

MANNA *in the wilderness*

June 2006

The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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Practice of Hospitality Under Siege

by Julia Occhiogrosso

Mayor Goodman appeared far away and distant. Enthroned in his high-back chair, flanked by his staff, he ruled confidently over his Las Vegas kingdom. I sat in the City Hall Chamber with a group of a hundred or so who gathered to convince the City Council to vote against recommendations to deny a zone variance to the Family Promise program day site.

The Las Vegas Catholic Worker befriended Family Promise when it came to Las Vegas ten years ago. Family Promise, born out of a network of like programs across the country, invites faith communities to respond in a personal way to the plight of homeless families. Faith communities offer meals, overnight accommodations and hospitality to homeless families. During the day the families are transported to a day site to shower, to do laundry, and to take care of children and to look for work.

When Family Promise came to Las Vegas in 1996, they were in need of a day site. The Catholic Worker joined the other faith communities who were committing use of their churches and synagogues, by offering the use of our hospitality house as a day site for the families. For the Catholic Worker, it seemed to resonate with Peter Maurin's vision of

"every parish making room for the homeless." Members of different faith communities were making a personal response at a personal sacrifice to serve the needs of families in crisis. This personalist response yielded non-bureaucratic and compassionate care akin to the Catholic Worker style of hospitality.

Before Family Promise, homeless families could only stay in shelters that separate husbands from wives and teen boys from their mothers. Unlike the other shelters, Family Promise provides a twenty four hour program which does not force families out onto the street during the day.

In 2004, with the generosity and dedication of many in the Las Vegas community, the Catholic Worker was able to build a second hospitality house next door. This house was built specifically as a day site that would better serve the needs of the families in the Family Promise program. It is a beautiful home built by donated funds and labor. On a block that has more vacant lots and boarded up buildings than residences, this new house, landscaped with flowers and fruit trees would offer the neighborhood beauty and hope.

We were devastated in February of this year, when we first learned that Fam-

ily Promise was on the City's radar because it was considered a "business" and was operating "illegally" in an area that was zoned residential. The debate has occupied a good part of the last four months. Representatives for Family Promise have spent days conversing with city officials and people in the neighborhood. They shared the story of Family Promise in the hope of gaining support and special consideration. And although all of the neighbors in the immediate proximity to the property have expressed disappointment that Family Promise would be made to leave, there are also some in the area, ironically a pastor and members of his Church two blocks down, who have complained that they do not want another "social service" program in their neighborhood. They complain about property values and everyone's right to economic development.

Proponents of Family Promise see it as helping the neighborhood by bringing the services to where they are needed and providing a homelike environment for families recovering from the instability of homelessness. For many proponents of the program the City's decision to shut down the day site is met with suspicion. They wonder if there are developers in-
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THE FAMILY PROMISE DAY SITE FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES NEXT TO THE CATHOLIC WORKER HOUSE WAS GIVEN SIX MONTHS TO LEAVE BY THE CITY COUNCIL ON MAY 17. THE CATHOLIC WORKER HOUSE IS ON RIGHT IN BACKGROUND.



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terested in this redevelopment land. In the City Council Chambers there is only one way to give voice to all sides and that is behind boldly marked battle grounds. The setting is not conducive for true listening, or honest dialogue. As voices for the poor we need to disengage from the rules of battle set in place by the power politics model. When we participate in this model the conversation is limited and lifeless. The important questions are lost and the poor become even more marginalized. The very ancient and noble practice of hospitality is under siege. It is being replaced by greed, bureaucratic technicalities and blatant misuse of power. No one is addressing the question, why are we being penalized when we give expression to the deepest longings of the human Spirit?—the longing to care for the vulnerable, to be compassionate, to serve. There are no city ordinances or zoning laws that can adequately respond to models of service that begin with the movement of the Spirit in the human heart and are incarnated in the simple gestures of human beings showing kindness to a brother or sister in need.

The Las Vegas City Council after much protest voted to deny Family Promise a zone variance and gave them six months to find a different location. Good programs offering compassionate care in a sensitive responsible manner are not only being penalized but are scorned as if they are the creators of poverty and homelessness. There is an underlying assumption that by not helping people “the problem” will disappear.

It is our task to be in these public places and proclaim the truth of the One Mystical Body. A Body that refuses to accept the severing of its parts. We must vigi-

lantly require that the poor be included in this broken but sacred vessel of the human family. We must continually tell the stories of the outcast and bring their pain and triumphs before the hardened hearts of our decision makers who all too often live in worlds too far away from the struggles of the poor.

Over the last ten years, thousands of people across Las Vegas, through the ministry of Family Promise have had an opportunity to walk, if only briefly into the world of the poor. Many lives have been touched and changed. Volunteers give testimony to transformation experiences prompted by their very human contact with men, women and children in the Family Promise program. They have played with the children or comforted a crying mother. They have prepared a meal for strangers and discovered alive within them the gift of compassion.

There is significant power in these

kinds of experiences. It is not a power that frequents the city council seats. But it is a power that can certainly have its place of influence when it reaches enough people with enough courage to speak with conviction on behalf of the poor. This power can trigger the places underneath the surface in ordinary people who hear a call of the Spirit. This power is born out of personal relationship with the poor themselves and knows that the fragile and vulnerable need to be seen and cared for, not ignored and ostracized.

This transforming power of divine love in action keeps ignited the flame of resistance to the City’s decision. The City is receiving public pressure to reconsider their move to close this place of comfort and care. We will continue to place our hope in a Power that transcends the politics of City Hall and hears the cry of the poor.

LAS VEGAS CATHOLIC WORKER JOINS LAWSUIT

On June 9, 2006 the Las Vegas Catholic Worker joined a lawsuit filed by the ACLU against the Mayor, City Council and the City of Las Vegas to regain permission to serve the homeless in City Parks. City Marshalls forced the Catholic Worker to quit serving in Ethel Pearson

The Catholic Worker served for many years in Ethel Pearson Park. In those days there would be a few folks sleeping on the grass during the day and teenagers playing basketball in the afternoons and on the weekends. Today the park sits empty almost daily.

**PRAY
FOR
PEACE
IN OUR
WORLD!**

(FOR
TAB)

*Thanks to all our
Donors who make this
ministry possible!*

Park seven years ago when five area parks were designated “Children’s Parks” by the City Council. In a Children’s Park no adults or teenagers are allowed unless they are accompanying a child (or children) under 13 years of age.

The Children’s Park ordinance was designed to remove homeless adults from the parks. Teenagers are also targeted because they were allegedly associated with drug activity.

Live-In Volunteers

We need your help. Live simply, serve the poor at the Las Vegas Catholic Worker. Room and Board and weekly stipend. For info call 702-647-0728 or e-mail julia@lvcw.org.

**Friday morning Soupline
volunteers needed**

call 647-0728

WEBSITES:

www.lvcw.org

www.catholicworker.org

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Las Vegas Catholic Worker
(702) 647-0728
500 W. Van Buren Avenue
Las Vegas, NV 89106-3039

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PLEASE JOIN US:

Wed., Fri., Sat., 6:00 a.m.:

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:

Breakfast served to the homeless.

Last Saturday of month; 8:30 a.m.:

Deliver food to homes in need.

Wednesday; 8 a.m. -noon:

Hospitality Day, we invite 10 folks home for showers & lunch.

Thursday; 8:30 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.:

Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Courthouse, 333 S. Las Vegas Blvd.

Thursday; 5:30 p.m.: Potluck, **6:30 p.m.:** Prayer Service or Mass.

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