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The Companion

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From Sister Val ...

Dear Friends,

Seventy five years ago, an artist named Fritz Eichenberg created the piece of art that is on the cover of this issue and titled it, "The Christ of the Breadlines." It captures what we at Emmaus see in our guests: their sanctity, the presence of God, and the light that shines through them in the bleakness of their circumstances.

Eichenberg also captures the dreary, stuck feeling that most of our guests experience in one line after another, day after day, as they seek life-sustaining services and safety. They need the patience of saints. And as you'll read in this issue, especially Liz Allen's piece, they often display it.

In a different way, perhaps, that dreary, stuck feeling is also familiar to those of us who work and volunteer at Emmaus. Decades and generations pass, with people trying their best to dismantle poverty and dehumanizing systems, and yet these problems seem unbudging. Like our guests, we continue waiting for a world where people are valued and everyone's needs are met.

We can take some comfort in the adage made popular by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." But the arc, at times, seems unbearably long. I'm sure it does to you, too.

I want to reassure you that this waiting is not the same thing as being passive. It means keeping an attitude of openness and experimentation and expectation. You'll read in this issue about how one of our programs, the Kids Cafe, is now evolving to meet changing needs, and about how we've continued to respond to justice issues at the local and national level. And you'll also read about one of our dear, recently deceased guests, whose passing reminds us to appreciate the time that we spend with each other, as imperfect as that time may be. Each moment, waiting on a bread line or waiting for the world to change, is a precious one, because, as Fritz Eichenberg shows us, Christ is in the midst of it.

As we continue to wait and work for a better future, we are grateful for your support that sustains us through the dailyness of feeding our hundreds of beloved guests.



Sister Valerie Luckey,
Director of Emmaus

In peace,

Sister Val

Waiting Together

by Liz Allen

For Emmaus Soup Kitchen guests, waiting is a way of life.

Matthew, 42, waits to borrow a cell phone to call his parents. They no longer live in rural northwestern Pennsylvania, where Matthew grew up. He wants to reassure them that he is still alive. If he's lucky, they'll answer a call from an unknown number. If not, he'll wait to try again.

On the evening of Jan. 23 at Emmaus, Matthew waits to speak to one of six volunteers participating in the Point in Time Count, an annual audit of the unsheltered required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Neighborhood Development.

The survey, which doesn't ask for names, asks: "Where did you sleep last night?"

Participants can offer additional details about how long they've been homeless, whether they are veterans, what types of benefits, if any, they receive and which issues they face, such as substance abuse, physical or intellectual disabilities or domestic violence—all barriers to "stable housing."

Erie volunteers used to head out in the middle of the night to search for people sleeping in parks, abandoned buildings, alleyways and other places "not fit for human habitation," George Fickenworth explained. He is assistant director of the Mercyhurst University Civic Institute, which conducts the yearly audit with local partners. For the past four years, instead of traipsing around in the dark of night, they visit places that serve those who are homeless, including Emmaus.

All at Emmaus receive a "blessing bag" with gloves, socks, hand and foot warmers and toiletries from those conducting the survey.

At other times during dinner at Emmaus, guests can fill out an assessment with Erie County Care Management to see which of their circumstances qualify them for permanent supportive housing.

But currently, there is no funding for those housing programs, according to volunteers and staff members at Our Neighbor's Place, the seasonal shelter at 450 E. 16th Street.

On Jan. 25, when the temperature was stuck at 16, Matthew is among those waiting in the foyer for the shelter to open.



Waiting Together

EMTA provides bus service to the shelter every night except Sundays, so adults who are guaranteed a bed because they spent the previous night there have either walked or hitched a ride.

When doors open, each shelter guest stops at the registration desk and calls out a number: 9B, 1C, 23D. "Just like BINGO," says one guest, but the number-letter combination is for assigned bunks.

Nicole, Andre, Jenna and Mason are dripping wet when they come into the shelter together. They had a bit of a wait before they got to the shelter, because they had noticed a driver stuck in the snow at East 16th and Parade Streets.

Without hesitation, they dropped their baggage, pushed the car and called out directions for about 15 minutes before they freed Mary Steck, a shelter volunteer, from her predicament. They then made sure she made it to the shelter down the street before returning to retrieve their bags.



They weren't thinking of themselves or the frigid temperatures when they pitched in. Mason says that if his mother were there, "She would say, 'You should help that lady.'"

"They really are everyday heroes," says Colleen Hammon, who volunteers at both the soup kitchen and the shelter.

The shelter is roomy and functional, and there are cheery signs, inspirational sayings and even corny jokes taped to the walls, so the shelter doesn't look so much like the institutional pre-release center it once was. Because the shelter is just west of the Erie County Prison, staying there can be a sad reminder to those formerly incarcerated.

