

# THE OPEN DOOR

*From the Core Community of André House Summer 2020*

## ANDRE HOUSE CHRONICLES OF COVID

*June 19, 2020*

**Where** *Fr. Dan Ponisiak, C.S.C.*

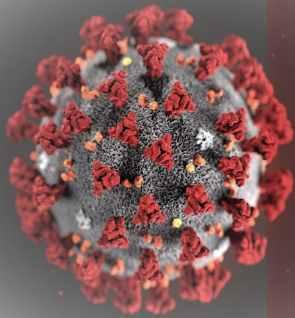
“Where can we go?” It’s a question that is posed to André House staff almost every day at this point. The neighborhood where Andre House is located commonly called “the zone” has changed over the last several months. In early February, the sweeps began. Residents sleeping in tents on the public easements were required to pack up their belongings every Wednesday morning and move so the area could be cleaned. At the end of the cleaning, they were allowed to return and set up their tents once again. This weekly cleaning was extraordinarily challenging to those who are homeless, but especially challenging for those who are homeless and who are working full-time. Imagine needing to call out sick every Wednesday not because of something you have control over, but because if you don’t, you’ll lose your home. Lately, silver poles connected by chains have appeared on the public easements and people have been forced to move either to a temporary shelter space that was set up by Maricopa County to allow people to choose to have extra room during this time of COVID or to go somewhere else. Where will people go when the temporary shelter space closes in a couple of months? Once again, we will ask “Where can we go?”

When did we, as a society, become offended by one’s housing status? I don’t get offended by the “housed.” Situations like what is currently happening in our neighborhood are happening all over the country. San Francisco. Seattle. Los Angeles. South Bend. Phoenix. Police are ordered, by someone, to clear out encampments because someone who has more power over the situation has decided that the presence of people in tents is offensive to them or that they know what is better for the people experiencing homelessness. Instead of simply telling people “you need to move,” can we work for a better solution – a solution that emphasizes our shared human dignity. A solution that focuses on our shared humanity rather than what detriment homelessness might have on our individual lives. We have a solution. It’s called “**From Street to Home.**”

Homelessness is not a choice. In these uncertain times, as the unemployment rate continues to climb due to COVID-19, homelessness will become the reality for many more people. A professor of economics at Columbia University estimates that there will be “an increase in homelessness by 40-45% this year over January 2019, an addition of nearly 250,000 people, if homelessness follows unemployment the way that it has done so in the earlier part of this century.” Where will all of these people go as encampments continue to be demolished or moved? My answer, I hope, will be “you can go to this shelter next door to André House where you’ll meet some wonderful case managers that can help you – that can help you find a home.” But in order for me to be able to give that answer, we need your help. The Human Services Campus and André House are petitioning the City of Phoenix to increase the number of shelter beds available to people experiencing homelessness in our neighborhood from 425 up to 1000. Of that 1000, 100 beds would be for a low barrier shelter next door to André House. 200 beds would be available for summer and winter weather relief. The remaining beds would be for the current shelter on the Human Services Campus, CASS. Help us give people choices. Help us support those experiencing homelessness by bringing people inside off the streets.

Visit our website [www.fromstreettohome.org](http://www.fromstreettohome.org) to learn about how you can help make this plan a reality.





## André House Chronicles of Covid

*moments of outreach during a pandemic*

On March 16, 2020 we closed our main dining room and cut back on some of our services for those experiencing homelessness. We released all of our volunteers. Our Core staff, support and administrative staff and Congregation of Holy Cross Priests and Brothers have been providing essential services as well as evening meals six days a week, for up to 800 people. ANDRE HOUSE CHRONICLES OF COVID has posted daily on our Facebook page. Here are some of those moments.

### March 18, 2020

Fr. Dan referred to it as our 1st André House picnic. We made it through the first day and first outside meal service. We have a very small staff so we continue to figure out the absolute necessities including running this meal service each evening. We served almost 700 meals last night. Styrofoam containers, Grace's spaghetti and incredible meat and veggie sauce, bread and butter sandwich and a fruit. We will be adjusting a few things.

