

# THE OPEN DOOR

*From The Core Community at André House Summer 2021*



*"If there ever comes a day we can't be together,  
Keep me in your heart and I'll stay there forever."*

*- Winnie the Pooh*

# Pep Talks and Unlikely Success Stories

ZACHARY BOLLER Core Staff 2020-21



New York City was overcast, and abnormally cold for a summer day in July. A young boy was standing on a street corner, and quickly glanced up at the sky as he waved his hand for a cab. He had a large suitcase, a duffel bag, and a backpack. "LaGuardia, Terminal B," he said to the driver, "my flight leaves in thirty minutes." The airport was bustling when they arrived, and the boy anxiously watched the time on his phone as he waited in line to check his suitcase. "Southwest is just the greatest," he muttered sardonically. When they finally cleared for takeoff, he was excited. The city looked beautiful as they circled above it, and a sudden wave of nostalgia overwhelmed him as he bent forward to spot the familiar neighborhood where he had lived for the past year.

Four hours later, the boy rubbed his eyes and looked up to see the seat belt sign illuminated above him. He lifted the window blind and blinked disconcertedly at a bright sky filled with puffy clouds. "Good morning," the lady next to him said pleasantly. She was middle aged and kind, with a smile that made the boy feel happy and secure. He placed his backpack by his feet and fastened his seatbelt.

"How is it possible that anyone can function in heat like this," the boy interrogated himself as he stepped onto the sidewalk outside the baggage claim. It was 4:00 in the afternoon, and the weather in Phoenix read 112 degrees. He refreshed the weather page, still 112. Minutes later, a small, venerable looking Toyota pulled up to the sidewalk. The driver was grinning widely, and leapt out of the vehicle approaching the boy with an outstretched hand, he greeted me, "You must be Zach!"

By the end of the day I was flushed with excitement and ready for anything. I had already been to André House; meeting what seemed like hundreds of new people, tasting the Sunday chili, and rolling up my sleeves for the bathroom clean.

Almost one year later I am still that young boy, somewhat naive and lacking maturity by some standards, but there has been a universal change. Pinpointing this and characteristically identifying this modification is difficult, but if I was to begin with one question for myself, it would be if I needed André House more than André House needed me.

Objectively I have imagined myself as a vital member of the staff team; offering my energy and commitment to our services and placing our guests' wellbeing foremost on my mind, but besides the fifty hour week and the often grueling work load, there have been distinctive elements that overshadow anything that could be perceived as unfavorable, and have suggested that working here was more important for myself over anything else.

This year has been remarkably difficult for me, and I can state this with marked sincerity. I have always seen myself as situationally resilient and indomitable on some occasions, but working here has tested me like never before and has coherently elucidated that I am just a weak person in the face of conflict. Ironically, while acting as the pallbearer for a year of service wrought with difficult situations and insurmountable work loads, the coronavirus pandemic was concurrently responsible for bringing me to André House. After weeks turned into months, and the curse of quarantine seemed eternal, I knew I had to make an escape from the semi-charmed comfortability of my home life in New York. Arizona was some far off wonderland that seemed comparable to how F. Scott Fitzgerald described the ever-harkening pull of the green light across the river for Jay Gatsby. Yet beyond a far away place that was like foreign land to me, the appeal of André House was something tangible. My interview week underlined my feelings, and I eagerly described to my parents the energy and happiness I felt from everyone who I had spoken with on the phone. I was nurturing a strong desire to serve and engage in work that could benefit others more than myself.

I lay awake on my bed a few nights ago, chewing my fingernails and musing about both my future and the past several months. As I mulled over thoughts, a question that continued to needle me was whether or not it was beneficial to have experienced such a tumultuous year of service, juxtaposed against an easier one that more closely resembled normalcy. I reached an ultimatum, and concurred surprisingly that the hardships throughout the year had not only made me stronger and cultivated my desire to serve, but had indeed bettered me into an inviolable, kinder person; and therefore I would not have wanted an experience any different. To contextualize, one of the primary Intents for my work was to expand my proverbial horizons and practically broaden my education.

The coronavirus pandemic has been responsible for increased workloads, understaffed crews, and a major decrease in volunteers, but this circumstance has urged me to elect the same strengths and aptitudes that I knew I wanted to utilize before I even came here. I have witnessed so much and I have worked so hard that everything I have experienced, however difficult it was at the time, has been fundamental in making this year something that I will always remember.

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Last week I arrived at work on a Wednesday and knew from the unsettling feeling in my stomach that a sick day was nearly inevitable. When my foolproof and personally adopted solution of lying prostrate on the floor with my arms outstretched did no avail, I threw in the towel and left. I was anticipating a quick getaway, but as I walked outside towards my car, I experienced something that was almost euphoric enough to make me break down and cry. The parking lot had been open for a few minutes already, and seeing that I was not my usual self, three separate individuals had encountered me, offered a friendly word, and earnestly questioned how I was feeling. Each one of them smiled kindly at me, but had a deep look of concern on their faces. I was awed and felt undeserved of their attention, and savored a long hug from each one of them. Unbeknownst to them, these singular interactions were the highlight of my day. I felt genuinely loved and knew that I would be back the next day in full capacity to be there for my dear friends.

It's something that arguably every core staff member throughout the mission's history would repute, but I cannot deny that the greatest gift from André House are the friends that I have made and the allies that have walked beside me throughout the journey. Two thousand miles away from my family, and at the age of nineteen, I was thrown into a large new city with a daunting job ahead of me that I cannot begin to describe how nervous I was for. But instantly I had a profusion of supportive people who accepted me, cared about me, and had every desire to value me as a co-worker and friend. This is a true gift and is invaluable as it is irreplaceable. Moving forward during the year, these friends were the same ones who have been directly beside me throughout everything that was unpleasant and difficult; and no bond is stronger than this. I believe there are angels among us, and André House can only be a fostering ground for them. I am eternally grateful for these beloved souls who I am privileged to call my friends.