There's a common room for conversation, board games and bagged meals and snacks. Guests can take

smoking breaks before the men and women go to separate sleeping areas and lights go out at 10:15.

At 6:45 a.m., the bus arrives for transportation to the Erie City Mission for breakfast.

Guests can leave their bedding behind but must take all other personal items with them, stuffed into plastic bags, backpacks, suitcases and even their own pockets.

When Matthew returns to Emmaus, he might speak again about waiting to see if his dreams to become a physical therapist or an athletic trainer for the Philadelphia Eagles might eventually be realized—a long shot, he acknowledges, due to struggles with alcohol, drugs and mental health issues since his college years.

Both today and always, waiting has been a way of life for the poor. Emmaus guests wait in line at the food pantry (opposite page) and at the soup kitchen (above).

Waiting Together

He waits to fall in love again, as he once did with his daughter's mother. But he won't marry again, he says. A girlfriend will be just fine.

Unprompted, he allows that there is one wait that never bothers him—standing in line outside Emmaus Soup Kitchen, wearing a big smile, even when the temperature hovers in single digits.

A smile “uses less total muscles than to frown,” he points out. And there is never anything to complain about, because a free hot meal and a warm welcome always await him at Emmaus.

Matthew looks over the February 2025 edition of *The Companion*, with a quote on the cover from Founding Mother Sister Mary Lou Kownacki: “There isn't anyone you couldn't love once you've heard their story.” And he agrees.

Stability & Love: Sister Gus' Kids Cafe

One of the blessings of Benedictine spirituality is the promise of stability. Benedictines stay in one place, loving its people, and listening and adapting to what they need. There's no better example than the story of Sister Gus' Kids Cafe, which closed its doors at the end of the year.

Named in honor of Sister Augusta Hamel, who loved children and ministered at Second Harvest Food Bank, the Kids Cafe offered students a safe place to spend their hours after school and receive a nutritious meal. When it opened in 2000, it was one of the only places in Erie where children in poverty could be fed after school.

As the years passed, it became much more than that: the students, who primarily came from Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary School just a block away, played games, did crafts, “shopped” for Christmas gifts for their families, formed friendships and found people who believed in them. They were encouraged to dream, and given opportunities for extracurricular activities like gardening and yoga classes.

In more recent years, though, the number of children enrolled at the Kids Cafe was steadily declining. And for a good reason—the Kids Cafe was no longer one of the few places where children could go for food and encouragement. The United Way's Community School Program, which includes Pfeiffer-Burleigh and all of the city's public schools, has been in place now for almost ten years. Their work has strengthened students' access to healthy food and enrichment opportunities. They have brought in hundreds of volunteers to work with children and their families on the issues that matter the most in their lives. This program and others are far more comprehensive than what the Kids Cafe offered, and so, for the Board of Directors, it made sense to close the Kids Cafe at the end of the school year, and go into a time of discernment about how the space could be better used to meet the current food needs of the neighborhood.

“The Board of Directors named a subcommittee comprised of board members, the coordinator of the Kids Cafe, and community members at large who work for food access on Erie's east side to look more closely at the Kids Cafe and current reality. After many conversations and broad exploration, they returned to the Board with a recommendation to close Kids Cafe and repurpose the space for other efforts that support our mission,” explained board member Sister Linda Romey. “It was not an easy decision but knowing that the children are cared for made it possible to consider other options. We're excited about following our mission in new and creative ways.”

When longtime director Sister Mary Miller was asked about her hopes for the future of Emmaus, she always said that her dream was to eventually close the ministry. She imagined that someday, the whole community would take such good care of the vulnerable that there would no longer be a need for people to come to programs like the Kids Cafe. Some part of this dream comes true as children who once came to Emmaus now find what they need in their schools and neighborhoods.



Clockwise from top left: Sister Mary Miller (left), longtime Emmaus Director with Ann Vinca, longtime Kids Cafe Coordinator; Emmaus Staff Margaret Kloecker surrounded by Kids Cafe children; a young girl shops for gifts at the Christmas store; Sister Dianne Sabol plays basketball with the boys.

For the Record

Emmaus Board Members Help Imprisoned Immigrants



Emmaus Board Members Sister Anne McCarthy (left) and Sister Joan Chittister (right) attend a rally.

Imagine being imprisoned in a place where guards do not speak your language, unable to see your family and uncertain of what lies ahead for you. Thousands of immigrants, across the country and here in Erie, are in this situation now during the current crackdown on immigrants. They are transferred quickly from one prison to another, usually staying in Erie for less than a week, and visits with family and friends are only allowed on Saturdays, when they may have already been sent far away to another facility.

If they are able to afford to retain a lawyer, however, they can see their legal

counsel outside of visiting hours. Those visits are an important—but not inexpensive—opportunity to learn about their options and to relay information to their loved ones. Emmaus Board members Sisters Joan Chittister and Anne McCarthy are making it possible for more of these detained migrants to access legal help through their work with the Joan Chittister Fund for Prisoners.

