

LEFSA: *Serving the Community for 25 Years*

by Sr. Margaret Donegan, SC

In September, 2011, Life Experience and Faith Sharing Association celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. It was in the 1980's that Sr. Dorothy Gallant, SC, and Sr. Teresa Skehan, RSM, daily encountered the homeless and hungry on the crowded streets of New York City, and, like St. Vincent de Paul in 17th Century Paris, they were deeply troubled by the hopelessness and pain they witnessed, and again, like Vincent de Paul, they felt compelled to respond to the suffering and devastation that surrounded them. Thus was born LEFSA, a not-for-profit interdenominational empowerment association.

Over the years, the LEFSA team has reached out with compassion and respect to countless men and women, offering them food, clothing and shelter, while at the same time touching hearts that have often been broken by depression and despair. They have given encouragement and support to those who struggle to conquer addictions and to maintain sobriety, and they have



From left: Gerald, Sr. Dorothy, James Addison, David, and Frank Brandon all participated in the LEFSA Thanksgiving celebration.

walked with those who have trod the seemingly endless journey to retrieve the losses inflicted by homelessness.

The mission of LEFSA is to extend the reign of God. The team does this by striving to realize and respond to their call to live as sisters and brothers with one another, acting as responsible members of a global community. In addition, they make a discernible commitment to work for liberation with people who are oppressed, and they stand in solidarity with those who strive to create a more just society. LEFSA serves a multicultural, diverse population, and fosters and promotes Jesus' values of inclusiveness, love, solidarity, justice, and peace.

LEFSA, with its nine team members and two associate members,

extends its care to a clientele in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. Eight of the eleven members have experienced homelessness and have lived in shelters. Their experience that lends an authenticity to their work has proven to be invaluable.

Vaughn, a team member, who had been homeless, can relate to the hopelessness suffered by those who live on the street. He understands how the situation can lead to drug addiction, criminal behavior, and a never ending cycle of grief. Through his experience with LEFSA, he says, "I have met people who have regained a sense of dignity, hope, and personal responsibility even though the cards have been stacked against them. They have decided to stop self-destructing as a way of life."

Believing that all people have a right to a good quality of life, LEFSA provides weekly forums in shelters, drop-in centers, and an HIV/AIDS residence. There, brothers and sisters form a faith community. Following the Base Christian Community model, they reflect upon concrete life situations in the light of God's Word. They discuss with one another the issues and problems that may have contributed to their homelessness or hopelessness. They try to understand the forces that have influenced their lives, and in the light of scripture, they see these forces not as impersonal and unapproachable, but as factors to



Over 100 people joined Sr. Dorothy for a day of Thanksgiving.

The kitchen staff prepared the Thanksgiving meal for members and friends of LEFSA.

be understood and changed on personal, communal, and structural levels. Within this context of a faith community, together, they search for direction and solutions.

They soon find empowerment as they regain a sense of their value and dignity. By sharing with each other their wisdom and insights, and offering each other affirmation, support, and encouragement, they experience a new energy that can only come when a faith community works together on common problems. Through these gatherings, participants come to deepen their faith in God and to believe that life can get better. This new-found hope makes it possible for them to develop realistic and life-giving goals for themselves and to develop an awareness of how they can make life better for others.

Lucy, once homeless but now a team member, speaks of her experience in a faith community. She says, "In the beginning, being homeless was depressing. I was angry, ashamed, and upset being in that predicament. I had no relationship with God." One day, quite by accident, she walked in on a LEFSA gathering. The topic was love and it moved Lucy to think about God. In time she learned to focus on God and she put her life together. She says, "I am now living in my own apartment. ... I am a Deacon in my church and I am privileged to be with people in the shelters as a LEFSA team member."

LEFSA is also involved in a weekly street ministry. In summer's heat and winter's frost, in the rain and in the snow, team members distribute sandwiches, juice, socks, and other items to people who live in the parks and terminals. They form relationships with the people and support their efforts to find housing.

In addition, each month LEFSA provides a leadership study program and members of the team meet with a women's empowerment group and a men's spiritual development group. These groups enjoy a good breakfast and dinner. LEFSA also offers two annual retreats at Mariandale Retreat Center in Ossining and distributes about 900 copies of *Daily Word* (an interdenominational book of prayer and inspiration) to people who are homeless or who were formerly homeless. LEFSA sponsors a weekly creative arts group and every year the team travels to Albany to advocate against unjust social policies.

Each of the programs that LEFSA sponsors has expanded in the past years. Now, many of the participants themselves are involved in facilitating sections of the program and in assuming other leadership roles. One participant, Deborah, who had been in a shelter visited by LEFSA every Thursday, was encouraged to tutor a young man. She believes the opportunity she had been given has been a blessing, and that LEFSA has opened doors for her.

Georgia, formerly homeless, says, "I am a story of hope because I was in the shelter when LEFSA came into my life. When it came time for me to move out, the organization offered me a ministry employment because of my understanding of homelessness."

The work of LEFSA has attracted students from Canisius College in Buffalo. Each year for one week, these students join the LEFSA team as they minister in the shelters and on the street.

Inspired by what they have experienced, the students return to Buffalo, where they minister in soup kitchens and other programs that reach out to the homeless.



Sr. Dorothy is warmly hugged by Diane Mack, who recently moved into a studio apartment.

For hundreds of people, LEFSA has been a beacon of hope. James, the Mission Coordinator who experienced homelessness says, "LEFSA helped me to dream again and heal" The team enabled him "to fly again."

LEFSA, funded entirely through grants and donations from organizations and concerned individuals, offers a variety of resources and referrals that facilitate the transition to permanent housing.

Because of such generosity, Sr. Dorothy has seen homeless men and women find faith, dignity, self-esteem, and the knowledge they need to make positive changes in their lives. "In my 25 years in LEFSA ministry, I have experienced many miracles."

Sr. Dorothy is continually inspired, humbled, challenged, and enriched by the resiliency and deep faith of the women, men, and children she has shared life with. "Journeying with people through homelessness has been a tremendous blessing in my life."



Sr. Dorothy with Mervon Griffith, who was tutored by Deborah Byrd (right) for the naturalization test.

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