

MANNA in the wilderness

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The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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FOOD FROM SHERRY

by Peggy Devitt

When we first met Sherry she was living in a small decrepit "back house" behind her elderly Aunt down the alley from the Las Vegas Catholic Worker. We delivered food boxes to Sherry each month as part of the Catholic Worker neighborhood food pantry program. The first thing we noticed was the rotted out sink in the kitchen. The odor from the dingy kitchen was so pungent that Dale and I hesitated to enter her messy world. It was immediately evident that Sherry struggled to care for herself and her home.

As a young teenager, while working for a linen company, Sherry had an accident that left her with only one arm. "Yeah baby, I put my arm in the mangle instead of the sheet" she'd routinely explain. It seemed like such a small thing for us to bring food and visit once a month. But, her gratitude was sweet and her happy disposition was heartwarming. She drew us in.

Sherry had three children that she did not raise, "That was when I was on the drugs" she'd explain. I did not inquire further.

She was my first "black" girlfriend and I was her first "white" girlfriend, and while we each certainly looked beyond the surface of color, it was a truth that seemed important to acknowledge. Being Sherry's "girlfriend" seemed significant as she often admitted sadly; I never really had *any* girlfriends before you, Peggy." I could tell that she enjoyed referring and relating to me as her girlfriend. Even with one arm, Sherry was known as the "beauty" of the Westside. She spent much of her younger years enjoying the affection and attention of men. There was not much time for girlfriends.

She struggled with many disabilities besides her missing arm. She could barely walk, part of the brain damage from being beaten as a young women by her ex-husband. Over the course of our twelve years of friendship, we witnessed Sherry's gradual loss of sight due to macular degeneration, glaucoma and inoperable cataracts. Sherry had a remarkable ability to not let her many troubles affect her disposition and spirit. At times, seeing her reality made my heart ache, but she

never appeared to feel sorry for herself.

Approximately four years ago Sherry suffered a stroke that placed her in a care facility. Once she was permanently living in a nursing home, the monthly food boxes ceased and we began to have

to raise her children.

In July 2012, Sherry was diagnosed with stage four throat cancer. This new affliction meant that she had to leave the nursing home she had grown to love and give up the mobility of her electric wheelchair. The last six months of her life were spent completely bed bound, battling cancer. The tumor was so large she had to have a tracheotomy in order to breathe.

As her power of attorney, I was charged with the fearful decisions regarding whether to perform the tracheotomy or not. After the surgery she would not be able to speak and a feeding tube was inserted in her stomach.

With her admittance to the hospital our weekly lunch outings became daily visits. I became Sherry's "U.N.A", *an uncertified nurse's assistant*.

She would smile when she heard

weekly visits. I would load her wheel chair in the back of my van, and we would head to a spot that had outdoor tables, so that Sherry could catch a smoke with our lunch. She asked me once if I thought that the bad things happening to her were payback for the things she did in the past. These conversations revealed to me that Sherry certainly had a shady past and lived a life foreign to anything I ever participated in. In an unspoken understanding, we both preferred to keep the conversation in the present. The mistakes of Sherry's past did not matter to me. I only wanted to help ease her present burdens.

Whether the past or the present, I was continually aware that Sherry's world was so different than mine. She was raised by a "mean" grandmother and I had a loving mother who lived well into her eighties. She was severely beaten by her ex-husband; I have a dear husband of forty years. She survived in the squalor of poverty and I have always had all I ever needed and more. Sherry considered me her only sister, I have five sisters and many soul sisters who have been in my life for years. As a stay at home mom, I was blessed to nurture and care for three children. Sherry was unable

me explain this to hospital staff. It was sad for me to witness the obvious absence of any of Sherry's family during her illness. Cousin Earlean came when she could. But if it had not been for friends who filled in when I could not be there, I would have been Sherry's sole visitor. Another certain way to get Sherry to smile and laugh was my response to the often asked loaded question, "How do you two know each other?" I flippantly replied "We are sisters, Sherry got the tall genes!"

