

FROM CASS HOUSE



OUR PLANS

The aim of the Catholic Worker is to work toward a new heaven and a new earth according to the precepts of Christ. Food for the body has been the primary focus at Cass House for the past eight years. The need to nourish the soul will now be the primary focus for the community, at least for the present.

The past two years have been difficult. Conflicts about Dorothy's vision sapped our energy. Community members moving on made it impossible to sustain the ministry of hospitality on a round-the-clock basis. Thus the decision to stop, rededicate and renew ourselves.

In the work of building a new society within the framework of the old, the Worker acknowledges a correlation between the material and the spiritual. We have become aware that we as a community need to be fed spiritually. Thus, we plan to gather with the Karen House community for liturgies on Tuesdays and at Little House on Fridays. We will be gathering monthly to pray and to celebrate our being as community and eventually we hope to dialogue with you, the broader community, about the possibility of renewing our commitment to the poor.

What follows are a few thoughts on our past, our memories, our thanks, and our needs. We invite you to walk this path with us as we commemorate the closing of Cass Catholic Worker House.

-- Barb Prosser

OUR HISTORY

A few weeks ago I learned that Cass Catholic Worker House was closing its doors. Although I haven't lived at Cass House for over four years, it has always been a significant part of my life and naturally I have many feelings about its closing.

I remember the beginnings of Cass C.W. as if they were yesterday. We had just opened Karen C.W. House in September of 1977 after a relatively short few months of planning. At Karen House we were inundated with a tremendous need for shelter, food and clothing. The Notre Dame convent that had originally held about twenty sisters was now pushed over its limit with close to sixty guests and volunteers — were were "into" cozy. When we realized that sixty was definitely more than we could handle, we decided we would have to limit our hospitality to around forty women and children. We did this by attrition.

While making one of our many trips down Cass Ave. I started to dream out loud with Luanne Schizel. I pointed out this building surrounded by a large red brick wall which sat well back from Cass Ave. I remember saying to Luanne, "Wouldn't that be an ideal home for the Catholic Worker?" My hope at that point was that we could offer hospitality not only for women and children but also for men and, who knows, maybe even do a soupline. Luanne and I talked about this off and on just kind of dreaming — not even really knowing who occupied the place.

I had met Hugh O'Donnell C.M. when he was the rector at Kenrick Seminary. After Hugh was elected the Vincentian Provincial, I learned that their offices and residence were located in this magnificent building on Cass and that they wanted to move their headquarters to a smaller building.

The possibility that our dream might become a reality excited us. We brought it up to the community at Karen House, but a dream that seemed so right for Luanne and me was met with great uncertainty by most of the others in the community. Since we were committed to consensus decision-making, we were in for months of rough meetings.

What we struggled with most at those meetings centered around the issue of

personalism. Crucial to the Catholic Worker philosophy is a warm caring for the individual person. Some feared that would be lost in a building the size of Cass. Those of us who wanted to give the building on Cass a chance were convinced that the size of a building doesn't dictate whether or not personalism exists in it. The soul searching continued and we finally resolved that there would be two sister Catholic Worker houses of hospitality.

The negotiations went smoothly with the Vincentians and they gave us full use of their building for what would become the Cass C.W. House. We started out pretty fast at Cass House too. We opened a soupline in October serving seven nights a week and usually had around 100 people — men, women and children. In November of 1979 we began overnight hospitality for about twenty men. A few months later we started our hospitality for women and children and took about forty-five.

In retrospect I do feel that it was the failure to give personalism its proper place in the house which ultimately forced Cass C.W. to close. The tasks of day-to-day survival became the priority. For a Catholic Worker house to endure the