A few comments from guests during the day:

"What the heck is going on? Corona Virus? Isn't corona a part of the eye?"

Most people when told responded with a wow and an immediate ask "What can we do to help you. we're here with no where to go. What can we do?"

We continue to count our blessings.

Today.... Rain.... new plans on how we serve our meals.

That's it until tomorrow.



### March 19, 2020

Yesterday, as we left the building it was raining hard. Folks were lined up, vying for the opportunity to sleep on a mat on the floor of the St. Vincent de Paul dining room. It was serving as weather relief shelter. CASS Shelter had to reduce it's numbers because of emergency regulations. And the dining room could only allow 40 people because of those regulations. Hundreds sleeping in the rain. No tents.

The day at André House was a learning experience again. New menu to go. Bagged. Hot Dog in a bun wrapped in foil. We made our own squares. Piece of fruit. Condiments and napkin. Hard boiled egg. Yep. 650 hard boiled eggs cooking in one huge pot. No we did not peel them after they were cooked.

Bag assembly line. Distributed off of the loading dock because of the rain. Water table under the solar panel overhang. As if the cups were capturing the rain.

Sanitize Sanitize Sanitize

People got clothing, took showers, used the restrooms.

No complaints. We could use prepackaged cutlery. packaged snacks. Lots of both. Makes things simpler. We have to simplify so we can sustain.

Best guest quote of the day "You know, this ain't what you think this is....you're messing this up... I mean people are buying toilet paper.." - a man who did not finish his sentence, shrugged and walked off.

Prayers





**March 26, 2020**

Last night, Wednesday, we served 817 meals. In one hour. The lines wrapped around the building all the way down 11th Ave. There are a lot of new faces in this line. We are blessed at this point that we are able to serve a meal with substance. A real meal. Most likely the only decent meal of the day. We want to keep doing that. Last night was the first night we served a take out dinner we purchased from a local restaurant. We served a pasta meal from Cibo Pizzeria. We were prepared to run out at some point and had Tuesday night's leftover spaghetti in the oven ready to go. Then we ran out of that and pulled cold but yummy turkey pasta meals from the big fridge. We do everything according to food safety guidelines so our guests are assured of their meals quality. The day services at André House continue as usual. Folks need to use the restroom. Only a few people can be let into the building at a time. It can be frustrating especially when folks don't quite understand what is going on. One man who was asked to wait exclaimed "I hope you crash and burn!" But another guest, Rocky, proclaimed "we are gonna get through this and at the end of everything we will be bigger and stronger and better... as long as we stick together." When you think about it, our guests on the street already know how to do this. They have been in survival mode for so long. They have been helping each other when no one else would. And now they are sticking together. They need each other. There is no ability to isolate yourself or practice social distancing when you are living in a tent on the street. And more folks are sleeping on the street due to the emergency guidelines just put in place by the state. So our guests do what they have always done, survive, in a fairly gracious way. We can all take a lesson from them.

Yes Rocky, we will get through this. As long as we stick together.



**April 1, 2020**

### **Food Bank**

Tuesday morning. Staff pulls into the covered parking area in front of St. Mary's Food Bank Agency Shopping building. Organizations across the city come here to acquire donated and low cost food items that help them achieve their mission. Every day our core staff go to the food bank early am to find treasures and staples to aid in the creation of the evening meal for 650 guests we serve that night. Usually a decent sized group of non profits like André House roll carts through the large doors in an organized but all at once manner. You are allotted one hour to gather what you need. There is usually an abundance of items and one is able to gather what is needed in a timely fashion.

In the days of COVID, obstacles prevail. Our time has changed slightly, each agency only has 1/2 and hour to get in and out and very few agencies are allowed in the shopping area at one time. Social food bank shopping distancing. Then there is the line outside. Waiting. A line of large agency carts that have been sanitized after each use. Calmly stationed, socially distanced apart. Front line responders from each agency (yes these agencies who are feeding the poor are on the front lines) these responders man these carts, some stacked with large coolers to hold refrigerated items, and plan their strategy to get in and out with what they need in an expedient and safe manner.

