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**2016 Day Three - Monday, 6/27 - Holy Family Retreat Center, West Hartford to Hartford to East Hartford to Hartford to Holy Family Retreat Center, West Hartford**

As usual when we stay at Holy Family Retreat Center, we start the next day's ride with 7:00 am mass with Fr. John Baptist.

This day would be no different and his homily ended perfectly. He ended with this, “I would rather be a fool for Jesus than a damn fool”. We all embraced that.

I began the day with a bit of apprehension still feeling some of the effects of the previous night.

We went to breakfast and had a good start for the day. We met Maureen, a friend of Claire, who would be helping with Support this day.

We began gathering our bikes, pumping tires, etc. We were ready to go and Johnnie asked who would lead us in prayer. I said I would, thinking I could start my day off right. Somewhere deep down the emotion came to the surface and I could not get any words out. Tom led us in prayer.

We left Holy Family on time in order to be at the Stop & Shop in Wethersfield to meet Stefan from Hands on Hartford and would be collecting food to restock their Food pantry.

However, things did not go as planned right from the beginning. First, there were not enough Cue sheets or so it seemed. I was riding in the middle of the pack without a Cue sheet and noticed we were missing Tom, Pam, Claire, and Wayne. I found out that Tom, who had chain problems the day before, was again experiencing problems with his chain and shifting. I caught up to the riders up front and impatiently asked them to wait and informed them about Tom and that we had no Cue sheets. Apparently I still had some anger, frustration in me from last night.

I cycled back to Tom. When I got there I told (should have asked) Pam, Claire, and Wayne to catch up to the group and I would stay with Tom. No need for so many to wait and technically hold up all. They proceeded ahead. Again, however, I handled this wrong and I am sure these three sensed my frustration.

I worked on Tom’s chain and it seemed okay. We started out together or so I thought. I was out front of Tom after going up a hill when I got a call from Joan advising me I left Tom behind. So I went back down the hill to meet up with him.

We began cycling together this time but as he shifted the chain popped off. A closer look at his derailleur showed that it was bent outward and the chain could not match up with the sprockets. He had to go to a bike shop to get it fixed.

So, now I was alone. I had to catch up to the group who was now far ahead. Joan and Pat followed me along the way.

I had gotten a Cue sheet from Joan and also had made sure Wayne had one too before they left.

You cannot underestimate the importance of having a Cue sheet just in case you do get separated from the rest of the cyclists.

I caught up to the group still a ways from the Stop & Shop. We were supposed to be there for 8:30 am. It was already after 9:00. Of course I was concerned about that and showed it when I got up to the group. Again, didn’t handle it as I should have.

The problem was that they were getting so many red lights and it slowed them down. I tried to call Stefan to apologize for being late. I could not get him. I only had his work phone number, not his cell.

I cycled ahead of the group and was happy to see our support folks there with Stefan at the two entrances already set up to collect food.

After everyone arrived, I could tell there was a not so good feeling in the air. I also had to announce that we would split into two groups in order to stay at Stop & Shop long enough to collect food and also show up at Stewart McKinney Shelter on time. Plus we had to be at the Malta House of Care Mobile Medical Clinic in East Hartford for 12:00.

Thank God for John Ryan and for Pam. Both approached me separately and talked to me, to settle me, to get me back.

After much tears and apologies I realized I had hurt the team dynamic and most likely individual feelings as well.

I had a lot of healing to do. I knew that night’s discussion would be tough.

We handed out slips to people entering the store. We would politely approach patrons from both entrances and explain why we were there.  It was different than last year. There was less “traffic” this year. We thought we would not get much food but slowly the baskets began to fill up. The Holy Spirit came through again.

We don’t know how much we totally collected but we did pretty well. I know Stefan was happy. He took all the food with him in his car. Mondays are always tough as most people already did their shopping over the weekend.

We also handed out the Free Meal Cards as well when we could. We also again noticed so many people coming to cash in their empty bottles and cans.  Did you know that it takes more than 144,000 empty bottles or cans to generate the $24,250 Federal Government poverty level for a family of four? That's a lot of cans and bottles.

