

THE OPEN DOOR

From the Core Community of André House Spring 2020



"I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me....."

Matthew 25:35-36

LOVE RESPECT KINDNESS DIGNITY

Fr. Dan Ponisciak, C.S.C. Director, André House

What are the top ten needs of those experiencing homelessness? Earlier this year, André House established a partnership with the Director of Social Work at Grand Canyon University, Dr. Kathleen Downey. This partnership has allowed our Core staff to meet regularly with professors within the department for continuing education addressing topics such as substance abuse, trauma and motivational interviewing. Our last session focused on the needs of those experiencing homelessness. At this session, we were joined by freshman students from GCU who are researching the answer to the question at the beginning of this article. What are the needs of those experiencing homelessness?



It's a simple question really. It's a question that can easily be searched online with a variety of lists explaining what people need. Among the more popular items include clothing, restroom access, food, shelter, hygiene products, etc. These were also the needs that the students from GCU shared with us as well. However, when our staff was asked what the needs of our guests experiencing homelessness are – the answers were slightly different.

Certainly, we identified the needs to include the normal, expected answers, but we also identified less quantifiable items. Love, Respect, Kindness, Dignity...needs that cannot be measured, but nonetheless are certainly needs of those experiencing homelessness. The difference we identified in knowing what one's needs are, can be found through relationship – through getting to know someone for who they are created in the image and likeness of God.

We are a house of hospitality. Love, Respect, Kindness and Dignity are not just the needs of those experiencing homelessness, but rather are the needs of everyone. But, those of us who are not actively experiencing homelessness can sometimes take these needs for granted because for the most part we receive them on a daily basis. Our guests can feel ignored, cast aside, invisible to the rest of the world. Our hope here at André House is that no one ever feels abandoned or disrespected. Our hope is that through our hospitality that we can welcome people and meet people where they are by getting to know their names and offering counsel in response to their present state of life. Our hope is to be Christ for them – to encounter people through love, through kindness, through respect by acknowledging their God-given dignity.

It is through this love and compassion that we show our guests on a daily basis that led the André House team to pursue something we are not as familiar with – Shelter. If you've been down to the "zone" lately, you've noticed many, many tents set up around the neighborhood where André House is located. We have been working for many months with the City of Phoenix to have this neighborhood re-zoned so those sleeping outside can sleep inside. We are working with a potential partner to run a low barrier shelter next door to André House to serve the most vulnerable people experiencing homelessness in our area. We are thankful that just recently Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego has expressed her support for this proposal and is working with City staff to address many other issues that affect our guests including more affordable housing.

André House has a long and rich history of serving as a beacon of hope for those who have no hope. We serve our guests through the love of the One who first loved us, suffered for us and died for us that we might live. We offer kindness and respect to all who walk through our gate no matter who they are because that is what Christ did. He loved all those who He encountered and so we are called to do the same.





FAMILY

Alexandra Lesnik Core Staff

“Why are they doing this to us? This is my home. This is my family.”

Jane and I were standing in the middle of the street in front of André House. It was 6 AM, and the newly administered street clean-up was beginning for the first time. Jane and I embraced as she cried into my shoulder. Our hearts were hurting together, immersed in a sea of sadness and frustration as people had their lives uprooted.

Recently, Jane was diagnosed with HIV. Again, Jane cried into my shoulder as I cried with her. One of her first concerns was how her family, near and far, blood and chosen, would react to her diagnosis. As we drove to a nearby clinic, we talked about all of the people that she wanted to talk to, to have by her side, to know what was going on in her life—the list was long. Some people, she had known for years. Some much shorter. But most people were from the Zone, the little neighborhood around André House where so many dwell.

It says in the Gospel of John that “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Recently, I have become fixated on a different translation from the original Greek that is particularly vivid considering life at André House: “God pitched his tent among us.” How profound a statement when looking around the Zone, a place where hundreds and hundreds of people live in tents on sidewalks in a 4 by 2 block area. A place where Christ lives all around, down every block and on every street corner. But amidst the suffering, beauty. So many, like Jane, build relationships, build families with those by their sides.

Humans are adaptable. Humans are strong. Humans work to create community wherever they go.

Jane is adaptable. Jane is strong. Jane has built a community where she is. And I am inspired by her every day—by how she has worked to get health insurance when nothing was going right, by how she is checking the boxes to get on food stamps, by how she has taken charge of her health, by how she loves her family.

Jane is chronically homeless like so many of our guests—she has lived on the street for two years consistently, and she has been homeless before. I cannot help but think of all the ways the systems are failing her and how many barriers there are as she tries to fight her way out. I wish that it was even nearly as easy to exit homelessness as it is to enter it.

What we need is shelter, a place for people to be safe at night, a place to actually find rest. Imagine how different our neighborhood may look. Imagine how many opportunities could be accessed when safety is achieved. Jane has done amazing things for herself, but I hope for a day when it doesn't have to be so *hard*.

