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**2015 Day One - Saturday, 6/20 -Manchester, St. Bridget to Hartford to St. Margaret Mary Parish, South Windsor**

We gathered at St. Bridget with the hope of leaving right at 8:00 am.  One by one those expected to ride that day showed up.

We parked our bikes, we all looked cool in our BTC cycling jerseys. The weather was great.

Cue sheets were passed out. Riders, 9 of us,  stocked up out water and/or Gatorade.

Shortly before 8:00 we got together to take our first photos.  Eric stopped by to wish us well.  Wayne came over and joined us in the photo.

Our new cyclists, Greg, Gary, and Matt were anxious to begin. We gathered in a circle and I lead us in prayer to send us off on our 2015 journey that would again change our lives.

Believe it or not we got on the road before 8:00 am.  We had a comfortable ride into Hartford.  We were hoping to be in Hartford at South Congregational Church to meet Matt Siracusa of the Sparrows Ministry he started where he feeds up to 500 homeless there at the church every Saturday morning from 5:30 to 9:30 am. The mission of Sparrows Ministries is to show the tangible love of Jesus so that our brothers and sisters may experience Him in a real way. I think we truly understand this mission as I believe we do likewise.

When we arrived there we not many folks there, mostly staff. Got to meet Vicki Silva who coordinates this ministry for Matt.

I found out that she worked at Aetna when I was there and we got to share a few stories.  I provided Vicki with many of the business cards that End Hunger CT gave us to pass out for their Free Summer Meals program where any child 19 years or younger can get free meals, breakfast/lunch, lunch/supper, by calling 211 or texting or going on the End Hunger website to find out when and where he closest spot the meals will be served.  An awesome program and we had no idea at that time how many of these cards we would pass out during the next six days.

We did get to engage some of the homeless there.  Several of us got to meet Valerie and Stephan.  I did not get an opportunity to speak to either of these two individuals but from what I heard later they touched quite a few of the team.  I am hoping that Claire, Johnnie and any other team member will add their stories here.

Truly the Holy Spirit guided us to this spot especially being our first stop.  Wow! That's all I can say.  We were all moved and our new riders were quickly immersed in what we are all about.  We could not have started on a more loving, touching, meaningful note. Thank you Holy Spirit.  We commented too that it was not really coincidence that the leader of this Sparrows Ministry was named Matthew.

So, after the Sparrows volunteers (by the way many form Manchester) cleaned up and left, we were left with more time than we needed to get to our next stop, which was Arbor Park with the Hands on Hartford group at 1:00.

Someone suggested we cycle over to Catholic Worker House on Clark street.  We tried calling but did not get a live person so we trusted in the Holy Spirit, which we would do a lot on this year's ride, and headed over.

We cycled on Park Road for the first of many times over the next three days and got to Catholic Worker within a half hour.  Luckily Brian Kavanagh was home.  He invited us in and provided the education about Catholic Worker that our new riders had to hear and was a refresher for those of us who were familiar with their mission.

All left there further energized.

We cycled for Catholic Worker to Bushnell Park where we would enjoy the sandwiches That Wendy stayed up late Friday night to individually make for each of us.  They were yummy.  She made great chocolate chip cookies as well.

We relaxed and shared our meal together and we were engaged by an older couple who were visiting Hartford from California.  They were curious about what we were doing and began a dialogue with some of us about poverty in general and some of the things they were engaged in in California.  You would not have expected them to be one of those that "gets it".  I found myself judging and quickly caught myself that we cannot ever pre-judge anyone.

As we began to wind down our lunch time, which was nice for bonding, especially with the new riders, we noticed a man sleeping on the grass a ways away from us. Johnnie walked the two remaining sandwiches that Wendy had made thinking Tom B and Tim were riding with us that morning.  We commented on what we thought he might say when he awoke and saw the sandwiches wondering who tom and Tim were and why they left him two sandwiches,

Close to 1:00 pm we walked/rode our bikes down to the pond area for "Church by the Pond".

This was an outdoor non-denominational service sponsored by Christ Church Cathedral and ministered by guest priests or ministers.  It was a Christian mass in the park for anyone that came by.  We laid down our bikes and settled in.  We were handed the Readings, greeted by the minister who would say the mass as well as Andrew May, a volunteer and a former BTC rider.  He distributed the Readings and reconnected with several of us.

This just seemed to be perfect and a special place for us to be.  So many people began to gather round.  The Service was beautiful.  We shared bread and wine together and everyone extended a sign of peace by hugging each other.  Awesome!

The Holy Spirit at work again.

I was especially blessed as I was called over by Steve, a volunteer who seemed to be the coordinator of the Service this day.  He was wearing a beautiful metal cross.  I noticed the Minister as well as every volunteer assisting the service wore the same cross. Come to find out the cross an Ecclesia Cross which is representative of an outdoor church ministry which is moving Nationwide. After the Service, Steve called me over and explained the significance of the cross and what it represents. He also explained that they wanted to present me with a cross as leader of the BTC group this day. I felt very honored and got pretty emotional as a result.  What a way to end the Service.

The volunteers then had those attending, mostly the needy, line up for sandwiches they usually pass out each Saturday afternoon. Also going on across the way, a volunteer Group was handing out new underwear and sox. The noticeable thing was that the line for the underwear was longer than the line for the sandwiches.

We left Bushnell park on such a high note.  And, while there, we were reunited with Valerie and Stephan who attended the Service.

We gathered ourselves and began our ride to South Windsor and St. Margaret Mary's parish. The ride over was not bad.  No problems going through the North end of Hartford although the road was bumpy in places. Passed out quite a few Free Summer Meals cards along the way.

Riding in the back was a bit different for me this year.  New perspective. Watched the development of the new riders from a distance. ai enjoyed the company of Claire and Pam as I was a replacement of Wayne this year. Wayne couldn't ride this year due to a health situation.

We also missed Eric, Maureen and Bob but they were with us in spirit.

We got to St. Margaret Mary's with plenty of time to attend their 5:00 Vigil mass, shower, set up where we would be sleeping, meet Johnnie's daughter, Lauren, have a nice supper, and conduct our presentation although not to a very large crowd.  But it still was effective.  We had those who attended write letters as an Action step and turned the night into a success

As we did last year, we gathered around for the "word of the day".

Here they are:

Community (2)

Enjoyment

Less intense, less threatening

Act out of Love not Fear

Just Do It

Tell them your name

Trust

Frustration (Valerie & Stephan)

Compassion - Volunteers smiling

Comfortable

Camaraderie

Humbled

Hope

Done by Lou

A couple of notes about Valerie and Stefan...Stefan works ad per diem jobs in construction, landscaping, maintenance etc. Valerie is in a wheel chair. When he works, he can get paid so he can buy food, but Valerie stays at the park and sometimes does not get food. If he is not working they can make it to various soup kitchens to get food. One day recently they were in Bushnell park taking a nap. Someone pushed Valerie's wheel chair (she was not in it) into the pond. All of their belongings were in a backpack on the back and got wet. Stefan had to wade into the pond to retrieve the chair. His stuff was still wet. When he gets paid...in about a week, he was planning to go the Laundromat and wash his clothes to get the mucky smell and out of the clothes. JF