As we got close to 10:30 part of the team, me, Eric, Gary, Lauren, and Maureen and Bob and Maureen from Support got ready to leave for McKinney Shelter. Pam, Claire, John, Wayne and Johnnie would wait a bit before heading over to Malta House in East Hartford.  Tom was going to the bike shop to get his bike and would join us all at Malta House.

Our ride over to McKinney was a little adventurous. We got off track slightly but made it in plenty of time.

We were greeted by Jose who was the Executive Director of Stewart McKinney Shelter and was also there when BTC first visited this shelter way back in 2005 or 2006. He’s been with this shelter 18 years. Jose gave us a great education. He talked about the 211 system how it could be a good thing but is not working like it should. He has gotten around the system a little to help those in need when he could because the system is not efficient. Most of our group went in to see more of the shelter inside. The team was further educated by Jose. This is an 88-bed shelter offering overnight beds, dinner, breakfast, and showers. A single stay can last up to 30 days with the possibility of an extension. Medical screening and immunization is provided. Case managers assist with employment and housing, and make referrals to other services. The Staff speaks both English and Spanish.  A day program for men with medical needs operates at the shelter. The Staff helps with housing, jobs, counseling, drug/alcohol use, mental illness, HIV/AIDS and other issues. Lunch is offered to day program participants. I think we all learned something.

We left close to 11:30 so that we could get to East Hartford close to 12:00. The ride over to East Hartford was normal as we have done it so many times.

When we got to St. Rose Church where the Malta House van was parked and locates every Monday, the other half of our team was inside getting a tour and learning what goes on in that hospital van.

We waited patiently for our turn.

The two nurses working there, Maryann Detore and Roberta Burn, gave a great explanation of what regularly goes on there on a Monday. They were excellent educators and the work being done touches so many in the community.

The mission of Malta House is to provide free primary health care to the uninsured. They deliver that health care through operation of a mobile care vehicle that has a fixed schedule in four distinct neighborhoods across the City of Hartford, St Rose Church, 33 Church Street, East Hartford on Mondays, 12-4; the Cathedral of St. Joseph, 134 Farmington Avenue, Hartford on Tuesdays, 2-6; St. Peter’s Church, 160 Main Street, Hartford on Wednesdays, 12-4; and St. Augustine Church, 10 Campfield Avenue, Hartford on Thursdays, 12-4.

Coupled with coordinated communication efforts at schools, homeless shelters, parishes and churches, community outreach and ready access to those who are most in need is assured. The Malta House of Care Mobile Medical Clinic has been key in responding to the plight of the uninsured in the Greater Hartford CT region for the past ten years. Through a dedicated group of physician, nurse and non-medical volunteers, the Malta House of Care Mobile Medical Clinic has provided over 37,000 patient visits over that time period with 2,000 individuals identifying Malta House of Care as their only medical home.

Think about this. Without Malta House of Care these patients would most likely be going to Emergency Rooms for treatment which is the most costly healthcare treatment or would not be treated at all.

When we arrived at 12:00, there were already 15 to 20 people registered waiting to be seen on a first come first serve basis.

These physicians and nurses treat most any illness and prescribe the necessary drugs, etc. patients could not otherwise obtain.

All patients treated do not have any form of health insurance.

What a great service to the community. I think we were all impressed.

Claire volunteers with these folks on a regular basis and provides advice on the nutritional needs of the clients. She gave us a brief idea of what she goes through and how she works with the patients after they have gone through the Mobile Clinic.

We are so proud of her for doing this. You go Claire!!

