable housing.

We do not ask prying questions. We do not try to "fix" them, but rather we meet them where they are. Over time, our relationships with our homeless brothers and sisters develop, and together we come to recognize our mutual identity and shared dignity as children of God.

At 6:00AM, members of the Breakfast Ministry (now in its 6th year) welcome our guests to a simple breakfast of hot coffee and tea, fruit and fruit juices, hot and cold cereals and cheeses. By 7:00AM the guests are off to meet the huge challenges that each new day presents to the homeless individual. It is our most sincere desire that the knowledge that they will have a "family" awaiting their return that evening and ready to greet them in the morning will give them roots that are deep enough to sustain them as they persevere in their life's journey.

The Charism of the Step Ministry



The underlying approach that early Franciscans had for the conversion, renewal, and restoration of people who had lost self-respect and social status was simply being a “presence”, a visible tangible sign that the person was worthwhile.

In honoring this tradition, the St. Francis Step Ministry is committed to “being there” each evening to throw open the Garden gate and say, “Welcome, friend. You will be safe and much loved here”.

It is one thing to offer people a handout and quite another to say I will be there for you as a friend. This friendship must be a commitment; they need to know that we will continue to be there for them and that our friendship will be a home base to which they can return. This is how we rebuild the confidence they need to take positive steps forward.

In Christ's love we strive to
Accept their individuality,
Believe in their worth,
Hope for their future, and
Love them where they are.

We are not there to fix them or change them or mainstream homeless people. We are there just to meet the person and take time to hear about how their day was and share our lives with them.

This ministry of presence - "loitering with intent" - is our unique means of accompanying one another on the Path.

One Body with Many Parts

(1 Corinthians 12:12-24)

¹² A person has only one body, and the body has many parts. It is the same with Christ.

¹³ The one Spirit baptized us all to make one body. It made no difference whether we were Jews or Greeks, whether we were slaves or free men. We were all given to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ I say again, the body is not all one part, but has many parts.

¹⁵ Perhaps the foot says, 'I am not the hand, so I do not belong to the body.' But it is still a part of the body.

¹⁶ Perhaps the ear says, 'I am not the eye, so I do not belong to the body.' But it is still a part of the body.

¹⁷ If all of the body were an eye, how could we hear? If all the body were an ear, how could we smell?

¹⁸ The way it is now, God has put each part in the body in the place he wanted it.

¹⁹ If they were all one part, how could it be a body?

²⁰ The way it is now, there are many parts, but it is one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you.' The head cannot say to the feet, 'I do not need you.'

²² No, that is not so. Some parts of the body are not as strong as others. Yet we could not live without them.

²³ **And we look after some parts of our body more than others because they need it.** The parts of our body that are not so fine in one way are made more fine in other ways. But the parts which are fine already do not need to be made fine. God made the body and has given more care to the parts that need it.

²⁴ He did this so that the body would not be divided into groups, but all the parts would help each other. If one part has trouble, then all the other parts are troubled too. If one part is praised, then all the other parts are glad with it.

The Resurrection of Wallace

It was a chilly evening sometime in 2003 that Wallace first arrived at the church steps looking for a place to sleep. At first glance there was nothing especially remarkable about him. He was an older fellow, maybe in his mid to late 60's, with silver shoulder-length hair and a full silver beard to match. Average height, average weight. He wore the standard "homeless" attire: faded, well-worn jeans with a slightly crumpled, long-sleeved plaid shirt, and a pair of dusty boots that probably should have been laid to rest a long, long time ago.

It wasn't until he spoke that I noticed there was something a bit different about this particular fellow. He asked if there was room for him to sleep on the Steps. He was unusually economical with his words and his voice had a sharp, thin edge to it. He stepped closer to me in anticipation of my reply and it was then that I noticed his eyes. Eyes of the most beautiful shade of light blue I had ever seen. Almost iridescent. But they were lifeless and hollow. There wasn't the expected spark of engagement, just a chilling vacancy. They reminded me of the eyes of circus elephants, those unfortunate creatures whose entire lives have been spent enduring endless violent, spirit-breaking training sessions alternated with hours of being chained in place in a long line of other zombie-like elephants. A sort of nightmarish "chain gang".

Wallace took a spot on the sidewalk at the far left end of the church steps. He spread his bedroll, climbed inside and just seemed to turn the world off. He was watching but not seeing, hearing but not listening. It was as if "Wallace" had disappeared.

As the days and weeks passed by, Wallace moved up from the sidewalk into a much coveted spot up on the steps. Much coveted because it offered more protection from wind and rain and you didn't need to worry about some drunk guy riding his bicycle over your forehead as you slept. He also, ever-so-slowly, began to engage in ongoing conversations, although still with his usual verbal economy.

As more time passed, it was a wonder to watch Wallace unfold. Soon he was leaving the confines of his bedroll and physically joining the group. He was now up to contributing occasional *full* sentences to the conversation. I had the impression he was actually becoming familiar with the sound of his own voice. He would make his contribution and then just sit back with a twinkle of self-satisfaction, pleased with the bountiful deed he had done. And it wasn't too long before he treated us to his particular brand of humor. He would let loose with an edgy zinger and then have a good cackle about it.

One evening Wallace pulled me aside and asked if I would do him a favor. His parole agent wanted to talk to me. Would I please call him? I replied, "Sure. I have nothing but good things to say about you. You have been a perfect gentleman during your stay here with us." As Step Ministers, it is our practice not to ask prying questions, but he must have seen the curiosity on my face. He volunteered that when he was very young he had done something very bad and that he had spent 42 years in prison. It was apparent that this was the extent to which he wished to reveal his past, so I moved on to another topic.

The next day I called Agent Jones. Wallace was lucky. He had a parole agent who sincerely wanted Wallace to succeed on the outside. He asked me to confirm that Wallace did indeed sleep on the Steps each night. Apparently parolees are required to maintain an address and the Steps were Wallace's current address. Agent Jones said that before finding the community on the Steps, Wallace had begged him to send him back to prison. Life on the outside had become too foreign and too difficult for him to manage. Wallace told him that on the Steps people really cared about each other. They helped each other. It was like a family.

It wasn't but a few months later that Wallace gathered the wherewithal to move into a room downtown. And still today, every once in a while one of us will cross paths with him. Those beautiful blue eyes sparkle and dance with recognition, a smile stretches his silver beard wide and the conversation that ensues is ... seamless.

The miracle of the Steps.