

THE OPEN DOOR

FROM THE CORE COMMUNITY AT ANDRÉ HOUSE SPRING 2021



*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit
you may abound in*

HOPE

Romans 15:13 NIV



HOLY GROUND Fr. Bill Dorwart, CSC André House Spiritual Director

"The face of every human being who suffers is for us the face of Jesus who mounted the cross to take the sting out of death. Ours must be the same cross and the same hope." (Holy Cross Constitution 8:114)

On occasion a ship will remain some distance from the shore before taking its place at the pier. It will pause midstream, as an anchor disappears into the deep where it touches the unseen earth below. Before long, water will entice the vessel to go with the flow. However, when the anchor-chain becomes taut, the ship holds its ground and does not get carried away by the changing tide. The wind will then blow one way and then another cajoling the craft to come along. But again, ship cannot be seduced and unmoored, as it moves around that trustworthy anchor. As we make our way through the ebb and flow of life's challenges, the Cross of Jesus, and the hope it bears is our anchor. (Hebrews 18:19) While the allure of worldly power and security seek to seduce and distract us trying to carry us in its sway, the self-sacrificing love of the Lord keeps us grounded in our faith and the promise of God's kingdom.

During the past year we have witnessed inconceivable suffering. The Pandemic has stunned the world leaving the faces of those who cannot breathe and those who mourn etched in our memory. Loss of life and livelihood have become a painful reality while caregivers and resources have been stretched to the limit. Yet, despite the challenges and heartbreak, as we make our way through and beyond this trial, this is a grounding moment for us to unleash the hope that resides at the heart of our Christian faith.

I am grateful, because at André House I have seen that undying hope bear fruit. Each morning begins with a promising prayer, placing the day in the context of who we are as a people of faith: "...behold, the Kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:21) During that ritual, petitions are regularly voiced on behalf of those in need, entrusting them to God's providential care. Then following this brief utterance of faith and reassurance, the duties of the day soon take over as an extension of that prayer and an expression of that care. Despite hardship and adversity groups of devoted volunteers and staff fan out to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, feed the hungry and care for the burdened. (Matt 25:33-36) The hands-on gospel is proclaimed bearing hope.

The journey continues to unfold. Amid the suffering and various challenges we inevitably face along the way, a surge of doubt may wash over us from time to time or the storm of discouragement may seek to steer us off course, but it is the Cross and the countenance of Jesus that touch our faith stirring our deepest hope; it is his trustworthy voice that beckons: "Come, follow me."



HOPE DOES NOT DISAPPOINT

Fr. Dan Ponisciak, CSC Executive Director, André House



“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Romans 5:1-5)

We have endured a long year. On March 17, 2020, the dining room at Andre House closed and we asked our beloved volunteers to stay home in order to protect the health and well-being of those experiencing homelessness. No one ever imagined a world where our volunteers would not be able to be present at Andre House. We had envisioned an economic collapse and what we would have to do to keep Andre House afloat, but who could have predicted that a global pandemic would strike and we'd need to a heart-wrenching decision.

Hope has been something that over the past year has been in short supply, not just here at Andre House, but around the world. The Covid-19 pandemic, in many respects, has stolen our joy and our ability to look into the future past the next day. It has taken over 500,000 parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren's lives and left many families to pick up the pieces. It has taken our ability to gather as an Andre House community for celebratory events like Hello, Goodbye! when we welcome the new core staff and say goodbye (see you later) to the outgoing staff, The Washing of the Feet on Holy Thursday and First Friday Mass and dinners. And yet, we have a small glimmer of hope...

The Andre House community has a small glimmer of hope primarily because of a gift that the Human Services Campus gave to us. They got us the vaccine! Over the past 18+ months since I've had the privilege to serve the Andre House Community as Director, I've been able to collaborate with Amy Schwabendlender, the Executive Director of the Human Services Campus located across the street from Andre House. Amy has been a wonderful mentor and friend to me since my arrival and was instrumental throughout our zoning petition for an increase of shelter beds in our neighborhood. While the Andre House shelter was not approved by the City of Phoenix, we continue to work with hope in collaboration with Amy and her team in advocating for our friends experiencing homelessness.