For decades, this Fund has sent spirituality materials to people who are incarcerated across the country. But the Sisters saw an opportunity to establish a designated line, the Erie Legal Retainer Fund, specifically for immigrants who are in Erie County Prison and need assistance in retaining a lawyer. Attorney fees are \$250 for an hour of counsel, an hour that provides realistic advice, messages from home, and human dignity. If you're able, consider supporting our brothers and sisters through this Fund at the QR code to the right.



For the Record

Bundles of Joy: 30th Annual Coat Distribution Held at Emmaus

Winters in Erie are long and hard, with potentially lethal temperatures for weeks on end. It takes good quality boots, coats, hats, and gloves to get through safely. Fortunately, for the last thirty years, Emmaus guests have been able to count on the annual coat drive organized by Kelley Glass and her friend Andrea Hallman.

The drive is so well-established that generous members of their parish, Saint Jude Catholic Church, don't have to be nudged to participate, Kelley said. "People absolutely count on it. A lot of times, Andrea and I are just asked by our friends, 'What's the date?'"

The savvy donors purchase winter clothing, and donate their gently used items, to outfit everyone who will need them, from newborns to senior citizens, from those in poorly-insulated apartments to those who are living on the streets and vying for shelter beds.

This year's coat giveaway took place on Nov. 3, a relatively mild day before the deep freeze hit Erie in December and January. "I love that we get things distributed before that first snowfall," Kelley said.

Volunteers and Emmaus staff arrived an hour before doors opened at 9 a.m. to sort through bundles of donations that Kelley, Andrea, and their friends had gathered at church that weekend.

When shoppers entered, helpers were there to find the right size and style and to compliment people on their choices. There was an occasional wrinkle. For example, a pregnant woman was looking for maternity clothes but there weren't any to fit someone expecting twins. A volunteer suggested that a nearby social service agency within walking distance could help and an appointment was quickly arranged. No one was left to face the cold alone.

"Every single year, it leaves you with that best feeling," said Kelley. "Any little bit helps—that's how the two Marys (late director Sister Mary Miller and late Founding Mother Sister Mary Lou Kownacki) would have looked at it," she said.



Top: Andrea Hallman packs up coats. Opposite Left: Emmaus Staff Jane Wagner helps a guest choose a coat. Opposite Right: Kelley Glass shows items to a guest.



For the Record

Emmaus Remembers Bill Hess

Bill Hess never arrived at Emmaus without a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. A regular guest at the soup kitchen, he knew our names, too. So when we heard that Bill tragically died after being struck by a car while crossing the street, we lost a bit of the twinkle in our lives.



Bill Hess shows off his blazer.

Bill was thrilled to receive a crisp blazer at the coat drive this past November. He arrived at the soup kitchen many evenings wearing the blazer, showing off the perfect fit and sharing his joy with everyone he encountered.

There's something poignant about the reality that Bill died while attempting to cross the street. At Emmaus, we accompany people through the daily journeys of their lives, always on the way with them. And yet we know that we only see a sliver of the long and often lonely roads that all of us walk. Let Bill's life and death be a reminder to be as kind as we can in the small encounters we share with others each day.

Emmaus Ministries Remembers

We are grateful to family members who asked that memorials be made to Emmaus in the names of their deceased loved ones:

Robert Allshouse
Mary Andrews
Kay Blinzler
Mary Julia "Judy" Brieger
Jacqueline Bukowski
Hubert Cioccio
Joseph "Joe" Fitzpatrick

Ramona Guarino
Mary Rose Hogenmiller
Jean McGuire
Betsy Mitchell
Robert "Bob" Teconchuk
Ann Wilson

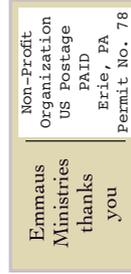
We also remember our faithful volunteers who have passed away:

Bill Reid Cunningham
Rose Marie DiBuono
Ronald Jankowski

STAFF: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Margaret Kloecker; Rosanne Lindal-Hynes, OSB; Catherine Simon; Jane Wagner; Susan Doubet, OSB; Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB; Liz Allen; Carly DiFuccia; Tom Hoffman
COMPANION STAFF: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB; Liz Allen

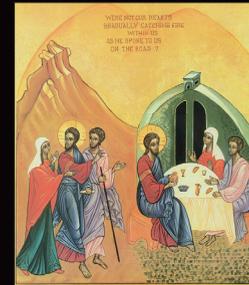


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EMMAUS ICON
Icon Road to Emmaus
Iconographer: Sister Marie-Paul, OSB
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Image provided by The Printery House of Conception Abbey



They came to know Christ in the breaking of the bread.

Luke 24:35

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