For now, our guests will continue to find home in each other, in the families that that have built.



Head on a Pillow *Julia Blois Core Staff*

I walked outside for my Wednesday morning porter shift, ready to greet our guests as they entered the gates. Kayla rode up on her bike. I hadn't seen her in a while – she was around a lot until she got a shelter bed in another part of the city. I told her it was good to see her, and that she looked great – she really was glowing. “Man, it's getting bad down here,” she remarked, “Like, really bad. Aren't you all supposed to be opening a shelter for us?”

About an hour later Tanya rolled through on her bike. She always knows what's going on in our neighborhood. “Where's Debbie?” she asked. “They found a body over on ninth.”

My heartbeat propelled me down Jackson, and the faces of everyone I know staying on ninth flipped like files through my head. There were police cars and investigation vans and caution tape blocking off a section of the street. The uniforms were huddled around a pair of light wash jeans and tan suede boots sticking out from behind a tent.

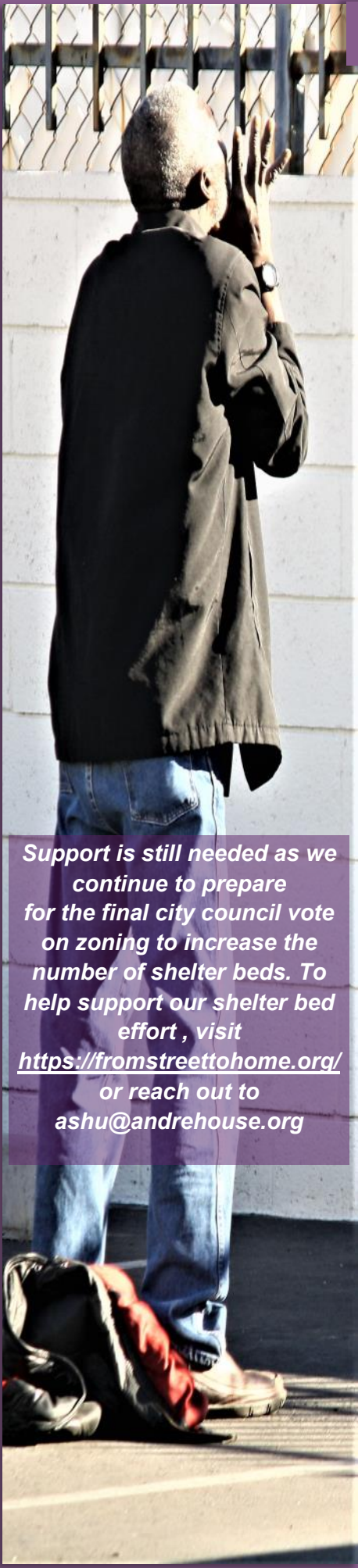
The city cleanup crew that barrels through the zone every week was making their way closer, bringing noise and chaos along with them, but it was quiet still on the corner where I stood. I stepped away while they enveloped the man in white. The investigators took careful pictures capturing how the curves of the body bag laid against the sleeping bag he had taken his final breaths in. The Bobcats and neon vests approached our reverence with increasing volume and vibration. The investigators lifted his body onto a stretcher. And while there was still some semblance of mourning in this little corner of the world, they placed under his head a clean, white pillow. I wondered when the last time was that this man had slept in a bed with his head on one.

As they rolled him into the van, the clamor of the clean up tore down the caution tape. The folks with hoes and rakes and a job to do fell out of line and got to work. They'd been waiting to erase what couldn't be claimed and moved out of the way by a man no longer living. The back doors of the van shut and I stepped over the yellow plastic barrier, eyes welling. I just stared at where he had been. I traced his bedding and belongings with my eyes so that I would remember. Navy blue sleeping bag on top of a brown blanket. Black sweatpants rolled up neatly. Green tube of Blistex with the cap off. I don't know why I was inspecting so closely; I think I felt the need to bear witness. Because the parade was coming through to clean up his “mess”. Within the half hour, his possessions were gone. By sunset, someone else was sleeping in his place.

There are 425 beds at CASS. Every night they are filled. Every night there are just as many people sleeping outside the big black gates. We need more beds. We need to let people come inside. The situation is made complicated, but it is really that simple. We have the room. We have a plan. We are ready to provide a bed for each of the roughly 1,000 people who use the services in our area each day. We just need your help.

It is getting worse, as Kayla noted that morning – but it is going to get better. We now have tentative support from our mayor, and steps are slowly being taken by our local government officials to make it so that sleeping on the street is not the only option for hundreds of their constituents.

When I got back to the building that Wednesday morning, I went to the chapel with my rosary and stared tearfully at the crucifix on the wall. As long as His children do, God sleeps on these streets. If we truly believe that we are commissioned by Him in the way of Matthew 25, we will view making these beds accessible not only a duty, but a privilege. It is a privilege to serve God as we serve our guests. I pray that each one of them will soon be allowed to lay in a bed, with their head on a pillow.



