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**2016 Day Four - Tuesday, 6/28 - Holy Family Retreat Center, West Hartford to Hartford to St. Thomas Parish, Southington**

We again started Day 4 with 7:00 am mass at Holy Family.   This time Fr. John Baptist’s homily mentioned that one person can make a difference. When God is for you, who can be against?

Then over to breakfast for nourishment.  A hearty breakfast was had by all and sandwiches were again made for lunch. We are so lucky we have Fr. Terry and Holy Family.

We lined up for photos and, of course, Joan had us do something fun for the picture.  A good way to ease any tension before the day's ride began. I think this time we all held our helmets high above our heads. I guess we will have to wait for the photo to see.

We would be cycling to Blumenthal's Office then over to Murphy’s and then over to My Sisters Place in the North End of Hartford.

We had to be at Blumenthal's Office by 10:00.  This morning, we would be without Eric and be down to five support persons. We picked up Fran, a friend of Claire’s from St. Elizabeth Seton parish for support.

We had our game plan for speaking with Rich Kehoe in Blumenthal’s Office. I would open with the intro, pretty simple since he is familiar with our mission. Claire would be talking about SNAP (food stamps) and Child Nutrition; Pam would be addressing Minimum Wage; Johnnie F would be speaking to Immigration Reform; John Ryan would be speaking to Tax Reform; Gary would bring in the faith-based part and Tom would do the Wrap up.

Richard Kehoe was very receptive and welcoming as always.  We presented ourselves well and smoothly addressed our issues. Some of us were a bit annoyed that Rich did not take notes but I think most of us thought he was engaged.

We left with Rich reassuring us to keep doing what we are doing and we saying we would be back again next year. Afterwards we all agreed we should be doing this more often, not just on the ride.

Again it was like "speaking to the choir" but the points were made.

We left the Office around 11:00 and walked over to Murphy’s Office. We repeated the process exactly. We met with Kenny Curran who did take notes which pleased us. We noted in the outer office a bobble-head doll of Pope Francis which we took as a favorable sign.

I think the best part of our “asks” was the faith part. Gary was perfect and so good with the choice of his words. He blew us all away. How nice. We could see where his son got his spirituality.

So, now we headed over to My Sisters’ Place and would meet with Bob Dunbar there.

The ride over was accomplished with little difficulty. We had to ride through the North End which is always eye opening. The poverty there is visible.

When we got to My Sisters Place we were impressed with the buildings. They looked very new and well maintained. Bob Dunbar greeted us and Sarah Hillier from the Office of Catholic Social Justice was there to greet us as well.

Bob is a retired executive who had a lot of connections in the business world which he has used to the benefit of My Sisters’ Place.

Founded in 1982 initially as a shelter for women with infants, My Sisters’ Place has today grown to include three permanent sites:

* The Transitional Living Program located on Pliny Street for homeless women and children
* Sue Ann Shay Place, which provides supportive housing for male and/or female headed households
* Mary Seymour Place apartments for single individuals

Through these sites and its related programs, My Sisters’ Place has helped more than 26,000 people in the community, providing them with a warm place to stay, food for themselves and their children, and services that are designed to get them back onto the road to independence – including medical care, management of financial affairs, and much much more.

Of the two building we saw, the one that Bob was talking to us from was the Transitional Housing facility. The building across the way was the Supportive Housing where residents can stay permanently.

The Transitional Living Program at My Sisters’ Place provides 18 furnished apartments and is focused on providing women who have experienced chronic homelessness with the skills they need to stop the behaviors, which have contributed to their continuing housing instability. Residents can remain in the program for up to two years.

In addition to providing educational and employment support, My Sisters’ Place also helps residents master soft skills such as developing a strong work ethic, life skills, working with others, and successfully managing personal challenges..

My Sisters’ Place provides Supportive Housing for low-income individuals and families who were formerly homeless and unable to hold their own lease. Through the Mary Seymour Place Apartments and Sue Ann Shay Place Apartments, they are able to provide housing and support services for those who meet one or more of the following criteria: low income, living with a mental illness, and/or currently homeless.

The Sue Anne Shay Place Apartments consist of 34 affordable one, two and three bedroom rental apartments. Tenants hold their own leases. Voluntary case management and referral/advocacy programs are also available on-site.

Bob took us through the Transitional Housing building in two separate groups showing us the apartments and explaining more about how this all works.

He told us he is responsible for raising $27,000 a week to maintain these facilities. This is where his business connections come through.

He had some remarkable stories. One had to do with collecting disposable diapers. There was a need and he so happened to go to lunch with an Executive Director of Farmington Bank and mentioned that need. The next thing he knew he received a donation of 50,000 disposable diapers. These are some of the little “miracles” that keep this place going.

All in all we left My Sisters’ Place feeling quite positive for a change. Things here are working so well and seem to benefit so many people. This is a program that seems that it should be replicated as often as possible. Just need to find the people and the money!

The last story Bob Dunbar told us was about a woman who had five children from three different fathers. One of the fathers, number two, came back to live with her. They got married and had jobs and saved enough money to purchase their own home and are moving out of their Supportive Housing Unit. Ended on a nice note.

We decided it was time for lunch before we headed off to Southington. We found some shade and ate our lunch, our Holy Family made sandwiches, on the premises of My Sisters’ Place.

