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**2016 Day One - Saturday, 6/25 -Manchester, St. Bridget to Hartford to Sacred Heart parish, Wethersfield**

We gathered at St. Bridget with the hope of leaving right at 6:30 am as planned.  One by one those expected to ride that day arrived.

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

Cue sheets were passed out. Riders, 13 of us, stocked up our water and/or Gatorade and dropped off our sleeping bags, etc.

Shortly before 6:20 we got together to take our first photos. Wayne was back with us this year. Welcome back Wayne! He would again assume his familiar spot and the end of the pack.

No new cyclists this year but a few new Support team members, Bob and Susan, Wendy’s friend, and Melissa, Wendy’s sister. Johnnie’s daughter, Lauren would be riding with us all week this year.

Fr. Marcin showed up to send us off with a prayer and well wishes. We gathered in a circle and he led us in prayer to send us off on our 2016 journey that would again change our lives.

Believe it or not we got on the road a little after 6:30 am.  We had a comfortable ride into Hartford.  The familiar “Car Back!” from Bob King who was back riding with us after missing last year. We also got Eric and Maureen back and it was a pleasure having such a blessed team with Gary and Matt again riding with us.

We were hoping to be in Hartford at South Congregational Church to meet Matt Siracusa of the Sparrows Ministry. Remember, they feed up to 500 homeless there at the church every Saturday morning from 5:30 to 9:30 am. They now serve indoors as the logistics works out much better. 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 we saw the guests mingling. Some were just arriving, some were already eating, some looked at us with curiosity. Got to again meet Vicki Silva who coordinates this ministry for Matt. Also found out that Matt Siracusa is on sabbatical from this ministry and Vicki is keeping it running. God Bless her! I passed on the Ecclesiastic Cross I received last year from the folks who organized the “mass by the pond” in Bushnell Park, giving it to Vicki now instead of Matt. She was most appreciative.

I also gave Vicki many of the business cards that End Hunger CT gave us to pass out for their Free Summer Meals program where any child 18 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.  Again an awesome program and we would hand out as many of these cards as we could during the next six days. We also received SNAP cards to distribute which assists folks in applying for SNAP, helping them know what is available, where to apply, where to call.

We did get to engage some of the homeless there.  Several of us got to meet Wayne, a gentleman who came in limping, bloody with his hospital wristband still on.  He had been beaten while sleeping on the steps of the Library the night before and everything was stolen. He had nothing but the hospital garb he wore. His face swollen and scraped. His state cell phone was also stolen so he could not call 211 for shelter that night. He was at a loss. What does he do next? What would you do? WWJD?

We did our best to comfort him, provided as much help as we could and left there so totally saddened by this event.

I got to talk to several people myself. First Maria and Angela. Both looked “beaten” in their own way. They seemed sluggish and tired. As we talked I came to realize they were tired of the system by which they have to live. The 211 Coordinated Access Network is not working for them. They are on the phone far too long waiting for an answer. They are frustrated with having to fill out forms and get scheduled for an assessment which could be days later even though they are homeless right now!

They are struggling to get by yet they smiled as we talked. They thank me and us for doing what we can. I said “goodbye” and called them by name.

I also talked to Angel and Lisa, a young couple who seemed skeptical at first when I sat down. I passed them a few Free Summer Meals cards and started explaining why we were there. Slowly they got comfortable and began talking about their situation. They were in South Park Inn. They were not happy with the food there. They kept getting the same meal over and over. They shared there latest occurrence. Hot dogs from a veteran’s celebration several days ago. They served Hotdogs that day. There were leftovers. What did they get for a meal the next day, hotdogs. There were still some leftover. The next day, hotdogs that tasted awful and felt like rubber. How would you like to eat four day old, re-cooked hotdogs?

I asked them about the 211 system. They told me it does not work like everyone thinks it is. They had a friend who came up from Florida with no place to stay. They told him South Park in had 20 open beds that night and to call 211 which he did. What was he told, South Park Inn was full and that he had to do an assessment. I am sure that had to be quite a frustrated experience for this man.