Support is still needed as we continue to prepare for the final city council vote on zoning to increase the number of shelter beds. To help support our shelter bed effort, visit <https://fromstreettohome.org/> or reach out to ashu@andrehouse.org

Rounding Third and Heading Home

Michael O'Sullivan Core Staff

A short story portraying the lives of three André House Baseball players. André House Baseball is a bi-weekly baseball game for staff, volunteers, and guests. The focus is fun and community. Today's starting lineup...

The Shortstop

6:30 sunrise, it's gameday. Cars fly past my tent. No more sleep today. The unflinching alarm.

Off to breakfast at André House. Waiting in line for a small cup of coffee. Sitting on the bench for an hour before food is ready. Tired, hungry, but I'm excited today.

Today I'm playing baseball. André House Baseball. I'm pumped up. I come out of the daydream and look around at the benches. Back to the grind. Day after day. Waiting in line for meals. Surrounded by my family of strangers. But, hey! There's a familiar face! That's our DH and it's gameday!



The Designated Hitter

Oof! Someone bring me my plate of food! My legs don't work well and my right hand even less. It took me an hour to walk one mile to the game last week. I walk everywhere I go. Back and forth between my shelter and every meal. A quarter mile to the shower. A trip back for the bathroom. Life on the street is not easy, and my health does not help. But I'll do whatever it takes to get to the game today. I love baseball, and wouldn't miss this for the world.

The first game, I was the first one there. I watched from the sidelines... didn't even take batting practice. I worked my way up...next week I took a few swings...the week after that I had some live at bats. Now I'm an everyday player. I run the bases like everyone else. I'm the DH and I love to play. I've been at every game, and so has our second baseman.



The Second Baseman

Finally. For two weeks I've been waiting for this day. It's baseball Saturday. Jersey on.

Ready to leave my tiny apartment, I step outside and feel the sunshine. Great day for baseball, as I breathe in the Phoenix air. Life's good. I moved off the street last year and have my own place. I'm not working right now, but food stamps and social security are getting me through. I'm bored out of my mind. But today, it's gameday...and I can't wait to play.



Today, I'm having fun. Today, I'm swinging for the fences and cheering on my teammates. I get to run around and give a little baseball chatter. "Gimme the high cheese. The low gouda. The middle cheddar." Gameday is the best. I'm the second baseman and Baseball Saturday is my favorite day of the week.



“¿Aquí?” José looked at us with wide eyes. We guided him to the bench he'd call home for the night and tried our best to set him up with blankets, gloves, and a hat and scarf. “Sí, aquí. Lo siento mucho, pero no hay camas disponibles.” Yes, here, I'm sorry, but there's no available beds.

“Ten cuidado, José.” Take care, José - my parting words to a man I met just hours before.

José had recently gotten out of the hospital and was dropped off in the zone, close to the Human Services Campus. A passerby brought him to André House after noticing he was incontinent, disoriented, and had difficulty walking on his own. Another core staff member helped him shower and dress. When they finished, we chatted over a big plate of spaghetti as the rest of the building was cleaned and locked up.

After finishing their nightly duties, two other staff members joined in the conversation - one filled with hand gestures and miming. Even across a language barrier, we shared jokes and learned that José loved to sing. But as José finished dinner, the inevitable arrived. José had nowhere to go and we had nowhere to offer. I asked him if he wanted a ride to somewhere he would feel safe staying.

The four of us piled into a car and set off for the Light Rail station on Central Ave. Although it had been his suggestion, José seemed weary of sleeping there. We all lingered a bit, not totally sure how to end our time together. How does one abandon another human? Is it possible to do so gracefully?

Despite his weariness, and our feelings of abandonment, soon the three of us were back in our car, headed for home. The three of us rode in silence, consumed by feelings of sorrow, desolation and helplessness.

There we left José, a man who could make anyone laugh no matter their first language, who loves singing, and who can eat any amount of spaghetti put before him, on a bench in late November.

There we left José, a man who cannot walk on his own, who is incontinent, who has only the clothes he wears, two blankets and backpack, on a bench in late November.

There we left a man on a bench in late November.

There we left a man.

Ten cuidado, José.





"We're preoccupied for our own things, and we forget the children who are hungry, we forget the poor people at the borders who are seeking freedom, these forced migrants fleeing hunger and war who find only walls - walls made of iron, of barbed wire, but walls that don't let them pass. We know this happens, but it doesn't pass [to our hearts]. We live in indifference. It's our drama, to be well-informed but not to feel the reality of the other. This is the abyss of indifference.

Today we ask the Lord for the grace not to fall into indifference, the grace that all the information about human suffering we have, will go down into the heart and move us to do something for others."

Pope Francis 3/12/2020





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