Thank you Wendy for the coffee cake. It hit the spot. And, of course, chocolate milk!

Once we finished lunch we started our ride to St. Thomas’.

After getting through New Britain the ride became quite familiar.

But just before that, we came across a young man whose car had broken down while making a right turn. We were headed in the same direction. We got off our bikes and asked this man if he wanted a push. He appeared skeptical. He was a black man and we were these white guys dressed in this colorful biking gear who came out of nowhere to “help”. He gave in and let us push him up the road, and it was up. As we gathered momentum he said his apartment is just up the street. We replied and told him we would just push him into the upcoming parking lot. The uphill got to us and the man got out to help push. Claire would steer.

We got it done and the man was very grateful. We asked him his name. No, it wasn’t Matthew. But it was a “Jesus moment”.

We felt reinvigorated after helping Carlton with his car.

Then the familiarity of the hills along Reservoir Road started and we were all tired. We could not wait to get to St. Thomas’.

Once we got on the bicycle path we knew we were close. A few more miles.

I think we were all relieved once we saw the church.

We were greeted by Fr. Nick and Deacon Angelo and Anthony, a Seminarian. They showed us where to store our bikes for the night.

Then we went over to the school to see where we would be sleeping and having supper.

We would be conducting the presentation in the church.

So, now we had to get ready to go to the YMCA for showers. We all got our toiletries and towels and loaded into the cars to take us over. The YMCA was ready for us. The showers were wonderful. It makes you so grateful for a shower and also makes you think how the homeless can’t regularly shower. We are so lucky. After our showers w scampered back to the church and got ready for supper. We had changed into our presentation clothes. We had lasagna which was so delicious, some wine, fruit, and other goodies. Again, we were so grateful.

Now it was getting close to our presentation time. We moved over to the church.

Slowly and steadily the church filled up. We would have a nice crowd tonight, over 30 or so.

We opened our presentation with our new introduction lead by Gary. He did it so well.

The presentation went smoothly again and while I was telling my Matthew/Jesus story I noticed Fr. Marcin in the audience. It threw me for a moment. I was happy he was there and supporting us.

When we were finished with our presentation I asked if there were any questions. At first none but the people did not leave. It felt a bit awkward. Finally a hand went up and the questions began. I noticed this man in the front kept raising his hand but others talked over him. He waited patiently. I called on him and asked what his question was. He said he did not have a question but a comment. He said he was homeless. I think everyone’s jaw dropped to the floor. I was stunned. He said if you want to know what the homeless need, ask the homeless themselves. Pretty logical don’t you think? He was very articulate, clean cut.

His name was Brian. We would talk some more after we were done. We took several more questions including another about the breakup of the family unit, the third time. I guess the Holy Spirit wanted us to address this issue.

Brian was very open and informative about his homelessness. He did say he was not homeless, he was addressless. He had his own cabin in the woods that he built himself by carrying the wood piece by piece. He used to live in a tent but he was hassled in the tent and in the winter he was tired of waking up covered in snow with the tent collapsed around him.

He is on food stamps and he is working for the elderly couple seated next to him. That’s how afforded the clean jeans and polo shirt he had on. They brought him to our presentation at the request of Fr. Nick. So Brian was a plant. It worked so well. The woman mentioned to me that Brian still struggles to shower and find places to go to the bathroom. He used to bath in the river, even in the winter. He had a temporary arrangement with the Y to take showers in the winter but not on a regular basis.

He never said he was down and came across as content with his situation but adamant about the homeless knowing what they need. He did mention he had lost his wallet and what a hassle it was to get his SNAP card renewed. He needed a form of identification which he did not have. The only thing that worked was a copy of his reaffirmation to the church and having someone from the church go with him as a witness to vouch for him.

I found it such a blessing that he was there. This could not have been a better evening.

So many people hung around and engaged us. It was beautiful.

Thank you Holy Spirit!

So, we headed over to our sleeping quarters which was the cafeteria. We had big fans blowing air and we really did not have to have air conditioning as a result. Gary would stay with us tonight in solidarity even though this was his home parish.

Mattresses were blown up, we all got in sleepwear and got ready for our word of the day meeting. We heard from Matt who wanted to come and share the word of the day again like he did last evening. He had come back to Holy Family to be part of the word of the day. You go Matt!!

This evening he wouldn’t make it although he said he had made it to the church but left because the weather looked bad.

So here is the word of the day – Day 4

Wayne – Satisfaction; My Sisters’ Place; Preserve family dignity

Tom – Joyful; Robert Dunbar

Pam – Team; Slow

Lou – Surprise; Brian; People no questions at first; Fr. Marcin

Claire – Encounter; Carlton

Lauren – Acknowledgement – Guests

Johnnie – Connections; Group talked with

John – Remember God is with you

Anthony – Heartbroken; witnessed; better priest because of us

Gary – Wind/Family; Family Shelter; Family Church; Family Us; Family family

Wendy – Dignity; homeless for a few days more like months

Bob – Appreciation; My Sisters’ Place; God’s hand; All of us; Fr. John Baptiste; Sister Gina;

Joan – Enjoy; Speak from Heart

Done by Lou with additions from John Ryan