Through our work with the Human Services Campus, the Andre House staff and our guests, were prioritized in receiving the vaccine when it became available. It was so important not just for our staff who have sacrificed so much over the past year, but also for our guests to be able to receive a shot of hope that the next year will look different at Andre House. Hope, finally, that the pandemic God-willing is coming to an end and we will be able to resume some of our normal services in the coming months, with the dining room potentially re-opening as long as everything continues to decrease, in September, 2021. We continue to trust in God's Providential love and we pray that this pandemic might end and be eradicated from the face of the Earth so that our Andre House Family can come back together at some point in the future to gather once again as a community sewn together by God's enduring grace.



HOPE IS FAITH an interview with Br. Richard Armstrong, CSC by Julia Blois Core Community 2019-21

*A year ago at this time, we had no idea what the coming weeks-turned-months would look like. Here at Andre House, all we knew was that we would keep going because we had to. When my mind would start to get caught up in the what ifs, and the unknown, there was the unflappable Brother Richard. This would be a time like no other for the Andre House community, but he was steady, and I took comfort in his readiness for whatever was to come, rooted in strong faith where mine, truthfully, wavered. He has been with Andre House for many seasons, and walked with many guests through the most difficult times of their lives. It was hard for me to imagine how he has been able to sustain his hope. So for this article, **I asked Brother if he would sit down with me so that I could ask him some questions**, knowing that what he would have to say would be a valuable message for all who might be read it.*

What comes to mind when you think about hope?

I think hope and faith are interchangeable. I believe that we are all children of God and just like with our material parents, we have an opportunity – or duty – to dwell on, “What is the will of our Father in heaven?” As time goes on, this becomes more and more clear and it changes – it evolves. We have to believe that God is a loving, caring God. Just like we have to believe that our natural parents should be - and are - loving and caring and they desire for our wellbeing. The more that we become one with the will of the Father, we will become true sons and daughters of what God wants us to do.

What is hope for you in the context of Andre House?

When I think of Andre House, I think of the people that we serve – or the people that we allow to serve us - and realize that we are the hands and feet of God. If the message of Christ is going to happen, it’s going to have to come through us. One thing that I think is detrimental to the homeless, our guests, is we tend to feel sorry for them. I think we oftentimes do not understand what they really need more than a toothbrush. We have an obligation or duty to bring about hope to people. And the only way you can do that is by example. And that’s what we try to do. We are people of hope, of faith, and we have to rely on the fact that Christ said that He will always be with us. Ask and you shall receive. A good parent knows what we need, and we have an obligation to investigate what our role is and we have a duty to share it.

How has your sense of hope changed over time? What have you learned about hope at Andre House?

The way that I look at life at 74 differs from how I looked at life at the age of 18. Anyone that’s open to their experience, and I’ve been here 34 years, changes their approach. I think the most striking thing that happens to me is when I look at the guests that are sleeping in tents, who really don’t have much, from my perspective, and ask them, “How are you today?” Inevitably, they say, “Blessed.” It’s taken me awhile to understand how you can be on the street and feel blessed. But then I look around, and I say, what are they doing that is essential for life? They don’t have a lot to give materially, but they tend to be charitable to us and to each other - they help. I think that coming from the middle class there was always that idea of striving for money, and prestige... and I have come to realize that those are not really the things that you need. What you need to do is rely on God and your fellow human beings. And give and love and care. I think that’s what’s changed more than anything else.

What is your hope for Andre House and its people as we move into the future?

I hope that all humankind will realize that God does not want people to suffer. God does not send pain. Therefore, if there is pain in the world, it is caused by fellow human beings. My hope would be that the world would realize that we’re all in this together. That’s what we really need. The pain of being homeless, the pain of not having money to feed your family would end if there was an equal distribution of wealth. I would hope that day by day the core, the staff, the institution of Andre House can help advocate for this change in the world and would have the basic belief that God has provided all we need.