The wait is longer than usual. Our Core members will miss the 9AM mass for our staff. Their time comes. They move quickly through the big doorways and their mission is soon accomplished. There was no fruit available but they found yogurt and the bread needed for bread and butter sandwiches. Perfect. Tuesday night takeout meal will consist of wonderfully yummy spaghetti with meat and veggie sauce, salad, a bread and butter sandwich and YOGURT! Perfect.

We are blessed that the food bank is continuing to supply us with some of the things we need to create each evening meal in a nutritious manner. We appreciate the lengths that they have gone to guarantee a safe environment for all of us who need them more than ever. We are grateful for the years of partnership. Now, more than ever, we are all in this together. .... YOGURT!



**March 27, 2020**

**Willie Lee Birdsong**

Thursday morning. White Tanks County Cemetery. Weekly Interment of those individuals without family or means of burial. Members of André House are performing Rites of Christian Burial as well as praying over each of the 14 individuals. One particular person was part of our Andre House family. A very special guest who had been on the street many years and was part of our daily life at André House. This was his obituary notice as it appeared in February:

**Willie Lee Birdsong** Phoenix - 60, of Phoenix, AZ passed away January 7, 2020. If you have any information regarding this person, please call Legacy Funeral Home.

He was not claimed. But he had a family. André House and those who shared his life in the Zone were his family. We thought we should give Willie a proper remembrance. A eulogy of sorts. Some of our core asked to share a few memories.

**Alexandra L**

*"Something I really loved about Willie: how he always asked for a new beanie to enter into his rotation, even though he already had one in every color.*

*And also when we made turkey hands on thanksgiving, he had a comment about every person's turkey: 'what is that, a psychedelic turkey? Wow that one has pimples'."*

**Julia B**

*"One of my favorite things about Willie is that his hat doubled as his wallet ~ he would stick all his cards and papers and his bus passes inside the fold around the rim... and sometimes he'd take a snooze sitting up, lean forward, and the hat would fall off and they'd all spill out.*

*Folks called him Pop. He had a blue chair outside back gate that had "Pop" sharpied on the back of it... it's in the basement at André House now. I'm sure we'll find a good place for it, for him."*

**Grace D**

*"Things people should know about Willie:*

*He kept everything in his hat - his social security card, a few dollars, his ID, scratch tickets, anything - it went in his hat. The next thing you should know is that he was a frequent hallway napper. He would fall asleep on one of the hallway benches nearly every afternoon. This of course was problematic with his method of hat storage, because as soon as his head sleepily tipped forward, the contents of his hat were scattered across the hallway floor.*

*Pecan Pie was his favorite. We spent Thanksgiving dinner together, and I may have snuck into our back-up supply to get him a couple of extra pieces. During dinner, we chatted about California, where he spent most of his life, and his children whom he loved very much.*

*"Fish Spaghetti" was not his favorite. On Christmas Eve, I tried to bring a piece of my home state, Rhode Island, to my new home here in Phoenix, by serving the "Seven Fish of the Sea" Feast. A Christmas eve tradition for many Italian families including my own. Willie was not at all a fan. That night, he called me crazy for trying to serve people "fish spaghetti," and he didn't care one bit if it was a family tradition. We settled our differences that evening with a joyride through the parking lot on his new wheelchair.*

*Willie enjoyed whenever we played cards in the office during a calm shift. Although he never played, he made sure to tell me when I played the wrong cards, or grunt and shake his head in disgust.*

*Most importantly, Willie had many nicknames. I often referred to him as the grumpiest man on Earth. I called him Grumpy, but ironically that usually got a smile out of him. Among other core staff members, I called him my adopted grandpa. Many others in the André House community shared this sentiment, as he was called Pops by nearly everyone who knew him.*

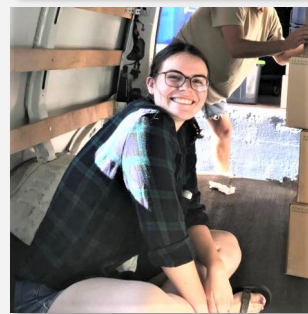
*We will all miss his warmth, his hallway naps, and his grumpy grandpa comments."*

Willie was laid to rest surrounded by his family. By those who loved him and shared the journey of his life on the street. We love you Willie. You are forever our angel.

