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**2017 Day Six - Thursday, 6/29 – St. Mary Magdalen Parish, Oakville to Waterbury to St. Bridget Parish, Manchester**

We awoke in the church basement of St. Mary Magdalen's.  It was chilly last night.  I knew because Joan cuddled so close.  But I, too, felt the chill.  It makes me wonder how the homeless do it, sleep outside with no shelter.

We don't realize how good we have it.  I thank God for what I have and should every single day.  Unfortunately I do not.

Deacon George and Mary and the others from the Mary Magdalen "team" arrived around 7:00 am to prepare our breakfast.  So much tasty food!  Hard to decide what to eat but I tried to keep it light since we had a long ride back to Manchester.

Slowly but surely we all had our fill and began to pack the support vehicles and get our bikes ready.

We gathered outside for some photos and for Pam to lead us in prayer before we rode off.  She did a great job and we were blessed.

We thanked Deacon George and Mary for their hospitality and he even said we should come back next year.  Maybe we should.  But then I think of those hills.

We also said goodbye to Gary.  His wife, Lynne, came to pick him up and his ride was over for this year.

We would also lose Jim before we got to Manchester but that was a long way off.

Our first stop today would be at the St. Vincent de Paul Shelter. the largest shelter in the state.

We had to be there by 9:00 am.  We were advised of a flatter route to get there so we did not experience any huge hills this morning.

We made a few slight wrong turns but got there on time.  We rode to the back of the shelter and waited for Jered Bruzas, the shelter Director to greet us.

Before entering, I was met by a little old lady, Leslie, outside the shelter. I started a little conversation as we waited to enter.  I noticed her arm was in a sling.  She injured it in a fall.  She was pushing a small shopping cart with what I assumed were her belongings.  I asked her how she came to staying at this Shelter. She told me she had a nice apartment and had taken in a young woman who she later found out was a prostitute.  Definitely a bad choice.

The women use her rent money for drugs and she could not pay her rent.  The landlord had strict rules which led to Leslie losing her apartment and she has not been able to find another she can afford on her Social Security.  The thing was she was not despondent but was kind of content that she would find another place and she forgave the young woman.  She had a smile on her face as she lite up a cigarette.  I told her those things will kill her. She said she didn't have that many for years anyway so she was going to enjoy them and smoking a cigarette was one of her joys. She seems to be moving quite slowly and I asked her if she would be alright. She, of course, said she would and shuffled along with a big smile on her face.  I should have given her a hug but settled for a hand shake.

Jered came out an invited us in.

As we entered the shelter I gave him a bunch of the Free Meals cards we have been handing out.  He said he could definitely use them.

We went into a small room and he had some coffee and delicious donuts for us. He began to educate us and we all learned more than we thought we would.

As he talked we greeted clients as they passed through.  They were asked if they want any donuts.  Of course they did and some had little kids that really enjoyed those donuts.

Here are some of Pam's notes from our visit.

    Largest shelter - 150 beds

    Men, women and families

    Catholic agency

    5 divisions

70-75 employees some making a little more than minimum

wage - poor taking care of the poor.

    Can stay until 10:00 serve breakfast

    Families can stay all day

    Outreach for people who do not want to come in such as the

tent city

    Can't take sex offenders due to children in the shelter

    It takes over a million dollars to run - 1/3 comes from

fundraising

    They do not cook meals there just heat what is brought in

    Given socks, pj and underwear everyday

    "It is tiring being homeless"

    Example: man is staying at shelter who was making 6 figures

in Southbury had a stroke and has lost everything.

Jered seemed to really be pumped about his job.  It was obviously difficult and stressful but you could tell he liked doing what he was doing.  Being in Waterbury made it more difficult with the jobless rate and lack of affordable housing.

They out a lot of effort into this shelter and it was noticeable. We were all impressed by his dedication and drive and thanked him for his service.  In turn he thanked us for doing what we are doing.  So important to have people like Jered and Sofia from yesterday doing this work for those less fortunate.

More of the people who can make a difference should be coming to see these shelters and soup kitchens and meet the clients and hear their stories.  They can be me or you in an instant.

We thanked Jered for his continued service and his educating of us and moved on to our next stop before riding home to St. Bridget.

We had an 11:00 visit to GWIM, the Greater Waterbury Interfaith Mission soup kitchen.

It was only a short cycle over but there was a lot of traffic to avoid.  It made for an exciting ride over.

When we got there I remarked that this was a place we had never before visited.  I remembered the soup kitchen being on the Waterbury green.  We would later find out that they had moved from there 4 years ago.

The soup kitchen was crowded we folks sitting outside at picnic tables waiting to have their lunch delivered.  Some of us got into hairnets and aprons to help serve. We had to sign a waiver type sheet in order to o so.

I took some photos of Johnnie, Eric, Jim, and Pam as they carried out trays of food.

We met Barbara, another dynamo Director who was on top of everything going on.  I gave her another bunch of the Free Meals cards.

Here's what we learned from Pam's notes

Food pantry provides groceries once a month to feed household on the last Monday of the month when the need is the greatest.     This serves the family 3 meals a day for 4 days and single bags as needs arise.

