



# From Little House

by Mike Baldwin

This is the second time that I have been asked to write the piece, *From Little House*. Each time I think, what do I have to say? It is the people we share our lives with who have compelling stories and much to say to us mostly comfortable and affluent writers and readers of the Roundtable. Maybe next time I will pass the buck to someone who lives with us at Little House or who works with the Downtown Teens. But for now, I will tell a little of my story.

Pope Benedict XVI recently issued a new encyclical entitled “*Caritas In Veritate*” (“Love in Truth”). Among other things, it brought to my mind two of the essential tenets of social justice: solidarity and subsidiarity. Please be careful of the knee jerk to the word subsidiarity and I will try to explain. I liberally borrow a favorite phrase from my friend, Miguel, who always says, “I moved to Honduras to live and pray *with* the poor.” After a two-year retreat of sorts learning to live simply in rural Maryland, I decided it was time for me to move back to the Midwest to live and work and pray *with* the poor. It is not enough for me to live in solidarity, but I, as I am closest to the situation, must contribute something to the lifting of the burdens others bear—subsidiarity in so far as I am able and competent. Subsidiarity is an organizing principle that states that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, closest or least centralized competent authority. In other words, I cannot expect the government or some other distant entity to take care of what is directly in front of me if I have the means to do so. This does not mean that I don’t expect governments and other institutions to do their part. I mostly hope they don’t get in my way, and that they help me with resources to deal with the matter at hand. I already knew that with my privileged background and wealth of friends, I could never be poor in the economic sense. Because of the resources at my disposal, if I chose to live in solidarity with the poor, I was obligated to also work and pray in subsidiarity with the poor.

After a year of living in St. Louis and working for the National Farmworker Ministry, I longed for something more concrete and closer to home. The farm workers, were in California, Oregon, Washington and North Carolina. I was in St. Louis.

When the opportunity arose, I jumped from the frying pan of farm labor organizing into the fire of housing opportunity and community organizing in my neighborhood. I began working with Pruitt-Igoe Development Corporation (PIDC) for the next eight years, developing and maintaining low-income housing which is decent and affordable. During that time, we faced many challenges and tragedies from Goliath develop-

ers to the death of loved ones. One of our triumphs in the face of these hardships was the formation of a neighborhood, youth, workforce training program. Resurrected from the ashes of the death of a young man in our neighborhood named Christian, arose the PIDC-sponsored group calling themselves the Downtown Teens.

With the support of friends and numerous benefactors the Downtown Teens is in its eighth year. During those eight years, we have demolished (I prefer to say disassembled), built, painted, plastered, landscaped, and cleaned to the tune of \$153,000 in payroll for over 125 teens. We have seen our teens through high school, some in college and others in their first jobs. Our oldest “teen” is now 27 and has a house and family. Though the program has cost me much of my life savings to run, I am much richer for it. My love for each of our teens is like that for my own child. The heartaches and the pride I feel are the same as well. I feel their pain to the extent I am able—solidarity, and try to do something about it—subsidiarity.

Another opportunity presented itself five years ago. Sr. Mary Ann McGivern was moving to New York and needed someone to take over and to maintain Little House, a.k.a Ella Dixon house. Teka and I did not exactly leap at the chance, but after praying, we felt a mutual calling to continue the work of Little House. Throughout these past years, Teka has continued to ask me, “Why do you want to be involved in low-income rental housing?” My answer is always the same in one form or another: “If not us, who?” The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity are in my face again. There are so many people out there who, for various reasons, do not qualify for other housing opportunities. But let’s face it, during any given month one or more of our residents can’t pay all or sometimes any of their rent. This can create a hardship on us to pay all the bills from our very large, very old, house. It also affords us the opportunity to continue to act in the best interest of the “least of these,” who are each much more heroic than ourselves. They face obstacles I have never faced, and they overcome.

So in light of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, who am I? Am I the Samaritan, taking from my own pocket or do I look for an institution to solve the problem? I must do both. I must both relieve the immediate problem to the extent I am able and work for systemic change to counteract the causes of suffering. But to whom am I preaching but the choir? Their stories and yours, their faith and yours, their lives and yours are truly inspirational—but thanks for listening to me anyway. Pray with and for us as we live and work and pray with the poor—who I found out is really me.



**Mike Baldwin**, aside from his considerable carpentry and organizing talents, is also a St. Louis diner aficionado.