

A Beautiful Experiment

by Barbara Prosser

"The Holy Spirit loves to do its thing, its fire and water, where the need is the greatest." - Matthew Fox

And so it began. With Karen Catholic Worker House in full swing, the community of Workers began to dialogue, discern, and struggle with the decision of how best to serve more people. Keep in mind Karen House was bursting at the seams with guests, and the need was great. It was 1978.

The question of how to offer hospitality to men, women, and children, and to help feed those in the neighborhood that needed help was a burning one. In late 1978, the Vincentian Fathers, who had their foreign missionaries and Provincial offices at 1849 Cass Avenue, offered a proposal. They were to relocate sometime in the next year. There were 55,000 square feet of house that could be utilized as a second Catholic Worker House of Hospitality.

The house had a rich history as the James Clemens mansion, then a residence for the St Joseph Sisters of Carondelet, before operating as the Vincentian Foreign Missionaries and Press.

So in the summer of 1979, I joined a band of women and we began the work of transforming the space into a home which would serve as many as 60 to 75 people and feed up to 150 a night. Shored up by the reward of warm 905 beer and government-supplied, unsalted peanuts at the day's end, we scraped, painted, cleaned, created sleeping and dining areas, and removed materials left behind by previous owners. There was an estate sale, an extensive basement fire, and a blistering St Louis summer (not necessarily in that order), but in the Fall of 1979, the Men's section (sleeping for 15) opened for hospitality. In 1980, we were ready for women and children. Somewhere in there, we began a soupline open to the public. At Cass House's height, we served up to 150 a night.



Cass House Community, mid 80's. Zach Davisson, Tommy Askew, Tim Pekarek, Audrey Tomkins, Emmett McAuliff, Carol Donohue, Jeffrey Tomkins, Janet McKennis, Stanley Hackney - Source Unknown

By our last year, 1987, that number would be halved.

This past fall, the St. Louis Catholic Worker community gathered to celebrate 35 years of presence in the near Northside. Cass House was open, and vibrant, 7 of those 35 years.

We reminisced, shared stories, rattled our memories for facts and dates, and celebrated the good and the awkward of our time together. It was mentioned more than once how the CW experience was an untidy experiment in community living. We are hard on ourselves when we look at our imperfections. So as I began to write this article, I grabbed Tim Pekarek, Karen and Cass House community member, and together we talked about what we did right in those years.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." - Hebrews 13:2

Hospitality. As Tim said so well, we often were the "restart button" from craziness. We offered a time for

men, women, and children to breathe for a few days, weeks, and even months.

At Cass House, we were able to offer hospitality in a place that was clean, warm, and offered an extravagant amount of space. The sheer size of the house was a luxury. It was our blessing, and at times, our curse. We had room for kids to play inside, a yard in which to run around, and a back lot with room for women to watch their kids ride bikes and play ball. It was the equivalent of the front (albeit back) stoop.

"Don't worry about being effective. Just concentrate on being faithful to the truth." - Dorothy Day

Room for the Movement- There were many social justice organizations that gathered, planned, recuperated and organized within our walls. We had space and could offer a place to gather



Barbara Prosser lived in the Cass House community for most of seven years. Today she lives with her husband, Phil Heagney, and two teenage boys, Nathaniel and Sam, in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood, an informal Catholic Worker annex. One of her fondest memories of Cass House is the secret rooftop patio and view of St. Louis from the chapel roof (kudos to Dean for demonstrating how to scale the slate roof).



Cass House - Source Unknown

and broaden the community. Local and national groups knew our space was available and that we were an eager community of supporters. The War Tax Resisters, the Nuclear Freeze movement, CALC, and Witness for Peace came to Cass House. Together we were able to benefit from shared passions. And I know I marched and held vigil more often because I was immersed in the presence of others faithful to the truth.

"Charity is only as warm as those who administer it."

- Dorothy Day

Community of Volunteers- We didn't do the work alone. We couldn't do the work alone. It was on the shoulders of hundreds of volunteers, and I am not exaggerating here, who came through our door (or supported us through prayers and mail), and helped do the work of the house. Together we cleaned (a lot), took house, offered rides, made, served, and washed dishes for countless meals. Our volunteers did repairs from carpentry to plumbing and electrical. And when individuals couldn't do the repair work themselves, they hustled professionals to donate services.

Volunteers took care of us from repairing our cars to restoring our souls. (I may go to my grave never knowing who anonymously paid for repairs on my yellow Plymouth Horizon).

"Every person is defined by the communities she belongs to."

- Orson Scott Card

Our community make up was a life lesson in itself. We came as young, old, male, female, black, white, straight, gay, vowed, laity, single, married, with children. You name it. We were a disparate band of workers. We learned from each other. We taught each other different styles of how to live, to make decisions, to create hospitality, to share recipes, and to discipline children. When it worked it was lovely. And when it didn't it was messy and painful.

"I know there is strength in the differences between us. I know there is comfort, where we overlap." - Ani DeFranco

Cass House allowed us/called us to offer hospitality with inclusion. Tim reminded me that we were probably one of the few, or only emergency house to offer hospitality to transgendered people. And what struck Tim about the memory of one guest, was how nonplussed the other guests were at what might have been viewed a different lifestyle than theirs. No drama or judgment. Oh the lessons we learned.

***"We cannot build up the idea of the apostolate of the laity without the foundation of the liturgy."* - Dorothy Day**

Admittedly, most of us who formed community came from a Catholic background. And we all had at least a basic knowledge of, and always a respect for, Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day. But let's be honest, we all struggled with the church and our vision of how to live the gospel, that we felt called to do. Liturgies were important to us, and between Karen House and Cass House, we were fed. There was the sacred space of the chapel, the ways we could celebrate liturgies with inclusion, and the intermittent, but meaningful, morning and eveningsong. In the end, the experiences and lessons from Cass House keep me in the church, even today. It was a reminder that the church is bigger than the Vatican. Our guests reminded us of liturgy every day, in the breaking of the bread.

***"One of the verses I have grown to love is the one where Jesus is preparing to leave the disciples and says, "I no longer call you servants.... Instead, I have called you friends" (John 15:15). Servanthood is a fine place to begin, but gradually we move toward mutual love, genuine relationships."* - Shane Claiborne**

Years later, I am in a neighborhood, Forest Park Southeast, that I love to call the Catholic Worker annex. And together with my husband and two boys we own a building next door to our house that 18 years ago began with housing a young group of women with the idea of intentional community. They chose the name of Sophia House, house of wisdom. Catholic Workers have sprung from the group. I love to think of it as a farm team for the Worker. I continue relationships with volunteers, guests, and community members. My friend Ramona, still marvels at the fact 32 years later, she and her 5 grandchildren are as close to me as anyone in her blood family. In any other world we would be unlikely sisters.

Cass House...an imperfect experiment? Maybe.

But, as Conrad Hall said," There is a kind of beauty in imperfection." For so many of us...workers, volunteers, and guests, it was a beautiful and necessary part of the people we are today. I believe our relationships and communities are all the better for the time we had together at Cass House. After all, "where there is perfection, there is no story to tell" (Ben Okri). And, in the end, Cass House was only the beginning. ✈



Barb, Crystal, Nodric, and Elizabeth - Source Unknown