They feed approximately 1,300 people at the end of the month

    Resource center

    Kid's club

    Soup Kitchen

    Hot Lunch from 11-1 weekdays

Feed usually 200 - 300 a day but can get as high as 500 at the

end of the month.

    Serve average 15,000 hot lunches and bag lunches a year

    Bagged lunches are also given out on Sundays and holidays

I decided, like always, to got outside and meet some of the clients.  This is always a bit scary to me as you never know how you were going to be received.  I remember the last time we came to Waterbury at the former location how Claire and I were yelled at by one of the clients, accusing us of taking their food as friends on the green had nothing to eat.  It was a hard experience for us.

This time was like the many others where once the barriers are broken down you can get into a good conversation and learn about how these folks got to where they are and why they have to frequent soup kitchens.  Like I said before, it could be any one of us where one thing changes any we find ourselves in a downward spiral and having to attend these poverty centers.

However, of all the folks I talked to, Johnnie, Rich, Alberto, Joe, Mark, Tony, Liz, and Lester the one person that affected me the most, even after 15 years of doing this, was a little 5 year old boy named Jordan.

He was just sitting there alongside his Gramma waiting for something to eat.  We made eye contact.

I went over to talk to him and asked him his name and how old he was.  He was the cutest little guy.  Nike hat and tee shirt.  He started eating his bologna sandwich.  I shoot his hand, pretending he was holding on too tight and he was hurting my hand.  He just looked at me kind of funny.

I left him and moved on to someone else to talk to.

As Barbara wanted some photos I had to leave and go inside.  I didn't want to but had to accommodate her.

She then took us to see their food pantry and also the learning area for the little kids who come here.

As we we being educated little Jordan came in a bit shy. Barbara got down to ask him if he was okay.  He said nothing but wandered around.  I started getting a little emotional.

Jordan went back outside.  I followed him out and offered him a cookie.  He smiled and I asked him for a hug.  I felt his tiny arms around my neck and choked up a little.

So, I extended my hand again to shake and again pretended he held it too tight.  This time he cracked a little smile.

He finished his cookie and I got down to his eye level and asked him if he wanted another cookie.  He said yes but then asked if he could have one for his Gramma.  I started to tear up and had to walk away after I gave him two cookies.  He continued to wander outside the soup kitchen.  I could not help crying and Barbara came over to sort of console me but I couldn't stop from crying. Why does a little 5 year old boy have to come to a soup kitchen with his Gramma for food and nutrition?  This is wrong.  We have to do more so no Jordans have to attend a soup kitchen. People have to know!!

We took a photo with little Jordan.  I don't think I will ever forget his face.  I left crying and rode the next several miles far back from the others while in tears thinking of him. This was my word for the week.  Jordan!

Now came the remainder of our ride to Manchester.   There were some hills, some ups and downs but we all stayed on our bikes, Eric, Johnnie, Jim, Tom, Pam, and me.

Somewhere about half way hone Johnnie got another flat tire.  We took time to fix it and the rest did us good.

After his tire was repaired we came to a big downhill.  I think in the previous Journal I mentioned going down a hill at 42 miles per hour and Johnnie F doing 50 plus.  This was actually where that happened.  John Ryan was at the bottom of the hill directing us to take a left turn at the traffic light t the end of the hill.  We all made it down safely thank God.

We cycled along the CTfastrack Busway from New Britain to Hartford.  It was a nice ride but a bit boring.  No scenery, just Transit Buses.  We did pick up two young boys who cycled with us all the way into Hartford before turning around. They were a couple a real trick artists on their bikes.  We couldn't do the stuff they did on our road bikes. It was kind of fun having them tag along for the ride.

When we got to St. Bridgid Church on New Britain Avenue in West Hartford we stopped for lunch and the word of the day.  Jim's wife was meeting us their to pick him up and take him back home to Milford.  We were all glad he rejoined our BTC team this year.

Does anyone on the team have a copy of the words.  I thought I took a photo of them from the back of John Ryan's Cue sheet but I do not have that photo on my phone.

So we said our goodbyes to Jim and headed for home.

As we got close to St. Bridget, Pam got her second flat tire.  And, because she has a tiny bike we did not have a spare tube.  We tried to pump up her tire but it did not hold.  We were so close so Pam rode on her flat the last mile to the church.  She was determined to finish on her bike.  She said she was not going to get off her bikes after all those miles from the previous 5 days.  She made it.

We settled in at St. Bridget.  Sue Ryan was there to greet us.  We had ordered pizza and we enjoyed our "finale" and thought about what we had achieved again and looked forward to next year.

15 years of the Brake the cycle of Poverty ride had come to an end.  It was different this year but the same.

We know we have a lot more work to do, to advocate for the less fortunate, for the voiceless.  Look for us on the road.  Riders Up!!!

We hugged our goodbyes to each other.

I got back on my bike and cycled home with Joan being my support for those last two miles.

Word/Phrase of the Day:

Lou: Jordan

Wendy: Connected

John: Bring – people to shelters/legislators offices

Joan – Interesting – the thing that happen on this ride

Eric – Life-style – thinking of Jered, Sofia, Barbara

Johnnie – Trump

Jim – Thankful; being back

Mary – Grateful

Tom - Tired

Done by Lou