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**2015 Day Two - Sunday, 6/21 - St. Margaret Mary Parish, South Windsor to Hartford to East Hartford to Holy Family Retreat Center, West Hartford**

Happy Father's Day!

We had a relatively peaceful night sleeping in the church hall.  We were spread out of the floor, most with air mattresses or sleeping bags.  The snoring did not seem to bother anyone.  It was a bit chilly though and Joan and I curled up close to stay warm.  She had an extra blanket.  I kept telling myself I am so lucky because I wasn't outside in the cold air, in the drizzly night.  I was concerned about John Ryan who was having some stomach issues and struggled riding yesterday and wound up going home to get better.  He was feeling better in the morning but not 100%. So, we lost a rider but gained one too. We also lost Gary who went home to enjoy Father's day with his family.

After breakfast prepared by Carter, nothing fancy but adequate. We said our goodbyes to Fr. Dolan and he suggested we come back next year and promised to have more people attend.  We might just take him up on that.  So, we hopped on our bikes, Lauren included, with our rain jackets on as it was drizzling enough, and chilly enough to start out with them on.

We were headed to South Park Inn in Hartford for a 9:00 visit with Dick Lusso, Volunteer Coordinator.  He was going to give us a tour and educate us on what they do at this facility. South Park Inn's mission is to assist homeless people to improve their life situation by providing temporary and long-term housing and supportive services and to advocate for solutions to homelessness. They have been in business since 1982 and are located in the former South Park Methodist Church on Main Street.  the church sanctuary was converted to a Transitional Living program in 1989 which allows men to stay for up to 2 years while they engage in education, job training, mental health or substance abuse treatment. The shelter houses up to 85 men, women and children per day, 365 days per year.

We had an uneventful but rather wet ride over to South Park Inn. We did, however, pass out more Summer Meals cards along the way.  I stopped and greeted a group who were on the corner just completing a prayer service, told them what we were doing, and asked them if they knew anyone who could benefit from the Free Summer Meals program and of course they said yes and that they thought what we were doing was remarkable and definitely needed.

We need that reinforcement of our mission every so often by the folks we meet on the street of Hartford or any larger city we cycle through.

We arrived at South Park Inn on time and Dick greeted us and showed us where to store our bikes for safety.  He then began giving us a tour of the facility.  We noticed it was quite clean and tidy.  clients milled around and graciously said hello.  Always a bit awkward coming into a shelter, sometimes I feel like we are intruding.  But for us it is the way we educate ourselves better and have our eyes opened, especially for the first time.  Dick was very thorough and detailed.  He told us that clients can stay a maximum of 28 days each year.  Sure doesn't sound like enough. One cool thing they have done is that they have Dental treatment for the clients.  Several dentists volunteer there time and service to treat clients.  Pretty awesome.  Not all shelter do this. The sleeping area for men and separately for women and children were neatly kept.  Not a lot of privacy but a roof over their heads.

We spent close to an hour there and had to call our next stop, Veterans Crossing in East Hartford to advise we would be a little later than we previously told them.

On the way out of South Park, we engaged a veteran, Richard.  He was not homeless but frequented the shelter to stay in touch and use their services.  He was so grateful for what this place did for him, to help him get back on his feet.  He had made some poor business decisions and lost everything.  Could happen to any one of us. He held no grudges, had no animosity, was just grateful. He shared a story with us about inheriting money from a life insurance policy on one of his parents.  He was the beneficiary and said he did not have to tell anyone or share the money. He had five siblings.  He did share with them evenly.  Then he took his share and donated the entire amount to South Park Inn.  Why?  He could have used the money for sure.  but he was so grateful, so indebted to what they did for him that he had to give the entire sum to them.  Wow!  This guy was a proud vet. And, he was not down on the VA.  He used their services and said they had improved very much.  We were very interested in hearing that because we were headed to Veterans Crossing which was a place were homeless veterans get help with housing, jobs, and healthcare.

Veterans Crossing is a 12-room handicapped accessible, transitional rooming house for homeless male veterans located in East Hartford. Veterans may stay for up to one year.  They help residents look for work, save for an apartment and connect with support services.  Vets are linked with all VA services (medical, mental health and substance abuse). Help with money management, life skills, counseling, and referrals are also available.

This was really the first time we would more directly engage veterans and hear their stories.

I remember reading about the 100 Day Challenge being conducted in CT sponsored by the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness and Journey Home of Hartford.  The goal of this initiative was to end Homelessness among Veterans by the end of 2015 and chronic homelessness by the end of 2016. the effort started in March and piggy-backed off of what started in New Haven. More than 140 agencies and providers were involved, impacting 85% of the state's homeless population.

