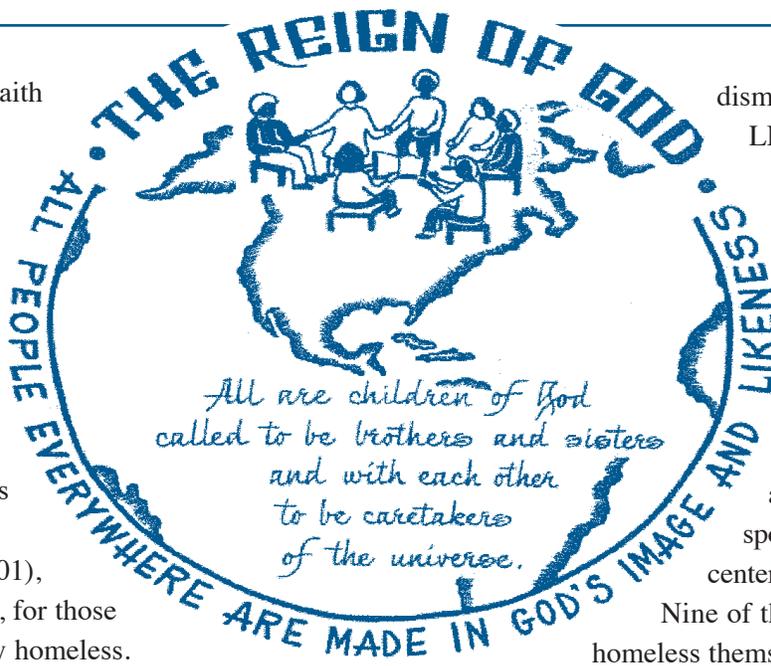


Ministering with the Homeless

Patrice Athanasidy

The Life Experience and Faith Sharing Association (LEFSA) logo “expresses the heart and soul of its ministry. The vision of being a part of extending the Reign of God in our lives and in our world is what is aimed for and is that which orients the association’s direction.” Based in Manhattan, the Association was founded in 1986 by the late Sister Teresa Skehan, RSM (2001), and Sister Dorothy Gallant, SC, for those who are homeless and formerly homeless.



LEFSA began in 1985-86 after Sister Dorothy and Sister Teresa saw the conditions of a large city shelter. They knew that there was another way to help people to experience their dignity and worth. “The shelters offer food, some clothing and a bed. People also need to heal themselves on the inside. LEFSA helps them to find that strength and healing from within themselves,” Sister Dorothy explained. “We wanted to walk the journey with them.” She explained how much she has learned about life from people that many have

dismissed. Sister Dorothy believes LEFSA helps people to find hope within themselves through prayer and sharing and proves that all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

The program began with the two sisters visiting three shelters and one hotel. Now, 11 team members and one associate work in nine city sponsored shelters, two drop-in centers and one HIV/AIDS residence.

Nine of the team members are formerly homeless themselves, giving them a deep understanding of the program and how it helps. Sister Dorothy says, “The people who participate in our meetings draw hope from the team members who are formerly homeless.”

Sister Dorothy explained, “The primary purpose of LEFSA is to provide a weekly forum for people in the shelters to come together, to form a faith community with one another, share around life issues of concern to us and search for direction and a solution to problems within the context of faith community in the light of God’s Word. We look at what God is calling

What We Confirm In Our Ministry

The statements below come from the team members of LEFSA:

- We confirm a world of peace and justice in our role in bringing that about within ourselves, our community, the world.— Ann Quintano
- We confirm God’s presence in each person we meet.— Rosemary O’Donnell, SC
- We confirm the identity and dignity that God gives everyone through forgiveness. God’s love and hope transcends tags. God sees us through love.— Vaughn McLamb
- We confirm people can love, get along and work together. We express this when we are in the shelters as a team—bringing people together in harmony. No one is up and no one is down.— Dorothy Gallant, SC
- We confirm willing changes turn into blessings.— Georgia James
- We confirm we don’t have all the answers.— Jimmie Robinson
- We confirm people need to believe in themselves.— All
- We confirm there are unjust structures and we all have a responsibility to work to change them. People often blame themselves when they become homeless. It is not all their fault. The system often plays a role in someone’s becoming homeless.— James Addison
- We confirm people can work together without being in competition with one another.— Lucy Lumsby
- We confirm it doesn’t matter whether we are Catholic, Protestant, etc. We can get together without one being better or worse. Outside Christianity, others are welcome.— Frank Brandon
- We confirm LEFSA’s ministry is also mission. Our ministry is our mission.— Timothy Dunnington
- We confirm Christ’s love message: We are all our sisters’ and brothers’ keepers—God’s family.— Godfrey Xaba
- We confirm that giving people respect and affirmation helps them to grow.— Sister Cecelia Palange
- We confirm we share our thoughts and dreams with one another.— Eve Thomas