Brother Richard then asked me “In what way do you think you are a different person today than you were when you first walked into Andre House? Are you less materialistic?” **“For sure,” I said.**

And that should allow you, which I’m sure it does, to be open to other people’s needs – which supersede, maybe, your own personal needs, and in my opinion, that’s the way that people connect. You know, when John the Baptist said, “He must increase, I must decrease,”– that’s kind of what we stand for. When you rely on things... it’s destructive. The more we can strip away of that, the more we open ourselves to share and receive – that’s important. I think what most of us need to do is to try to learn to love ourselves, and believe that we have merit, and believe that we have stuff to give. And believe that there are people out there who want to receive it.

*In the Andre House community, we rely on faith and, thus, hope every day as we strive to make God known, loved, and served, by knowing, loving, and serving our guests. **In Brother Richard’s words**, “I pray that we believe and act upon the fact that God has given us all we need. And we need to share what God has given us. Because in giving, we shall receive.”*

As Holy Cross religious, we are oft reminded that we are “Men with hope to bring.” In the pronunciation of our vows, we affirm daily that we are witnesses to the Almighty, transfiguring sin and death from seemingly hopeless situations into avenues of love and new life. Here at Andre House, desiring to bring hope to the myriads of people we encounter often requires repeated attempts, as well as routine reorienting of one’s self. Regardless of the situation, in an experienced setback, the journey must be reignited in the planting of a new seed, not the tree that necessarily failed but one which still has room to grow and flourish anew.

Our severely mentally ill guests or SMI as the shorthand term is used, typically possess some of the largest of these swings from relatively stable healthy lives and interactions to incongruous meldings of friends and foes where the expected reality is despair. Sometimes names change, on other days they remain the same or revert to a prior usage. Every so often a calm conversationalist demeanor is shown and the next day a stark change to emotions of rage and misunderstanding leading to possible violence. Nevertheless, in ministering to those who are experiencing both severe mental illness and homelessness a whole array of cares and concerns are in play at any given moment. These guests of ours tend to be the most vulnerable but also the easiest to miss. Especially in traditional shelter models, in which a baseline of calm and collectedness is required, there exists little-to-no-room for error in the ups-and-downs of living with self-medicated severe mental illness. Therefore, many of our guests who fall under this situation often are left with no place for them, they are already outcast from main-stream society and typically are outcast even from among the community of others experiencing homelessness.

One of our hopes in working through such situations was the creation of a low-barrier shelter. While hope remains on this avenue, the reluctance of local leaders and populace to such a place existing put a damper on each of us and in real ramifications continues to leave the most vulnerable out in the drastic changelings of the Arizona weather without a plan going forward.

A different hope that often brings us to new life is our restorative justice program for our guests. While in the past we had at times attempted to codify the time-off a guest needed for a specific infraction affecting our hospitality ministry, over the past two years rather than always just excluding people we seek to foster a conversation between all the affected parties. This way we can try to address the root issues at hand rather than taking merely punitive measures. This proactive array does not always work but usually fares far better in creating base points of community and continuity between us and our guests.

Sometimes restorative justice can work with our SMI guests, but the results can also be easily forgotten. The days changes as do the people, but the hope each of us carries with us at Andre House is for the long goal of ending homeless. We strive to meet people where they are at, some days one of us may not be the right person to engage a person, some days none of us are, but regardless of what occurred we continue to push forward to be a stable presence for everyone on their journey. A touchpoint of stability that everyone should try to be in engaging with individuals at rough spots in their lives. We are not always perfect, we do not always take the right action, but we dwell in hope that those we encounter, no matter their state of life, may know that they are beloved children of God and may see those around and among them likewise. May each of us know that we are loved by God and in turn be God’s love enshrined unto others.



Things feel really broken. That's probably a weird way to begin a newsletter article about hope, but it's the truth. I've been at Andre House for over a year and a half now, and I am still constantly surprised by how broken our systems are. Or maybe they aren't broken if this is how they were designed to function. Honestly, it feels so overwhelming at times to look around and see injustice abound. In loving so many people at Andre House, I have seen and heard firsthand how our systemic and societal failures have very personal effects. It doesn't feel so lofty and abstract when I know dozens of people whose prior felony convictions hold them back from housing and jobs. When guests I love are in dire need of mental health care in a system that will support them, but the only option that exists seems to be incarceration, so that is where they are cast. When another young person ages out of the foster care system and ends up right on the street. When my friend, Robert—a young black man in mental health crisis—had his face pressed into the hot asphalt by an officer just weeks after George Floyd was murdered. When our friends with addictions, pets, and other barriers to shelter were given the message by the Phoenix City Council that their lives are not “worth it” as a shelter that would serve them was struck down. When over 600 people experiencing homelessness in Maricopa County passed away on the streets in 2020, but many of their lives are honored by nothing more than a PVC pipe and a brick in a dirt field.