Tom’s recollection of St. Rose’s….My Aunt and Uncle were mainstays in that parish back in the day . . . they lived in East Hartford for 60 something years. . . .both buried from there as well.  As we rode there my memories floated back to the Saint Rose of old  . . . Italians, a vibrant school, etc . . . what I saw that day reminded me that we are not in Kansas anymore!  The demographics of our cities are so very changed . . . again, the prevailing tone in society would judge this as a bad thing because it is different from what it used to be.  It is always important, for me at least, to be reminded that difference is not bad; it is just different. . . and we have also to be mindful that 50 years ago the globalization of the economy had not taken place yet.  Good jobs with good pay enabled families like that of my Aunt and Uncle to build a solid middle class life in East Hartford.  It is clearly much more difficult to do that these days and it will not do to blame the victims . . . those waiting there that day for a chance to get medical attention.  We have to look at the systems that create that situation and advocate to change it.

We got back on our bikes and headed over to East Hartford Family shelter on Main Street.

We had some difficulty finding it as there is no sign out front indicating which building is the shelter. Actually we understood why that was done since this facility housed families and mothers who may be escaping from an abusive situation and do not want to be found.

Once we were identified as BTC we were warmly welcomed by Patrice and Molinda both who work through CRT, the Community Renewal Team.

Patrice gave us an informative presentation on what they do at East Hartford Family shelter. She was very upbeat, making a bad situation seem more pleasant. They are doing wonderful stuff to keep families together. Most shelters split up the family with mothers and kids separate from the dads. Here the structure kept them together as best as possible. There are only 2 ½ family shelters in this area.

This is a 40-bed family shelter that welcomes adults and their children. Dads, moms and two-parent families will find a safe environment. Case managers help connect families to services in the community. The Staff speaks English and Spanish.

The shelter is open 24 hours a day for families whose children are four years or younger. Families with older children must leave the shelter from 7:45 am to 4:30 pm each day. That is very difficult for families during the summer and vacation time from school. A parent or guardian must be with their children at all times. Other children are expected to be in school while their parent(s) look for work or permanent housing. They help families keep their children in school, or re-enroll in new schools. Families work on their goals of finding jobs and moving into stable housing.  Families are able to stay from 30 to 90 days but can stay up to 10 months. There is very little transition housing for families. A story was shared with us about a family that was going to move in later in the day. The family had been living in their car in a 24 hour Walmart parking lot. At night, they would go in the Walmart and find a spot for their children to sleep where no one would see them. Due to the homeless list, they were able to get this family into the shelter.

There is a strong connection with Stewart McKinney Shelter as well since CRT is responsible for that shelter too.

Patrice mentioned an older gentleman called Bosey who all the kids as well as the parents just love. He brings them treats and does so for all the shelters. He has a great reputation and when you mention his name to the guests of the shelter they all smile just thinking of him. Some people are just great providers and humanitarians. We seem to meet them in every shelter or soup kitchen we go to. It takes special people to work, volunteer, and serve at these poverty centers. We see Jesus in these folks.

We all felt quite good after Patrice’s presentation. She sort of skirted the issue around the 211 system but did have to admit things were much better than in the past. She also said it was so very hard to turn a family away when they did not have the correct documentation or had not completed an assessment. Seems the system has some bugs needing to be fixed.

Some items that the shelter needed are inflatable mattresses, pack and plays and people willing to transport item when families are going to move.

We were supposed to walk over to Veteran’s Crossing, which was just down the street, after our visit. Molinda informed us that there was only one veteran that may be there as all others were working. It seems things have improved greatly for homeless vets since we visited Veteran’s Crossing last year. Most of veterans staying there now are using it as a “bridge” before they get into permanent housing. Their average stay in now three to six months. CT was recognized as one of the first states to supposedly end veteran homelessness. Molinda said this was not 100% true, that there are still some homeless vets out there but it was how you viewed them in the system as to whether they were deemed homeless.

As long as they had an assessment or were acknowledged as possibly obtaining a place to live, they were considered “not homeless”. At least it was moving in the right direction.

We decided to eat our lunch in the back at their picnic tables.

While there some of us like Wayne and Gary interacted with some of the guests, especially a mom and daughter.