The challenge ended on Wednesday, June 24, Day 5 of our 2015 ride.  Governor Malloy announced the goal to end homelessness for veterans by year end is on tract.  We will see.  Didn't look like that from what we saw on our ride.

So, we were now on our bikes headed for Veterans Crossing.  We were bringing coffee from Dunkin Donuts and snacks from what Carter had given us and cookies made by Wendy.

We arrived and were greeted by several vets as well as Amanda for CRT.  We laid out the coffee and snacks and talked with several vets.  One in particular was a Vietnam vet and told us he was skeptical of the VA and actually shared with Pam that, his words, "We put our asses on the line and now we find our asses in line"  alluding to the wait for VA benefits.  Part of the problem here is that Vietnam vets never got the recognition they deserved and do not trust the VA.

some of the other vets did say that the VA had improved since all that negative publicity came out a short while back.

Dave engaged another individual, Robert, and we heard his story.  He, too, had a successful business but made some bad investments and loss everything including his house. He was somewhat discouraged because he could not find a job.  Everywhere he went he was told he had to apply online, no in house applications taken.  Dave asked him about his job experiences and got a lot out of Rob and is going to get his resume and try to hook Rob up with someone he knows and see if it can be worked out to get Rob at least an interview.  Good going Dave!  Awesome!

Our experience at Veterans Crossing was exceptional.  We decided that when we visited our Senators Offices over the next two days that we would include Veterans concerns as one of our "Asks".  We thought this topic deserved more attention. Pam would be our spokesperson for this topic.

So we now headed for Christ Church Cathedral to their soup kitchen. We wouldn't be able to help serve lunch but we would be able to interact and talk to clients there.  We would meet Rose there and drop off some men's clothes too.  They collect men's clothes in the back of the soup kitchen.

We had a nice ride over to Christ Church.  No incidents.  But when we got there and approached the door to the soup kitchen we were met by a homeless gentleman named Moses. At first he was quite friendly and very talkative.  But the more he talked the more animated and belligerent he got.  When we said we were doing this ride for poverty awareness he went off on "his' tirade.  When we said we were going down to the soup kitchen he accused us of being phony because "those" people down there were liars, not really homeless, had job, etc.  He just kept going on and on.  Those of us who had gotten by him and were down in the soup kitchen talking to guests had to abandon our mission and come up to basically offset Moses verbal assault on our support folks.  We had to leave sooner than we wanted to as a result.  It was the safe thing to do.  Although much of what Moses was saying about the homeless in Hartford was true and on the mark, his delivery was too hard and a bit too scary and confrontational.

We left feeling sorry for his problem and learned another lessen as a result.

While in the soup kitchen I did get to talk for one woman who appreciated what we were doing and was grateful for the Free Meal cards.  She frequents this soup kitchen to keep in touch with her friends.  There is a definite community with these shelters and soup kitchens.  I also got to meet Rose and talk about the need for men's clothes. she said they cannot keep up with the need.  I told her I would check my closet for clothes and drop them off after the ride.  She said clothes my size were definitely in demand.

We also met Steve and Micheal form Church by the pond.  Steve was checking people in at the door. He noticed I was wearing the cross he gave me. Michael was the guy at the Service who announced during the prayers of the faithful that he had just gotten a job.  I asked him when he started work.  He was to start that coming Tuesday, Day 4 of our ride.  I wished him well.

Now it was time for lunch.  We would go to Bushnell Park again but this time Subway. Yummy!

Wendy had previous requested our Subway orders before the ride began so it was easy for her to get the orders and meet us at Bushnell Park.  We had a nice relaxing lunch and interacted with each other enjoying our Subways and our snacks.

Our "friend" was still there sleeping in the park.  Johnnie went and asked him if he ate the sandwiches we left him yesterday.  He did and was grateful although he wondered who Tom was.

Eventually we had to leave and start our ride to Holy Family.  We would get there in plenty of time to shower before supper and mass. We again found ourselves on Park Road and experienced the neighborhood.  We would be on this road at least five times and I kept wondering what these people thought.  They probably thought we were lost or confused.  It did give us a lot of chance to interact and pass out those Free Summer Meals cards.

I called Thad to see if he would drop by with Noah for Father's Day. he would come over he said.