We have created a world in which it is ok for a human being to live in a tent on a sidewalk, in which this is the option we present to people instead of creating spaces where everyone can thrive.

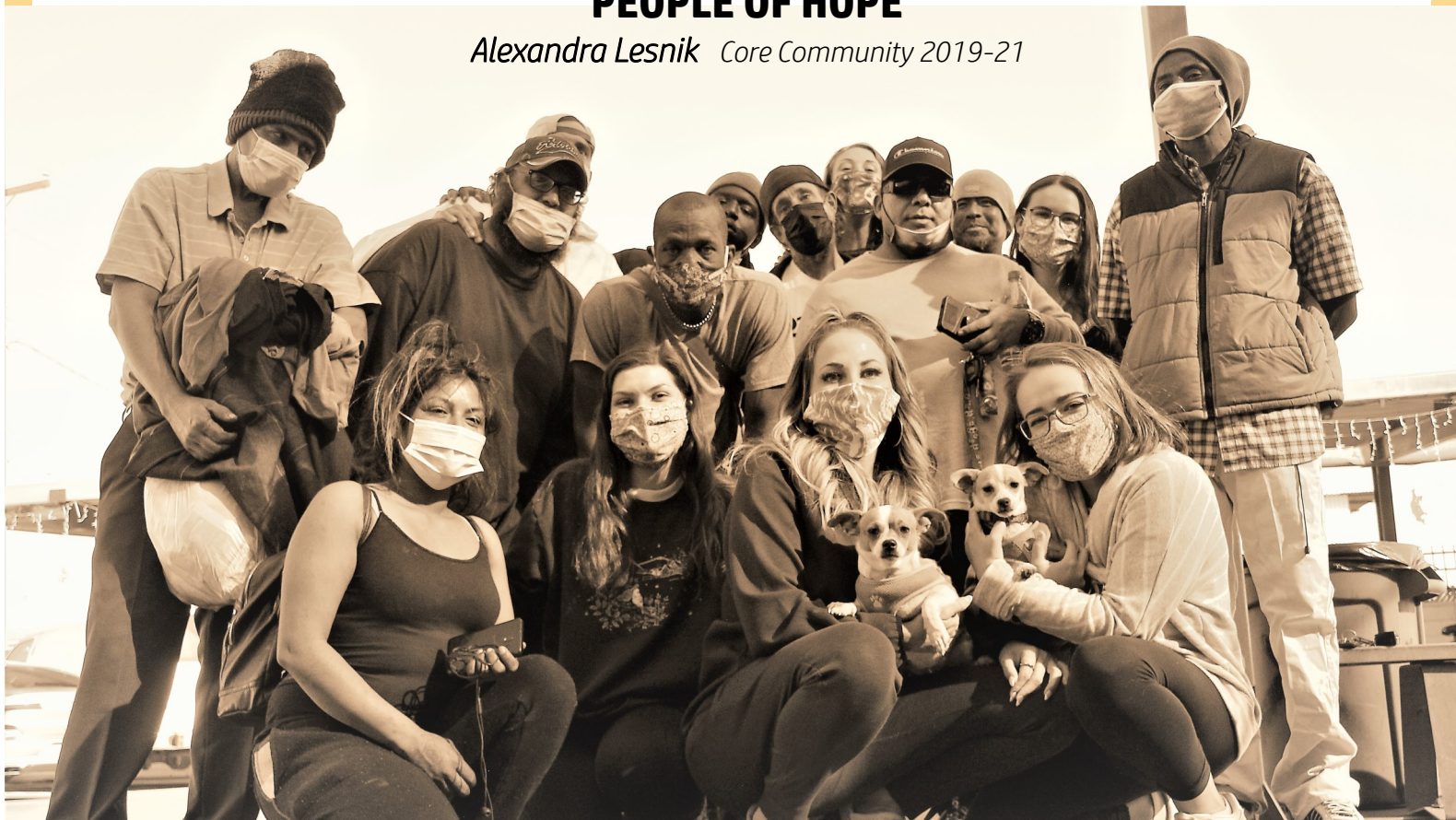
A former core staff member, Liz, wrote a holiday letter this past winter, and a question she posed has really stuck with me: how do we continue to be people of hope amidst so much darkness and hurt? It seems pessimistic to talk about all of this failure and brokenness but think about how much optimism we have to have to believe that we can create a better world. I think that may take more hope than anything else. All these injustices that I speak about here did not happen to me, and I would never claim that my experience of them is anywhere near that of my friends who have to live them every single day. But I don't know any other way to honor these friends than to continue to seek change in systems that hold them down. We cannot heal things if we do not acknowledge they are broken.