As we were finishing up with lunch, a young woman and her daughter came walking down the driveway.  She and her daughter were obviously residents of the East Hartford Family Shelter, who were returning from their day out on the streets - having to leave each day at 7:45 am and not return until 4:00 pm.  The woman's name was Ebony and she had a beautiful smile.  Her daughter's name was Brianna.  She first began talking with Lauren, and then Gary joined the conversation.  She was so well spoken, obviously well educated, and so positive despite her current situation.  She said that she tried to go to the library and/or the park each day for her daughter.  She wanted her to learn and be active.

Gary asked her how she came to be staying at this shelter.  She related a story of having a successful career with McDonalds - rising through the ranks to become an assistant manager and then a general manager.  She beamed with pride over her accomplishments, particularly that she had been chosen to attend Hamburger University.  This occurred while they lived in South Carolina.  Ebony said that she then made the biggest mistake of her life - she was persuaded by family members to return to Connecticut - people she had distanced herself from in going to South Carolina.  She was able to get a job transfer to Connecticut, but then things started to go downhill from there.  Although not getting into specifics, she said that family conflict and harassment caused her to lose her job.  She then had a couple of relationships that went sour, moving back and forth between Connecticut and New York.  The end result was that within less than two years of arriving back in Connecticut, she was without a job, with no money and nowhere to live.

Ebony was so positive that things would work out.  She wanted to work and was positive she could get a job, but first needed to know where she would be living - making sure she could commute to work each day.   She didn't want to start a job if she couldn't commit to being there each day.  All she wanted was to make a good life for her daughter.  They were hoping to hear about an apartment by the end of the week.

We were joined by another family at the picnic tables and interacted with them as well. Pam had the opportunity to speak with the family through their son Juan. Juan’s dad was very interested in our bikes. Juan’s parents did not speak English so Juan and his sister were translators. Juan and his sister spoke English very well. They told us that they arrived from Puerto Rico in September. They lived in Hartford until a few weeks ago. He did not tell us why they ended up at the shelter. Juan shared that he was in 8th grade but had to repeat 8th grade next year. He said he missed a lot of school. He did say that he wants to go into the military. Pam and he talked for a little while about how important it is to finish school so he can go into the military. He was a very smart boy with a lot of things going on in his life.

We need these interactions to fill us with what we need to pass on when we speak at our presentations at night.

So now we were off to our date with Hands on Hartford and Community Meals where we would be serving supper to more than 120 guests this day.

We would be meeting at Christ Church Cathedral and would wait for Sue Larson to bring over the ingredients for the supper prepared by Steve Dimotta, Barbara McVeigh and Pat Sullivan who are involved with the St. Bridget Youth Group. We would be serving tacos to the guests, something they were looking forward to eating instead of the usual chicken meal.

Our bikes were placed on our support vehicles and brought over to Holy Family. They would not be safe here at Christ Church parking lot and we did not want anyone to have to watch the bikes from 4:00 – 7:00 pm.

Once we entered the soup kitchen we were split into teams, servers and preparers. I first began helping wrap the plasticware. We had to do it a certain way as described by the volunteer organizer from HOH. It takes time to wrap more than 125 sets of plastic forks, knives and spoons. And it was so extremely warm in the kitchen! Plus we all had to wear hairnets unless you had a hat on or were completely bald.

Wayne was “in charge” in the kitchen. Pam seemed to be “in charge” of the servers.

Making the tacos was fun and we got the process down pretty well. We just had to worry about having enough meat, etc. to serve all that came into the soup kitchen. We even started to make quesadillas with just cheese and rice once we ran out of meat. We served 122 guests that night.

Some of us got a chance to mingle and talk with the guests.

I had the opportunity to speak to two women who both had previously stayed at the East Hartford Family shelter and now had their own apartment. They were a family of four with a brother and a little child of about five. Of course I mentioned Bosey and they lit up with the mention of his name. The mother of the little one said he called Bosey “Poppy”. They said they were “fortunate” to stay at the East Hartford facility and that they were treated with dignity. They also loved Patrice.