A personal testimony

Lucy, Team Member and formerly homeless

In the beginning, being homeless was depressing. I was angry, ashamed and upset for being in that predicament. I had no relationship with God. One day, I came in early from work and went to the Rec room and walked in on a Life Sharing Community Gathering. If I can remember straight, the gathering was on love and it got me thinking about God's love for me. I decided that I would let these Gatherings be my connection back to God. Whenever I was going through anything, I kept coming back and each time there was food for my soul. My spirit would be lifted, and I would be able to continue through that situation.

After about six to seven months of participating in LEFSA gatherings, I learned to keep the focus on God and putting my life together. I am now living in my own apartment; I have custody of my grandson; I am a Deacon in my church and I am privileged to be with people in the shelters as a LEFSA team member.

Getting housing was a long, hard road for me. Besides the unavailability of sufficient low income housing, the systems in our society presented many roadblocks along the way. I learned a lot about the housing systems and I am now sharing the fruits and learnings from my struggles in this area with people searching for apartments and a place to live. I am LEFSA's Housing Advocate.



Lucy Lumsby presents Barry Markman with a gift from LEFSA. Barry has been donating shrimp to monthly Leadership lunches, holiday meals and annual picnics for over two years. What a blessing he is to us!



In September 1986, Sisters Dorothy Gallant, SC(r.) and Teresa Skehan, RSM were on their way to their very first shelter where Life and Faith Sharing Gatherings were initiated. They went equipped with a lot of love, faith, coffee and bibles.

us to do on personal, communal, and structural levels. Extending God's Reign in our lives and in our communities and world is our mission." These weekly gatherings, on average, include 200 people at 12 sites located in Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn.

The Association also sponsors other programs including monthly programs for Leadership Development, Women's Empowerment and a Men's Spiritual Development

Group. LEFSA also has a Street Ministry Program that goes out into the streets on a weekly basis; a weekly Team Enrichment Program and a weekly Creative Arts Workshop; and four Annual Retreats for persons who are homeless and formerly homeless. The Housing Advocacy Program and holiday programs round out the Association's offerings. Voicemail and resource sharing is also available to help people with the process of moving out of homelessness.

Everything centers around the objectives of the Association which include:



"You just feel all alone, no familiar faces and no familiar voices. You're in your land but you feel like a stranger in your own land. Then you feel like people are taking advantage of you because you're at their mercies and you have to obey them and their rules. It's almost like you have no more voice. (You can speak but no one is listening to you.) But again I say thank God for the Lord Jesus Christ."—Deborah Byrd



LEFSA gathering at a shelter.

- To be a caring presence within the shelters
- To provide those who attend Base Christian Community gatherings and those encountered within the shelters with referral information and support towards making concrete steps to remove/lessen the causes of homelessness

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- To be involved in weekly outreach to people who live on the streets and around the parks
 - To work together with people who are homeless, formerly homeless, and advocates to address the systems and structures that keep people oppressed, and to work toward their transformation
 - To address the drug epidemic in a focused way, and to deal with it on personal, communal and structural levels.
- James summed up how LEFSA helps by quoting

Langston Hughes about an injured bird. He said, “That is what life for me was like being homeless. I remembered sitting on the steps of Franklin Men’s Shelter watching a bird that was hurt that could not fly. He was trapped, hovering in a corner with fear, and vulnerable to everything and everybody. This is a very lonely and isolated situation for me and this bird to be in.

“Life and Faith Sharing helped me to dream again and heal through our life and faith sharing gatherings in the shelter. This Empowerment Model helps you to take the steps that are necessary that eventually helped me to fly again.”