**April 15, 2020**  
**A Year of Service**

They are six individuals. All with different backgrounds and future plans. But at this moment in time they live in community. The glue that holds them together is their deep commitment to humanity. To the under served. To those who otherwise would keep invisible. From early AM services until the last evening meal is served and all is cleaned up, their main focus is on those who are their guests. Those experiencing homelessness in the center of Phoenix. The Zone. And now in the age of COVID, these individuals driven by their humanitarian passion seek sustainability. How do you provide all the services that have always been and create and serve the meals every night when the virus has taken away your ability to engage volunteers or serve a meal in a dining hall. Do you let this COVID stop you from reaching out with love to those guests who have always offered their hearts in spite of the fact that they live on our streets. They have big hearts. They have lots of needs. And the Core staff at Andre House are determined to make sure they still have services, relationship and someone they can turn to.

Julia, Andrew, Mike, Grace, Sam and Alexandra are committed to all of the people in "The Zone". The open door of André House, a house of hospitality, has made a few adjustments to remain sustainable. But the strength that is keeping our doors open is powered by these six core staff. COVID is not what they signed up for. But maybe it is. To be able to grow beyond yourself in a time of stress and challenge, creating solutions and immersing one's self in defense of humanity is priceless. The joy and laughter that weaves its way through all of this is part of the glue that holds it all together. And then there are the lessons of the Holy Spirit. There have been many and all have been received with such grace. We at André House are so blessed to have Julia, Andrew, Mike, Grace, Sam and Alexandra here with us this year.



**April 19, 2020**  
**Sunday Blessing**

During the time before COVID weekend mornings were filled with Breakfast Club. Groups would alternate on Saturdays and Sundays providing breakfast for hundreds of guests. Depending on the group the food would be brought in or made in our kitchen. The food was served in our parking lot by loving volunteers, there was song, prayer and coffee. Yep a nice hot pick me up cup of coffee. That model was stopped in the middle of March. No more gatherings. Folks still needed breakfast. With all the groups still wanting to make breakfast for all those individuals they have served for so little by, The take out model emerged. Each group would deliver their food the evening before or early the morning of the breakfast. Then it is up to the Core Staff and staff to serve. This morning it is a wonderful sandwich and other goodies. All in a brown bag lovingly decorated and a wish for safety. Folks line up around the building. They receive bag and most importantly, COFFEE if they wish.

As Julia extracts each hot cup of perk from the Cambro she asks, "cream and sugar?"

This is love in action.

We hope you have an opportunity to practice love in action, in whatever form it maybe manifest, during this time of COVID.

Blessings upon you this Sunday morning.



**April 23, 2020**

### **A Tomato Grows**

The parking lot at André House is bare bones. Concrete, concrete, concrete with metal beams supporting solar structures and heavy block walls encasing it. Metal benches, railings, stainless sinks and fountains all allowing sustainability.

And then there is the tomato plant. It was discovered recently when someone was able to pause for a second and see.

How did it get there? Whose sandwich contained a thick tomato that spit out seed filled juice when chomped down upon? Are there tomatoes growing across the street in the St. Vincent de Paul garden? Did the wind inadvertently whip up and blow a seed that had been given off by a tomato that had dropped to the ground and slowly gave up it's essence? Or did Tuesday Spaghetti night Core staff leader, Grace, plant it lovingly as to assure we had tomatoes to make sauce with?

We will never know. What we do know, this tomato plant is a sign of hope. A sign of renewal. A sign of a life to come that may look different. Something that defies all the odds as it still grows. And soon again it will thrive. We see our guests this way. Somehow they landed here. We watch as they defy all odds and with a little love and hope they grow in strength and move into a new and better future. They have been doing this for a long time. The circumstances that surround all of us now may not seem quite as daunting to them. They live in "survive."

We thank all of you for your continued prayers and support. It provides light and hope for all of us.

A tomato grows.



