

MANNA *in The wilderness*

Winter 1988

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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Dear friends,

I remember when I first spotted the stone house. It was over two years ago while I was searching for a place to open the Las Vegas Catholic Worker. I had been looking for days. I combed the streets of the poor side of town with a loyal Volkswagen as my companion. Weary and anxious to find a place, I heard a prayer spill from my lips. Lord find us a house. A few moments later I took a wrong turn and there it stood. Set in a big yard and peering out from behind old Cedars was a picture of a perfect Catholic Worker house. It had plenty of space for hospitality, it needed enough work for us to bargain a good deal, and there was a "for sale" sign on the fence.

Despite the for sale sign on the fence the owners were not too serious about making a transaction. I was disappointed yet convinced that his house was in Gods agenda for the LV Catholic Worker. I went back to the house and buried a medal of St. Joseph in the front yard and hoped for a miracle. Today, two years later, the miracle is in our grasp. The house can belong to the Catholic Worker if we

can raise \$30,000. In addition we would need \$15,000 for repairs. We need your financial assistance to complete the miracle.

During our time here we have become keenly aware of the needs of the poor. In our hospitality house we have close contact with the homeless. Daily out on the street we feed a line of three hundred. Many of these people have nowhere to go. The existing shelters are full and when they lay their heads down outside they are vulnerable to arrests and violence. A Catholic Worker witness is vital now more than ever here in Las Vegas. We need to continue to feed, shelter and comfort the poor as well as advocate for justice and social reform. Your financial support will enable us to continue as well as expand our mission.

Thank you,
Julia Occhiogrosso &
Peg Del Debbio
Las Vegas Catholic Worker
St. John the Baptist House
1309 Gold Ave.
Las Vegas, NV 89106

For I Was A Stranger...

by Julia Occhiogrosso

"Don't ever mistake kindness for weakness" Buddie warned, as I propped another pillow behind his head. There was a still moment as he stared down at his dying body. "I ain't never been this sick before, this is tough." he sighed. Buddie was seventy eight years old and had spent most of his years on the streets, "hustling to survive." He recalls fondly his time as a song and dance man for the USO. His eyes delight in the memory of meeting the "great performers" of his day; Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Billie Holiday. The stories are all familiar to me. He retells them frequently with great confidence. I can only listen and know that a dose of nostalgia brings him comfort now.

It was just a few months earlier when Buddie arrived at the Catholic Worker house. He was a stranger on our doorstep. We took him in to learn that he had terminal cancer. The hospital was out of the question for Buddie. He came home with us. A stranger on our doorstep, I reflected as I held his forehead in the palm of my hand and watched his wrenching body vomit blood into a pail. Yes Buddie, a once homeless wayfarer, sleeps in the bed next to mine. I lay awake at night listening intently to the sound of his breathing, holding tight to his boney fingers, and anticipating the moment of his death.

When we allow our lives to be touched by the suffering of our forgotten brothers and sisters, our perception is altered. We can see clearly the image and likeness of God even in the stranger.

We manage to keep our lives at a safe distance from the poor. There is the physical separation. The poor are kept isolated in the ghettos, barrios and the "bad" neighbor-



Christa Occhiogrosso

hoods. They are considered eyesores. Efforts are made to keep them hidden. The homeless are put in jail for loitering. They search without success for a place where they are welcomed.

We have also the psychological separations. Derogatory labeling perpetuates the stereotypes. We convince ourselves that there are no real poor in our society. The people who live on the street choose to be there. If they really wanted to get work they could. We insist they are free-loaders and lazy. Even if we can break down and admit that there are some deserving poor, they are taken care of by agencies. We do not need to be concerned.

The city of Las Vegas feels justified in keeping the homeless poor out of sight. There is a fear that the poor will threaten their profitable image of glamor and success. Indeed in our nation this is the attitude which prevails. If you do not fit into the acceptable economic strata defined by status and prestige, you are not a valued member of the culture.

As we distance ourselves from the poor, it becomes easier to make assumptions. The assumption is that somehow we are better because we are better off. Perhaps we see ourselves as more dignified, more just, even more deserving of God's love. These assumptions are not just benign opinions. These assumptions weave their way into the structures and institutions that impact our lives. Eventually these assumptions translate into law and public policy. And when systematically executed they inflict unjust suffering. Billions of dollars are spent to shelter weapons, while cuts in low income housing leave families to sleep out on the street.

With our deep wounds of sin and alienation, it is difficult to be successful in our search for the image of God. Yet we must continue to live and act from the faith in the Incarnation. So we welcome the stranger and show compassion to the outcast poor. Our witness will shake the foundation of structures that are built to scatter the members of the human family. Unjust assumptions will crumble and from the dust we will begin to build a new society in the shell of the old.

Buddie died in our home. The last days of his life were filled with the comfort of a constant bedside vigil. A community formed in response to his suffering. They were there to help lift, to wet the lips, to listen. We gathered for his memorial service. As I looked around at the circle that Buddie's life had brought together, I had a sense that we were being given a preview of the Kingdom; where all are welcomed. We closed our eyes and joined in song:

"I am a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe. There is no sickness, no toil, no danger, in that bright land to which I go".

Buddie has entered that bright land. He has been embraced by a God who desires a world where compassion reigns, and where kindness won't be mistaken for weakness.

LVCW WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Monday - Saturday, 6:30 - 8:30 a.m.

Serve food and coffee at D and Bonanza Streets.

Wednesdays, 6:00 p.m.

Potluck Dinner & Round Table Discussion at 1309 Gold Ave.

Thursday, 4:30 - 7:30 p.m.

Serve dinner meal at St. James the Apostle Church at 821 N. H Street.

Friday, 6:00 - 7:00 p.m.

Stop Testing Vigil at the Federal Building, 300 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

To volunteer for any of these activities, call (702) 647-0728

SIGN ME UP!

Yes, I want to receive **MANNA**, the L.V.C.W. Newsletter.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone () _____

Send to: L.V.C.W., 1309 Gold Ave., Las Vegas, NV 89106

PRAYER, REFLECTION AND ACTION AT THE NEVADA TEST SITE

A TIME TO BE SILENT A TIME TO SPEAK

Lenten Desert Experience VIII
Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday
February 8 - March 26, 1989

Nevada Desert Experience

Box 4487 • Las Vegas, NV 89127
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