

Providing Hospitality to Homeless Families: Parenting as a Non-Parent

by Annjie Schiefelbein

Catholic Workers often reflect on Peter Maurin's ideal that we create spaces where it's easier to be good. In houses like Karen House and Teka Childress House (TC House) which provide hospitality to families, we try to create a space where families can focus on issues other than meeting their basic, immediate needs (food, shelter, safety). For most of us reading this, our growing-up years, though not void of difficulties, were not spent in fear or destitution. We have some images of warmth and happiness. As adults, if we are people who choose to be responsible for children, we are trying to create safe, healthy spaces for these kids. The images of our own childhoods often shape those efforts. For those whose needs are not being met at the most basic level, those images of childhood, or the ability to create a space where such a childhood can happen, is elusive.

For most of the moms who come through Karen House, the idea of the peaceful family hearth and traditional family warm-fuzzy happiness are familiar - after all, they watch the same TV shows and commercials as the rest of the U.S. The daily reality of their lives, however, revolves more around questions like, "Will our relatives accept us sleeping again in their living room or did they really mean it when they said the last time was it?" "Is my one year-old's cough really a bad problem, or can he wait for an ER visit until I get his siblings back into school, get my ID, and go to the welfare office because they cut off my food stamps because the letter came to my cousin's house after he put us out?" These questions go on and on.

Moms and kids show up at our door distraught and exhausted with these questions. For the first days, the moms are fatigued and wary. Often they

have come from situations where their safety was not certain, moving around from place to place until the options ran out and they ended up at 'the shelter.' It takes a few days for the moms to realize that their basic needs are going to be met here. Most of the families that come to us have been in other shelters, and are expecting the same: hard and fast rules, staff who will give them a hard time, shared space with lots of other people, and a high level of noise and confusion. In their first few days at Karen House, one can see the women visibly relax. They often wonder at the fact that we both live with them and want to hang out with them. They are relieved that they aren't required to leave our house during the day. The first week, we remember Dorothy Day's reflections on how grueling it is to be homeless and poor. It is a holy time, I think. We try to help more privileged people understand this, when they come for a tour of the house or when we are giving a talk about the Worker. The question often arises: do we "let people lay around," or do we "make them do something with their lives?". I want to ask those folks if they would be up for someone evaluating their time. I want to ask how much time they spend watching TV, or on their computer? I, myself, am relieved that my community does not evaluate how I spend my time on a daily basis. I would, however, expect them to challenge me if patterns arose that they felt were unhealthy, and so it is with our guests.

Kids transition fairly well into Karen House. My favorite thing about it is the greeting you get from the kids when you walk through the door. It matters little if you've been gone 5 hours or 5 minutes, a gaggle of children will often greet you, screaming your name as if your return is the MOST EXCITING THING THAT'S EVER HAPPENED! Aside from the at-

Annjie Schiefelbein is exhilarated (and somewhat embarrassed) by her newfound passion for professional tennis (and Roger Federer in particular).

tention the kids get, there is also some structure (and as it turns out, it is true that kids respond well to structure!). There are also a lot of other kids to play with, and often snacks to be had. There are people to help them with their homework, and an abundant supply of scrap paper on which to color (although strangely the wall remains the medium of choice).

Kids coming into Karen House may have an easier transition than their moms. It can be a hard place to be a mom. While I mentioned the volume and chaos of the other St. Louis shelters, Karen House is not without its fair share of both. We ask moms to keep their kids with them at all times since it's such a big house with so many people around. We also ask Moms to go upstairs with their kids at bedtime and remain with them there for the night. But do you know any parents that keep their kids around them at ALL times, including sleeping in one shared room? It's asking a lot, and we try to be gentle on the rules as long as it seems like the kids are safe.

A lot of our moms are homeless for purely financial reasons. In other situations, moms are mentally ill or addicted. This adds a new level of difficulty in both parenting and in other issues for the kids. In these situations, we often find ourselves in the situation of believing that a course of action a mom is taking (or not taking) needs to be altered.

The issue of challenging the moms who live with us or correcting behaviors in kids is a difficult one. Our community is pretty homogenous. Our ages, genders, and faith persuasions are diverse, but our race and parenting status are not. With only a few exceptions over the years (and none currently), we are a white, non-parent community living with mothers who are mostly African American. Usually this difference is uneventful. When it does come up, the Moms may ask, "Why do you think you can tell me what to do as a parent - you have no idea." We agree that, mostly, we do not. We want to constantly be aware of the divide between us and the guests, and do all that we can to obliterate it, to let go of our power and privilege and hold our guests up. So how do we ask these moms to go to parenting class, promote non-violent parenting, denounce junk food, endorse bedtime, and correct behaviors that we understand to be harmful to kids? The question, rephrased, is: "In a house of hospitality, how can a non-parent be

responsible for kids while respecting the house, the kids, and the moms?" Karen House and TC House lead us to two different but connected answers to this question.

At Karen House, we may not have a lot of personal parenting experience, but we do have a ton of collective experience with families at the house. It is a unique space to raise a child, and we have experienced both successful and failed approaches over the years. In many ways, we know what works with kids at Karen House and what doesn't. And so we try to incorporate the mom's knowledge of her kids with our knowledge of kids at Karen House.