I am so glad we came back here this year. We were all touched by our re-visit. Some of us served in the kitchen. Busy until they closed close to 9:00 am this day. Some of us served the food, some served drinks. We all engaged the guests.  We were all moved as we were quickly immersed again in the problems of the poor and marginalized.  Joseph and Mary were another couple I talked to. They seemed to be in a better position than most of the guests there. He was working, Mary was not due to disability. However, they were living in a hotel and most of the money Joe made was going to pay the cost of the room. Why were they in a hotel you ask? Because Joe had been stabbed 7 times, was hospitalized and lucky to have some form of healthcare. They had been “living” in a bad neighborhood and needed to get away. They were now getting by day to day. And again I saw those smiles. Getting by day to day yet smiling, shaking hands like everything was good.

Pam spent time engaging guests outside. She enjoyed saying good morning to people and later to have a nice day. Two gentlemen stand out for her- Jeff, who was very faith filled. He worked a part time job working in a kitchen Monday through Friday. He had a car but could not pay the taxes and fees so he had to get rid of it. He could afford his room but struggled with having enough food. He was always looking out for others. He called a friend of his to make sure he and his family would get there before the food ran out. Jeff told Pam if he did not have God in his life he would not make it.

The other gentleman was Scott. He was homeless due to alcohol issues. He told Pam how he had a bachelor and master degree from University of Hartford but lost everything due to booze. Jeff, Scott and Pam talked for awhile about how alcohol and drugs can change your life and what needs to be done to change your life around. Not easy!

Both went in to have breakfast.

When both gentlemen left, Pam called them by name. Scott was very taken aback that she had remembered his name. He came back to her and thanked her for remembering his name. He said that meant so much to him and that it made his day. They talked for a few more minutes about him getting some help and being safe.

The start of a life changing week.

We could not again have started on a more loving, touching, meaningful note. Thank you Holy Spirit once again!

We assisted in the clean up and left for our next stop, which was visiting the new the Hands on Hartford facility on Bartholomew Street at 10:00.

We cycled on Park Road again reminded of the number of times we were on this road last year. We arrived early and waited for Stefan Kellar. Once he got there he filled us in on some of the things HOH does. He showed us the Food Pantry which we would be collecting food for on Monday. They serve 450 families per month. He explained the “rules”. Families can come in fill up with supplies, can goods, fresh produce, milk and eggs, fruit, even meat. Often these items are the hardest to get and the most costly. How often can they come here? Once a month. We were sure the amount of food they took did not last the month.

HOH is focused on Food Insecurity; Housing; and General Economics security. They are direct service and a volunteer network organization.

They do Community Meals (a Soup Kitchen) which we would be assisting with on Monday evening.

They also have a backpack program for the summer where those kids who receive free/reduced lunch in school can get to have the same during the weekend. However they only provide enough for 309 kids out of 20 area schools.

Supportive Housing upstairs fully occupied. 13 apartments.

New building to house 30 more units but a long way off.

Stefan also took us to the back of the building where they had a Community Garden where they grow many of the vegetables they use in their Food Pantry. Some of the tenants their help maintain the garden and also get to partake in fresh vegetables.

The last thing that Stefan showed us was their restaurant style soup kitchen that they have yet to get up and running due to lack of funds. It was quite nice and you could imagine how welcoming this will be in the near future to the guests who will benefit from it.

Pam’s take on our tour.

HOH is doing awesome things to help people who are struggling. Her take away from this tour is why are we as a society letting this happen to so many people? The food pantry was set up to do what it is supposed to do but families could only come once a month. Just a reminder that SNAP (Food Stamps) does not pay for non food items such as diapers, toilet paper, feminine products, or toothpaste. The back pack program was wonderful but it was only helping 309 students of the 20,000 students in Hartford. What happens to the other children and families? It was wonderful to see the garden and what that will mean to people who are struggling.

We thanked Stefan for the tour and told him we would see him again on Monday.

We then cycled to Bushnell Park where we would enjoy the sandwiches that Wendy made for each of us.  They were yummy. We had to hang around in Bushnell park for quite a while as we arrived very early but just before they closed the roads down for the Chariot parade, part of the Indian Festival that day.