Part of our daily visits was a facial for Sherry. It was a sacred ritual. First the cool wet washcloth upon her cheeks. Then the moisturizer, and her favorite, milk and honey lip gloss pressed gently upon her beautiful full lips. She delighted in the cool wet washcloth laid gently over her eyes, settled across her forehead. In these holy moments we would share quiet thoughts or sit close together on the bed in silence. Even though I felt helpless against this final assault I could feel the power of our spirits connecting. As I held my hand to her face I would pray that God heal her and deliver her from her suffering. It helped me to envision my energy flowing through her soft skin. With her eyes closed, in her gravelly voice she'd whisper each time, (*continued on next page*)



SHERRY AND PEGGY

WITH DEEP APPRECIATION: Good-bye John and Katie

by Julia Occhiogrosso

Almost three years ago we welcomed John Yevtich and Katie Kelso, who had volunteered to take on the responsibilities of the life and ministry of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker, so that Gary and I could move to Colorado to get better care and support for our sons who struggled with mental illness. Gary and I would like to take this opportunity to publically acknowledge the gift of John and Katie to the Las Vegas Catholic Worker. When they providentially arrived almost three years ago we were relieved to have two people willing to carry on the work but little did we know that they would not

only manage the Catholic Worker, but that they would dedicate with heart, mind and soul, themselves to the community, the guests and the work. And in so doing, Gary I have returned to a vibrant crew of committed workers, beautified properties, and very organized projects.

Words are not sufficient to describe our feelings of gratitude to John and Katie and to all of you who with them demonstrated the true power of Christian love in action.

Our sons are eighteen and nineteen now and still have challenges. But because of Katie and John's support and generosity, Gary and I were given an

opportunity to provide safety and expert treatment to Nick and Cody. And even as they still struggle, I feel assured that they have been given the resources to eventually find their way. In Colorado, Gary and I gained many insights about mental illness and the effects of early trauma on behavior. Certainly these insights will help us better understand and work with people on the street.

As most of you know John and Katie will be leaving Las Vegas to continue to live a life committed to the poor and nonviolence. They will be beginning a trek via Greyhound, visiting family and Catholic Worker communities before they settle at Martin de Porres community in San Francisco. In light of this I invite us all to give our blessings to them in their future endeavors.

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"Baby your little hands feel so good."

On February 9, 2013, I arrived for our visit to find that Sherry could no longer respond to me. Her head was turned to the side with her eyes open. She could not speak. I sat for a long time on the edge of her bed, with my "little hand" on her face and cried. On each daily visit we parted with the same goodbyes, "I love you Sherry." "I love you too baby." Today there was silence. So I whispered the familiar "I love you and that I knew she was my biggest fan." With a slight smile Sherry acknowledged my goodbye.

As I left the room Sherry seemed pain free and calm. Holding back tears, I asked the nurses to please keep her out of pain, "I think she is leaving." Sherry died that night, quietly and alone.

At times, I struggle with feeling conflicted about not giving more to Sherry. When I received the call at 4 a.m., I regretted that I had not stayed the night with her. I feel unworthy to be her "sister," I realize if she was really my sister, I would not have left her bedside in those last hours or would have

organized family members to hold vigil. I had just experienced such a vigil with my sweet sister Susie in California.

There was a palpable difference between the two passings. Susie was surrounding by her adoring husband of forty two years, five sisters, other family members, a priest and hospital staff. Sweet Sherry deserved the same quality of love and caring.

Yet despite the disparity and differen-

**PRAY THE
ROSARY
ON FRI.,
8 A.M.**

(FOR
TAB)

**PLEASE
CALL TO
CONFIRM,
647-0728**

ces, our lives became mysteriously interwoven in a way that left us each blessed. She'd ask me often, "Baby, why are you so sweet to me?" I would always respond, "Sherry, because you are so sweet to me."

I pray for Sherry's forgiveness for me not letting her into my life more completely. In the end our friendship and connection has opened my eyes to my brokenness and limitations.

Dale and I met Sherry because we said yes to the Las Vegas Catholic Worker's new neighborhood food delivery program. Twelve years ago when we entered her messy world down the alley from the Catholic Worker house, our simple box of food became our holy communion. The food we shared with Sherry transcended into hearts of love.

CORRESPONDENCE

Thank you to Julia for writing about Buddie. Caring for him while he was dying was life changing for me. My best memory of Buddie? When he was so weak that he could barely speak, I told him I loved him. He beckoned for me to lean in so he could tell me something. I expected he would say "I love you too" or something like that but instead he said "I know" and that was one of the kindest things anyone ever said to me. —Sabine Henrie, referring to the poem in our Nov. 2012 appeal letter. Buddie was a guest at the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.

Websites: www.lvcw.org
www.catholicworker.org

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PLEASE JOIN US:
Wednesday-Saturday*, 6:00 a.m.:
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.
Wednesday-Saturday*, 6:30 a.m.:
Breakfast served to the poor & homeless.
*closed on fourth Saturday of month
Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.:
Hospitality Day, we invite 20 homeless men home for showers, to wash clothes, and to have a great lunch.
Thursday, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.:
Vigil for Peace in front of Federal Court-house, 333 Las Vegas Blvd. S.
Thursday, 10:30 a.m.:
50 Bag lunches delivered to homeless.
Third Saturday of month, 8:00 a.m.:
Deliver food boxes to homes in need.