We ask many mothers to go to parenting classes. We try to offer alternatives to the physical discipline that we don't allow in the house. We decide on a daily basis if the behaviors kids are expressing require action or not. When we can't easily decide, we discuss it in our consensus-based meetings and

talk to the moms about what we should do. We put kids in time-outs, and try to have their mothers both present and active in the consequence of their children's behaviors. One of my favorite recent episodes involved a very young mother of a 4 year-old whose behavior reflects her already difficult life. We've been trying very hard to get this Mom, not even an adult herself yet, to consistently do time-outs with us. I felt it a success when the mom, frustrated by her daughter, yelled at me in a voice sounding a lot like a young child, "Annjie, she is being bad and needs a time out but she won't goooooo!" I count that as a success!

At TC House, we are experimenting with another model of being non-parents in a house of hospitality with a family. Living

at TC House with Jenny and me is one family (a Mom and her 3 kids). They will hopefully be staying with us long term, which has prompted much of this reflection on parenting. We've had the time and intimacy with this family to better understand the patterns that emerge for families living with long-term homelessness. Like the moms that live with us at Karen House, the family at TC House had been homeless for a great deal of their lives. They have lived out of bags, lived all in the same room, and had to buy quick, easy food (which does not translate into healthy). They've lost their personal belongings many times over, and so have little sense of treating something as their own, to be valued.



Annjie Shiefelbein with "Jello," while volunteer Coco looks on
Photo: Beth Buchek

They've lost any hope for consistency with changing living situations and schools. And consistency, as our friend with 3 adult children told us the other day, is the hardest part of being a parent. Imagine how much more so for a homeless parent.

When a family has been chronically homeless, members necessarily focus on meeting very immediate needs. Not only do non-immediate needs (consistency, structure, attention) go unmet, but so does the opportunity to garner the skills necessary to meet these needs once the family is out of crisis. It has become clearer to us at TC House that, although Jenny and I are not parents, we may have insight into some better ways for the kids because of our privilege of never having been homeless. This is very hard to swallow. I feel it is an essential part of a Worker community (and indeed society at large) to go too far in assuming you don't know what it's like to be the other, to let go of your privilege, and to try fervently not to judge. It is with humility that I have come to realize I can try to hold myself and the kids' mom to a standard that will mean healthier, more fully realized kids.

I'm not sure this is the answer, or even correct, but we are getting lots of chances to practice it. We have unexpectedly (but happily) chosen to be more responsible for the kids than we planned to be initially (due to the Mom's work schedule). We are deeply invested in the long run with these kids, and each decision can feel like a heavy weight on us. Instead of worrying if the kids are in school, we worry about how they will perform on the standardized tests because it can make or break the future possibilities for an inner city child. We worry about smaller behaviors, understanding that we are in part responsible for the bigger problems that the accumulation of minor problems creates. We desperately want to ameliorate the unhelpful patterns this family has had to learn. Because there is a little more stability, our thoughts are on more future-oriented goals. It all feels so important and so hopeless, trying to create newness in the face of so many years of homelessness; so many years of living in a way that is focused on meeting only the most basic of needs, and ignoring anything else. Jenny talks about this in *From TC House* later in this issue - a lifetime of patterns based on homelessness does not just go away when the family isn't homeless. It is a difficult, frustrating, and holy lesson.

If we are to create places where it is 'easier to

be good,' what does that mean for families? I think, at Karen House and TCH, it means creating a space where a kid can expect love with a delightful ferocity. A space where moms can focus on something other than shelter and food, so much so that they can complain about what's for dinner and bicker over the bathrooms. A space where non-biological

parents can love, care for, and invest deeply in the lives of families without the need to shelter (both literally and figuratively) their own children. A space where children can have enough security to be able to remember as an adult a space and time that was sacred. I think we are succeeding. I think of specific faces, like the many times we

meet a young adult who grew up, in part, at Karen House. They always smile and you can see them going back in time in their memories with fondness as they recount the Christmas they spent at Karen House, or the hiking trip they took with Tim, or their favorite meal, and on and on. Their families may have stayed homeless; their mothers may still be addicted or mentally ill. Perhaps the adult versions of the kids who lived at Karen House suffer with these things themselves. But they often look back with happiness at that time and space.

I think of a family we know well - Lorraine Stewart and her large family - who lived at Karen House a few times throughout the years. The family is now deeply entrenched in the lives of the neighborhood, and we see them often. They all consider Karen House a home base, a place of safety and comfort. I think of a woman who called the house the other day and said that she lived with her mom at Karen House when she was a small child. Her mother had just passed away, but before doing so she instructed her daughter to remember Karen House, though it had been 20 years since they'd been with us. The mother told her daughter that Karen House would help her once she passed on. The daughter called us, she said, because she remembered Karen House and knew her mom was right.

It is a delight, in the many faces of family's needs, to be a witness to places that try to meet all of the levels, and to watch the holy goodness that comes forth from it, for all of us.

*The works of mercy are a wonderful stimulus
to our growth in faith as well as in love.
Our faith is taxed to the utmost and so grows
through this strain put upon it.
It is pruned again and again, and springs up
bearing much fruit.
-Dorothy Day*