And now they were getting by although they had to come to this soup kitchen to eat on a regular basis. What keeps these folks down? I asked then about the 211 system and how it worked for them. It was obvious that they were frustrated with it and the entire shelter system. They were so happy they had their own place. Of course I never found out how they were getting by day to day. They did tell me they were not discouraged. Hard to believe from my end but they were smiling, especially when I said I had to go work and left by shaking their hands and calling them by their names. Just a simple act of remembering their names is so important. It is that whole dignity thing we always talk about.

From Maureen:

My “story” from Day 3 has to do with reconnecting with Steven, a guest who was eating at the Christ Church soup kitchen.  I remember him from a year ago when he was staying at the MACC shelter in Manchester and I was volunteering there on Sunday nights.  I remember him in particular because one night we had to turn him away when he showed up reeking of alcohol.   I was pleased to see him at the soup kitchen, and he was obviously equally pleased to see a friendly face from his past.  He said he had more stable accommodation at a boarding house in Hartford, and that he was working.  I couldn’t help but notice that he smelled of alcohol, so I was sorry for him that he was still battling that addiction.

Another thing about the soup kitchen that struck some of us.  We ended up having to get permission from the chef to give out some of the food we had left over.  The rule is, if you don’t have – I want to say the number is 40 - complete 2nd dinners, then nobody gets seconds.  We struggled with the possibility of having to throw out the quesadillas and rice plates, but also had to respect the experiences of the staff who know what it is to deal with angry people who feel they are being treated unfairly when they don’t get 2nds.  Also, we servers were fully aware of being “manipulated” into getting more food by the guests who were playing games with the red tickets.  It’s easy to say “whatever” when you’re just there once as a volunteer; and yet, I have enormous respect for the staff and chef who have to run a really tight ship there.

So, it was close to 7:00 and some guests wandered in late but were still fed. We handed out seconds on the ice cream sandwiches. A couple of late entries just came in for the ice cream. Word had gotten out on the street.

After cleaning up we all packed into the cars and drove over to Holy Family for showers and our usual gathering for the word of the day.

This night Johnnie F asked if he could facilitate. We were happy to see Matt who had come to Holy Family to join us for the wrap up.

Here are the words of the day:

Claire - Forgiveness – forgiving each other

Bob S – no rooftop carrier – Children impacted by poverty

Wayne – Grateful; tense last night and this morning; we can talk about issues and feelings and move on.

Encouraged about housing support

Matt – Motivated to learn about justice. Research more

Lou – Forgiveness – asked for forgiveness; Grateful for those who reached out today

John R – Prophets and what Jesus sends us to do; prophets get their asses killed; The little girl who wanted her birthday party at the shelter – although testimony to a good shelter, nevertheless struck me as very sad.

Lauren – Better to be a fool for Christ than a damn fool

Some people appreciate, others think you are useless

Pam – Sadness – this negative feeling could make things end

Family shelters with kids; Living in cars at Walmart should not exist

Chris – We need reminders that God is still present in the universe; Making tacos was fun; Challenging with knees;

Spiritually very fulfilling time of growth

Maureen – Connection; Guarded but still connected; feel connections are strengthened with crying men; Stefan got white people to talk to white people about black lives matter

Gary – Smile; Joy of the woman who was watering her plants;

Jose at McKinney Shelter is a saint; Patrice; Breanna;

Wanted to better the life of a child….

Joan – Fun on this trip; Pat and Joan got lost; We have fun with this group

Tom – Human Family – this is more family than real family; We were happy to see Wayne from Sparrows Ministry; our Wayne was like “KitchenMan”;

Wendy – Useful; Things at Family shelter they can use; At McKinney she would like to do a meal; Underwear size 6X- 8X; FROG – Fully Rely On God; How do you get from one day to the next

Johnnie – Disconnected/Mosaic; Stop and Start; Chopped up day; not always seeing the connection;

Maureen- Life Changing; Glad she came to do Support

Lou (2) – Group more comfortable engaging with people; you should email stories to Lou

We then discussed the Topics we wanted to present when we meet with Blumenthal and Murphy staffers.

Done by Lou and Maureen, John Ryan, Tom, Gary, and Pam