



From TC House

by Annjie Schiefelbein and Jenny Truax

It's an interesting time to be giving an update from Teka Childress House; it's a time of transition for us. After 4 ½ years of offering hospitality to a family of four, we are now living alone, and find ourselves offering hospitality of a different kind.

It's been quite a ride. We knew we were in for more than we bargained from early on. After purchasing the house in 2004, our intended two years of 'cosmetic' reconstruction turned into a 3½ year gut rehab. Later, we asked a group of 200+ Catholic Workers for advice on doing long-term hospitality for a family, and received only shrugs, widened eyes, and wishes of good luck. The family moved in before the house was actually finished being rehabbed, and two weeks after our friend Dan, Courtney's husband, was shot and killed two blocks away. Beginning our journey with the family, we assumed that two Catholic Workers with a combined two decades of experience at Karen House would find it relatively easy to do smaller-scale, longer-term hospitality. Now, how we laugh at our naiveté!

We have many happy memories of our 4 ½ years with the family: doing homework with the kids, setting up systems of rewards, going to parent teacher conferences, having dinners together. We had temporary custody of Robert for about seven months last year— a blessed time where we learned all about high school football, China, Xbox, and parenting in a new way. At the same time, we were often sobered by the dissonance between our daily reality and our hopes and dreams for the house. We clung desperately to the belief that no act of love is ever wasted. We grieved our inadequacy, helplessness and pessimism. We began to cringe at the oft-quoted passage from Dostoyevsky: "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." What do you do when love is mostly, or even all harsh and dreadful, when you feel that your love is poured out beyond your capacity? We had hoped to be very involved with the kids' lives: primary adults, favorite aunties, mentors. We had hoped for relationships that would be deeply enduring. Generally speaking, this happened only in glimpses rather than as a whole.

Throughout our time, we fought our own racism, classism and self doubt, seeking support from spiritual direction, friends, family and especially the Karen House community. We grieved our inadequacy and unhappiness, and helplessness, wondering what other Catholic Workers would say if they saw how desperate, pessimistic and unloving we felt. We read Catholic Worker texts for inspiration and guidance, but were never sure if they were suggesting we stop for lack of love, or keep going for righteousness' sake. We continually asked ourselves if our own happiness (which felt like a very abstract, privileged concept) was worth more than the opportunities we were giving the kids. For 4 ½ years the answer was no. While many days were not gratifying or easy, we always knew that this hospital-

ity was benefiting the kids in a huge way. The stability of our house, along with the extraordinary education they were receiving at De La Salle (cumulating in the admission to Catholic high schools), was changing their lives in immeasurable ways. We knew, and continue to know, that this means the world for their futures.

This past October, our answer changed; in the end, we knew we couldn't do it anymore. This decision coincided with Annjie's dad's cancer worsening, and while it felt like the only decision we could make, our grief is still immense. So we're in a huge transition – us, and the family both. They got into a transitional housing program, which means subsidized housing for two years. This will help the kids continue through good high schools; hopefully, they will get to decide their futures.

So, our pretty good dream didn't go the way we hoped it would. We know that most people in the world live with the remains of some tattered dream, whether caused by divorce, a physical limitation, poverty or death; this gives us much comfort. We clung desperately to the belief that no act of love is ever wasted. We grew immensely; over and over, we hit rock bottom, had to redefine ourselves and our love for the family, and find more within ourselves. Dorothy Day says, "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." This is reassuring to us. It is gratifying to learn that you were stronger than you knew.

And now our lives change again. We have transformed the family's space into an apartment that is being used by Annjie's parents as her dad receives cancer treatments at Siteman Cancer Center. It has been wonderful to host them, and we are grateful to have the space and time with them. We will also offer the space to the Karen House community for a place of respite, meetings, etc. We plan to take a year off from hospitality. We've asked our community to hold us accountable to this plan - being surrounded by such need makes it very difficult not to respond. But this is our time for healing, a time to find hope and each other again. To that end we have a new wood burning stove that we and the dogs love, we're watching lots of "Battlestar Galactica," and intentionally making a lot of space for quiet in our lives. Little by little we will make sense of it. And even if we don't, we will hopefully find peace as we find out what life and love hold for us next. ♣