In a 1969 letter, Dorothy Day speaks of the need to “begin now within the shell of the old to rebuild society.” In our old society, many people are cast to the side, forgotten, and abused. But the person of hope inside of me tells me there must be a better way. So amidst the darkness, the hurt, the wrong, we must continue to have faith that we can rebuild our society founded on love, compassion, and true justice for *all*.

As I finish up my second year at Andre House and move on to law school in the fall and whatever else may come, I hope to take the words of Cornel West with me: “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” The love I have found here amidst a fractured society will inspire me to seek a more just and right world where everyone can be lifted up. Let all of us people of hope take our love public and work to rebuild a new society in the shell of our old.

PEOPLE OF HOPE

Alexandra Lesnik Core Community 2019-21





Julia

Grace

Alexandra

I've learned a wide assortment of lessons over the course of my time at André House: everything from how to coordinate the cooking and feeding of 600 spaghetti meals, how to properly clean a toilet, and the many paradoxes of life. One of the latter is that hope seems most evident during times of despair.

I think of the second night of running services during our Covid response. It was an André House without volunteers and what felt like not enough resources to transition our services outside. That night ended with mac and cheese, some tears, and a very crowded kitchen couch. We chatted about ways to work through it and hoped to find creative ways to love our guests.

I think of those who have passed away due to medical complications, overdoses, and the desert heat and a night spent on the sidewalk. In the wake of their deaths, few things felt comforting, but working towards change did. On my computer, I taped a note with the infamous words of James, a friend who died from the heat last summer, "What are you gonna do about it, bub?" I aspired to answer his question with my advocacy work during the second year program.

I think of the zoning case decision that did not go our way; a vote that ensured more beds, but not a shelter that can reach the most vulnerable of our community. Our efforts felt futile and I for one felt defeated. The next day, I sat in the sun with Ash, our fearless leader throughout the whole process, as we discussed our loss it became evident that change is still possible, we can still move forward, and there is hope for the future.

I think of all that our little corner of Phoenix is. It's a place where fights break out at the drop of a hat, where people feel safer when armed, and where drugs run wild. Sometimes it can feel like the difficult situations of the zone are all too-consuming, and it becomes easy to forget about the light and love that exist there. It's a place with its own challenges, but it's also a place where strangers share cigarettes, offer food to each other, to the pigeons, to other peoples' dogs. It's a place where people choose their own families and where one may use their food stamps with someone else to go buy sodas to sell on the street. It's a place where someone can get a shower, a new pair of shoes and a toothbrush. There is violence, but there is so much love and generosity.

I think of one morning in particular, spent hanging out on the sidewalk with Posie. We sat side by side eating strawberry popsicles that I smuggled us from the kitchen freezer, staring at this building with wings on its side and the Holy Cross logo in front, as she rolled cigarettes out of pages of the Bible. I can't help but think that God's got a good sense of humor and that just maybe, in these moments, we're gifted a chance to embrace it all. In loving each other and drawing strength from community, we can continue to hope.



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MAKING GOD KNOWN, LOVED and SERVED

