

From Teka Childress House

by Jenny Truax



Imagine two Catholic Workers who have absolutely no construction or home maintenance skills, nor any desire to acquire them. Imagine they have no aspirations to move from the house of hospitality where they have lived for years, and of course, that they have no money. Probably you know Catholic Workers who fit this description. It was certainly true for the two of us.

Now imagine a Catholic Worker neighborhood that is being somewhat gentrified, the 100+ year-old homes are being torn down for rows of identical vinyl houses. Again, that probably doesn't take too much to imagine.

Those scenarios were our reality in 2004, when Annjie Schiefelbein was taking the dog for a walk one day and came upon a house for sale. This house is two blocks from Karen House, next door to Tony and Julie's sustainable living project, and a perfect size for the 2 of us plus a family or two. The fact that it was ugly (painted brick—white of all colors) didn't deter Annjie, who exclaimed in a wonderfully dramatic fashion that night, "I have news that may change our lives!"

And change our lives it has. We had a large clarification of thought with folks from the neighborhood and our community, and felt supported and encouraged. The idea was to slowly rehab the house for two years and then invite a large family from Karen House to move in. The idea of offering long-term hospitality as a complement to the short-term hospitality at Karen House was exciting. We decided to buy the house only after finding out it had a new roof and needed only minor aesthetic work. The plumbing and the electric were fine. Through the generosity of several friends, we were able to front the money to purchase the house.

As evidence to how ill-prepared we were for such an endeavor, the first things we talked about were paint colors and a name for the new CW House! We worked hard on the name. Each time the subject came up, we lamented that we couldn't name it after Teka. For years, she has provided an authentic and loving model for doing hospitality. We knew she would never allow it, so we dismissed it each time. In the end though, as painful as it was to her humility, she acquiesced, and we are now proud to call it the Teka Childress Catholic Worker.

Three years later, the plans are still plans. The rehab turned out to be a gut rehab. The 'new' roof needed

replacing, the electric and plumbing all had to be ripped out and redone. At times it has seemed like the more progress we made, the more we uncovered what needed to be repaired or replaced. We've been blessed with help from high schools, church groups, and individuals, we've learned new construction skills, and certainly (and painfully) honed the Catholic Worker skill of begging.

From the beginning, we wanted Catholic Worker values to guide this house. Practically, this has meant doing a good deal of the work ourselves, depending on volunteer labor as much as possible, trying to support local businesses with our purchases, working on a shoestring and precarious budget, and trying to find less toxic options for building materials.

For us, sticking to Catholic Worker principles also meant grounding this new house within the wisdom and experience of the Karen House community. For a year, the Karen House community spent time each month discussing the formation of TC House. This initial process challenged and nurtured us, and provided wisdom and creativity that the two of us alone never would have managed. We formally decided that TC House would provide hospitality for one large or two small families. The money would not come from Karen House, but from groups and families interested in the more personal, longer-term hospitality.

We decided to create two groups of support for TC House. The first is a small consensus-based group that makes the major decisions for TC House, comprised of current and former members of the Karen House Community. The second group, which is still forming, will be a larger support circle of folks who are seeking a more intimate connection with a family. We envision families who have kids of the same ages, including the TC House kids in swimming lessons, outings, tutoring, etc. We hope that this will be a relationship-based way for all of us involved to enjoy life in a better way. Feel free to contact either of us at Karen House or by email (annjies@yahoo.com) if you'd like to get involved.

Hopefully the next time a "From TC House" article comes around, we'll be able to share the story of the house-warming party with you, and introduce you to the family with whom we will begin this new CW House!



Jenny Truax has added budding chef to her repertoire of skills as a Jenny of all trades.