**April 25, 2020**

### **Reinforcements Are Arriving**

It is time. Staff are spread thin and weary. Hospitality, the most important part of our mission, the one on one attention we strive to give each guest, is lacking. There is no time. And we have no idea how long this COVID era model of André House will have to be sustained. We can't bring any volunteers in yet because of the closed community and worry that the virus may be brought in inadvertently. Fortunately we are blessed to be unconditionally supported by the Congregation of Holy Cross. They are sending us Priests! Their members have been in lockdown from the 2nd week of March so they have no viral exposure. Many of them have been at André House during one of the summers of their formation. Are you ready gentleman? Porter, Kitchen Duty, Door Monitoring, Clothing Closet, Showers, Food Distribution, Drink Table, Forks and Napkins, Outside St. Francis Room Serving, Dish Washing and if you have any free time – Donation sorting, all await you with open arms! We do too. And our guests look forward to your energy, spirit and kindness. Oh yes, there are all those face masks that need to be handed out. And did we mention charging about 100 cell phones a day for our guests? Welcome to André House! Oh and did we mention you will be cooking for the multitudes.....

And just so you know, we are blessed with these gentlemen until May 11th. At that time we will be welcoming 8 Holy Cross seminarians who will be with us through July.



**June 1, 2020**

### **One Thing At A Time**

Each thing steadily helps our André House community get through these days.

Having enough help on a Saturday night to make a huge Caesar salad with homemade dressing to add to our guests meal.

Crates and crates of cold specialty drinks we got from the food bank. Constantly being refilled in the fridge as they are distributed to our guests who are outside in the heat. A little something special.

A book. A book. Something that was readily accessible during our pre-COVID existence. The bookcase at the back of the main dining room was always packed with donated books. Our guests were welcome to take one with them. Reading offers some solace. Entertainment. Distraction. When the dining room closed the books were no longer easily available. Then the library cart was born. Filled to the brim with all kinds of titles, it is wheeled out so our guests can choose a book to take with them to their tent, their spot, the coliseum in the day or the shelter at night. And then passed on to someone else to enjoy.

One thing at a time. They all add up as our guests journey through each moment of each day of each week. And as they add up, our guests journey becomes a little more stable in this world full of chaos and instability. At André House the most important of these one things is love. It permeates and overcomes anguish, loneliness, invisibility. It brings all these other things together. It is the glue of our souls. It has brought us together as we navigate a world that struggles within it's separation.

**June 10, 2020**

### **Emerging**

From a bubble. A protective bubble. Since March 17th, André House has not utilized any volunteers. We have been in a protective lock down of sorts. To protect our guests in the "Zone" as well as our religious and Core staff. Measures upon measures put into place. To get us through, keep all safe. Follow the guidelines so we can stay open.

**Soon.** A planned emergence guided by necessity and supported by public guidance. How does our staff and Core adjust to this internally. Everything has been pared down and we have been working in a lovingly utilitarian survival mode. **How** to do this? How many volunteers can we utilize? Much smaller numbers on shifts. Different times. Only regulars at first who have come on the same shift for years. Specific groups that have come on a specific night forever. But only a few. Not enough room. Commitments to the same shift every week. Reaching out slowly, inquiring. Explaining restrictions, guidelines. "It won't look the same for awhile. We are serving off the loading dock. Would you be alright with guest contact? Yes, the family dining for our physically challenged guests is now outside. No, we do not anticipate opening the main dining room until January. Yes, you will need to wear a mask. Please take your temperature before you arrive. Please, we want you to be comfortable and if you have any concerns about returning for whatever reason please wait and we will welcome you at a later date. We apologize that we haven't contacted you yet. It's been a process."

There are many who will not be able to return. And we respect their choices because we love them. There are those who are able to and have made a commitment and those who want the opportunity.

And then there is the recent rise in COVID numbers in Arizona.....

# **WELCOME VOLUNTEERS**



**André House  
of Arizona**

**André House**  
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**Thank you for your continued support!**



**MAKING GOD KNOWN, LOVED and SERVED**

**[www.andrehouse.org](http://www.andrehouse.org)**