They got to Holy Family before I got out of my shower.  We had a nice visit and I asked them to stay for supper.  Fr. Terry did not mind.  While in our room Thad shared a story with us. A couple of weeks ago, on the feast of the Sacred Heart, the namesake of his parish where he is Choir Director, he had notice from the choir loft window what appeared to be a homeless man who looked remarkably like Jesus.  He was curious because the man seemed to want to come into mass but was hesitant.  He decided he would go talk with the man.  As he went down to the back of the church the young man had come in and they met.  Thad welcomed him and the man sat in the second to last pew in the back of the church. During mass they young man acted strangely, stacking the hymn books neatly next to him and folding the bulletin over the pew in front of him just that certain way.  Apparently he had some kind of nervous disorder. Toward the end of mass Thad was looking for the man but he was gone almost magically vanishing. One minute he was there and then the next minute gone.

Thad did not see him again until the following Sunday. This time the young man sat in the second pew in the front of the church. He again acted a bit strange.  No one sat close to him.  He attracted attention and was almost disruptive during the mass.  the next thing that happen was that police came to the church.  Apparently someone had called them because of this individual. It seems people were nervous especially with the shooting that had just occurred down in Charleston.

The police confronted the young man and it turned out that he was a new resident in the home next to the church used to house low income folks. Because he was new nobody knew him and people just were somewhat apprehensive because of his appearance and actions.  All turned out well.  Thad felt grateful he befriended the man.  then Thad told me the man's name.  It was Matthew.  Seems like another Holy Spirit moment for me. And Us.

We were meeting in the meeting room as a team before supper and I asked Thad to share his story.  When he got to the end everyone was stunned.  Thanks for that story Thad!

So we all went to supper.  Again enjoyed each other company.  I was thankful for sharing some time with my son and grandson on Father's Day.  Thad and Noah left while I was in the restroom and I found out Noah went around to each table and shook everyone's hand before leaving and said to his grandmother, "I'm glad you and grampa are my grandparents"

That brought tears to my eyes when Joan told me.

Noah had asked me many questions about the ride and what we did.  He was very curious and wanted to know details. He thought what we were doing was "cool".  He asked if I was the leader.  I said one of them but we are all special.  He asked if I get paid to do this.  No but I told him I get paid in love.  He thought that was "cool" too.  I was a happy man this night.

After supper we headed over to the 7:00 mass in the main chapel.  The place was packed. Father Terry presided at the mass and Fr. David lead an orchestra of young musicians.  It was a beautiful beginning to mass.

Fr. David welcomed us during his homily and then introduced four attendees who would speak about their fathers .  It was so special to hear these kids and one older woman talk about their dads. What love!

The music was exceptional. The mass super.  We were all blown away.  Then I was asked to say a few words about our ride and BTC.  I think I did good.  After mass we greeted folks as they left and were offered well wishes and a safe ride.

It just made a great ending to a busy, eventful day.

I thanked Fr. Terry for his hospitality and making this happen.

We then gathered back in the meeting room for the word of the day.

Planting a seed- touching one person

Veterans

Inspiring

Community

Comfort of the Familiar

Moses

meaningful

Fathers

Done by Lou

Another thought... we met many folks who had nowhere to stay and some needed food. No one asked us for money and only Moses asked for chicken for lunch because he was allergic to pork and turkey. JF

Addendum to day two (Sunday):  Among the veterans we met at CRT Veterans Crossing in East Hartford was Rob who owned his own company in Berlin, CT called Castle Rock Landscaping.  Due to poor financial decisions, coupled with good weather (he does snow removal in winter) he lost his company, and his home due to bankruptcy and foreclosure. He basically went from a million dollar company to homeless. With no funds, and extremely tight job market, he is unable to even get an interview as “there are 400 applicants for each job and he never even gets interview or phone call”.  He had expressed an interest in a job in building maintenance, and in fact was going to be offered a job at CRT, but the offer was withdrawn at the last moment due to “withdrawal of funds for the position”.

Since I have an old friend who worked in the field of “building management and office leasing for a major corporation, I offered to help make a connection and affect an interview.  I’m happy to report I located the friend whose office is in Hartford.  Subsequent to our weekly BTC ride I made three calls to Rob’s temporary phone number, the director of the CRT housing in East Hartford, and received no response as he did not receive the messages.  In frustration I decided to visit Rob today and was fortunate to find him two hours before he left Veterans Crossing to move in with his sister in Cheshire, CT.  I asked for a current resume which he says he needs his sister’s assistance to update and make the resume more directed to a career in building maintenance.  He now has my phone number and e-mail address and promises to send it to me.   Our goal is to get him an interview.  We now have a “plan”.  The “plan” may not succeed, but in Rob I see a person who is genuine, skilled, and competent to perform a number of jobs in construction or landscaping.  All he needs is a hand up, a few prayers, and someone who cares.  I’ll keep you all informed as we progress.

David, BTC support