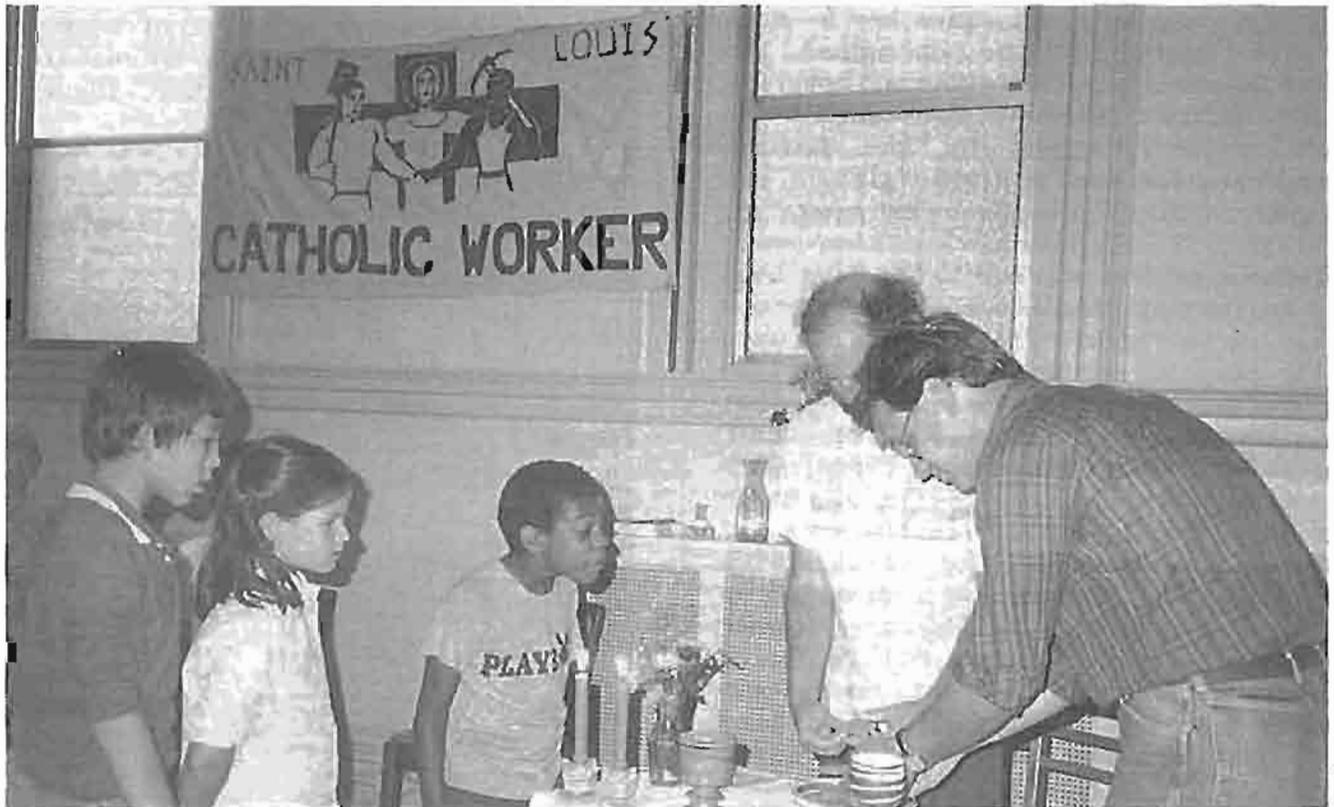
necessary ingredients in my experience are 1) prayer, community and individual 2) deep commitment to community 3) a personalism that will flow out of the combination of the first two.

I consider it a privilege to be part of the Catholic Worker movement for five years. I am reminded of a passage from the VELVETEEN RABBIT:

"What is Real?" asked the Rabbit.
"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Shin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easy, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you're Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

I walked away a little more "Real" from having been touched by the hundreds of wonderful guests who have helped us learn what it means to be hospitable.

— Sue Lauritsen



St. Louis Catholic Worker Anniversary Mass

MORE FROM CASS HOUSE



TREASURED GLIMPSES OF THE PAST

— Christmas, when a young woman and her daughter came from an abusive situation. As Santa Claus gave the young girl a present she quickly unwrapped the gift and said, "Santa Claus, how did you know I needed a pair of socks?" The sincerity of such thanks melted my tired and troubled heart. Again Santa Claus gave her a gift and with great joy she unwrapped the present to exclaim, "Santa Claus, how did you know I loved puzzles?" And again I was brought closer to God by the genuine thanksgiving for such a simple gift.

— Zack Davisson

— Glimpses of Heaven, and Hell, have been given to me at the house. Heaven was visible in the grace-filled moments such as: the laughter of children; sharing time with volunteers; the realization that guests would allow us to be part of their lives in vulnerable moments — times when you could sense the possibility of God's reign on earth. I saw Hell in the acts of violence I witnessed; the destructive power of alcohol, drugs, and racism; times when we as a community failed one another and those we professed to want to help; moments when I would look into someone's eyes and see nothing but despair. If they were a child's eyes, the feeling of all our efforts being hopeless would overwhelm me. Where's the "gift" in all this? The realization that without God, we're lost.

— Mitch Magee

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OUR THANKS

For the time you listened to our frustrations in the kitchen.

For the times you enabled us to take days away.

For the many times you responded to our needs and even anticipated them.

For all of the financial support.

For all of the affirmation — often undeserved.

For the way you expressed compassion for our guests.

For your on-going faithfulness and enthusiasm.

For the countless new homes you helped to furnish.

For all the special home-cooked meals.

For all the anonymous and unseen gifts that were shared.

For forgiveness when we seemed ungrateful.

OUR NEEDS

We have shared where we have been, where we are and where we hope to go. We are still in need of your continuing prayers; financial support for Karen House and future dreams; staying in touch with us; continuation of a spirit of hospitality; and of course your work to sustain the vision of the Catholic Worker. Thank you and God bless you.



St. Louis Catholic Worker Anniversary party