We relaxed and shared our meal together.   As we began to wind down our lunch time, which was nice for bonding, we noticed folks beginning to gather nearby where we were. This is where Church by the Pond would take place this year.

As a reminder, this is 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 Nancy Jacobs, the coordinator of this event which is held every Saturday afternoon at 2:00 pm, rain or shine all year.

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.

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, our team gathered to distribute new underwear and socks to the homeless and less fortunate. The line for the underwear was again noticeably longer than the line for the sandwiches.

It was a humbling experience to be passing out new underwear, something we so take for granted each day.

We have to thank very much Sue Larson and her family for bringing the collected underwear and socks from St. Bridget over to Bushnell Park. We had over 190 sets and expected to only distribute 125.

Pam’s recollection….I am always struck by how many people take part in this mass. Jesus was present in all the people. Wendy did an awesome job coordinating the collection of socks and underwear. This reminds me of the basic needs that people who are struggling do not always have. I hope someday the line for the bare essentials will get shorter.

Tom’s recollection….Some of the men who received a package of socks and underwear returned them as they preferred boxers. This served as a reminder to me that every person, even needy and homeless people, have preferences and should have choices about what they wear.  So often the prevailing tone in society is that those with nothing should be grateful for whatever they receive . . . it is so easy for those of us who have unlimited choice to take it for granted and overlook the need to provide that choice for others who may not usually have it. I also recall that we decided that day to make a mental note to remember to collect more boxers!

One issue there that we mentioned was that boxers cost more and that might be a drawback for some making donations . . . again, a point for us to be mindful of . . . would this be an issue if folks understood that they were giving these things to Jesus?  I think of the magi . . . only the finest for the Christ child.

We left Bushnell Park on a relatively high note.

We gathered ourselves and began our ride to Wethersfield and Sacred Heart parish. The ride over was very quick to get there. We rode on Wethersfield Avenue, the street I met Jesus on 14 years ago.

We got to Sacred Heart with plenty of time to attend their 5:00 Vigil mass. My son, Thad, arrived and helped get us settled. We also were assisted by some parishioners. Mass was very nice. Thad is the Music director at this parish. The song selection was perfect for us. All Social Justice oriented.

We had a wonderful potluck dinner after mass. And everyone thought the blessing of our bikes was a nice touch before dinner. Everyone was stuffed. The volunteers set up the coffee pot for the morning, left us with bagels and donuts as we would be out pretty early.

The presentation went very well after John Ryan got through the difficulties of his computer. Luckily Steve Dimotta figured out what went wrong.

That was the only glitch. The presentation was received very well. We did get a question about the breakdown of the family unit and a root case of poverty regarding “fatherlessness”. We would discuss and consider as a group.

After we got settled, we went over to Pam’s brother-in-law’s house to jump in their above ground swimming pool. This was to be a substitute for our shower this night.

The water was cold but refreshing. We had some laughs, especially with Claire. We thanked Pam’s brother-in-law and his family for the use of the pool and headed back to Sacred Heart. On the way over to the pool we noticed the Ice cream shop on Main Street. So, we stopped on the way back and most of us indulged in some ice cream. Yummy!

We got back to the church and before bedding down, as we did last year, we gathered around for the "word(s) of the day".

Here they are:

Tom: Reinvigorated

Gary: bare feet for the woman who just wanted a pair of sox; hospital bracelet (Wayne’s at Sparrow ministry)

Lauren: How to donate more

Johnnie: Faith

Wayne: Compassion…has no limits

Claire: Freedom…Paul to the Galatians

Pam: Reminder of why we do this

John: Sad: HOH pantry state of the art shopping experience. With limits by family size. But then the “once-a-month” restriction blew me a away. Even a relatively good situation is essentially impossible to live with.

Lou: Worried; Hopeful; more educated than before

Matt: Community; Inspired generosity; Renewal

Wendy: Loaves & Fishes…the underwear drive; Life changing moments; family/sister

Done by Lou with help from John Ryan, Maureen, Pam, and Tom