Now, as July and my farewell from André House approaches alarmingly fast, I treasure the holistic, rewarding experience that every day offers. The home fires are calling me and I need to leave, but I am happy. I am matured, and I believe that I am now nourished in the ways of true, selfless service; practicing God's word, and achieving fulfillment.

## Kicking Down The Walls

MATTHEW BREWSTER Core Staff 2020-21

Coming to André House, I was not sure what to expect. Prior to this year, I had spent a significant amount of time around those who have less. I was not shocked when I visited André House. I knew that this level of poverty existed across the entire world. I was aware of what we couldn't and could do. I had already witnessed executives in my dad's company "losing control over COVID, so I was aware of how that could affect the administration of any business. What I wasn't prepared for, was how close I would become to so many humans living on the street in the zone.

Even though many of my encounters outside of been negative, I do feel that my own ability to look for the good has increased. Whether that be with a guest outside, someone calling me harmful names (specific to me), or if that be assuming good will with everyone I work with. I will definitely be seeking out serious psychological aid through therapy in the coming years, but I do feel prepared for the world now. Honestly, I am not confident that things can get meaner or less evolved than I have experienced over the past year.

While here, I have helped quite a few people exit homelessness. I have buried many guests, petitioned many guests, even watched guests die on the street. I have experienced the hopelessness of guests living on the street. I have watched as many guests have been reduced to tears in front of me. So, moving forward, what can I do?

I am reminded of what a professor told me my sophomore summer after a sociology class. At the end of the course, he said, "Well, I am guessing that this entire class is sufficiently depressed at this point. So, I am, going to tell you something hopeful. The only method that consistently works at dealing with injustices is to never stop kicking down the walls that are being built. If someone is trying to build a wall, you must continue knocking it down so that they can never build it any higher."

I view it like this, you can view this as hopeless, or hopeful. Hopeless in the sense that there is very little that we can do to solve these issues. To make peoples lives better. To solve the issues of homelessness across the globe. Or you can view it as hopeful. Hopeful in the sense that we are doing the best we can. We are doing close to the same work as Jesus Christ did. Reaching out to those who can't be reached out to. For me, looking in the mirror at the end of a disastrous day it is always nice to know that I did the best I could do.

In my life after this year, I really can honestly say this. I do not claim to know what the future holds. That seems like a profound statement but allow me to expand upon this. I cannot count the number of times that I have been incorrect in my life about what my future holds. Things change constantly. Whether that be where I am living, what I am doing or whether or not I have a job. I simply do not know.

Despite the fact that I don't know what my future holds, the lessons I have learned this year will stick with me for my entire life.

To save paper, rather than share with you every lesson that I learned this year, I will sum them up in just TWO sentences. Do the best you can. Never stop kicking down those walls. Quoting this same professor, "If you do that, we cannot lose."



# Becoming Grace

GRACE GARDNER Core Staff 2020-2021



With only a little more than a month left at André House, I have found myself in a time of transition, challenged to reflect on the past year and plan for the road ahead. When looking at what will come next, I am admittedly scared to lose the values, strength and confidence that I've gained from being on core staff for a year. I think about it all the time; how am I going to make sure that I stay the same Grace that I've become through this year of service? It's a question that I've grappled with for a while now, but luckily, with the guidance of many close friends, I'm starting to find some peace in knowing how to structure my life when I go back home to continue to grow and act with compassion and love every day. Surprisingly, those friends have helped me realize that leaving André House does not mean I have to forget my life here. In fact, looking back on the experiences and lessons that have formed me during this year has helped me find clarity for the next steps.

The first is a very dear friend from back home named Taren. We met early on in college and by the grace of God, she has stuck with me through it all. She was with me when I was a terrified freshman who had no idea what she was doing, when I changed my major four times, on Tuesday nights as my guinea pig while I learned how to cook, as I struggled through some really tough relationships and when I decided to up and leave Texas to move to Arizona for some random place called André House. I am so grateful for our friendship, her steadfast love and lack of judgement through all of the twists and turns of my life. On my most recent trip home, I shared my worry with her over waffles and eggs and she offered me some wonderful words of encouragement and advice. I am paraphrasing (though I wish I had recorded it), but she said something along these lines: "Grace, through all these years I've known you, I've noticed that you are most yourself, most happy, most at peace when you are serving others. I think as long as you keep doing that you'll be just fine." This struck me because it seemed so simple and actionable, and I don't think she could have been more right. As long as I continue to frame my life around service to God and others, I'll be staying true to my core self. Service can be lived in a million different ways, and I fully believe that God will show me the way that is right for me. The harder part comes from listening to the movings of the Holy Spirit and then following. Sometimes I get caught up in how I actually follow, what happens when I know where I'm supposed to go or what I'm supposed to do? Luckily another dear friend was there to help me figure that part out.

Margo, one of the summer interns, and I were having a conversation the other night after we finished dinner at Men's House. Both of us are in times of discernment, trying to figure out what God's will is for our lives so we were both talking about our experiences and trying to reason out what some logical next steps would be. Throughout this conversation, we talked about the role that feeling free to be our genuine selves plays in living a fulfilling life. She shared with me how being able to start fresh at her college was liberating and helped her to stay true to the way that she wanted to live her life. Similarly, I was reflecting on the start of my core year. I have noticed how much freer I feel here to be myself and act in a way that aligns with the deepest parts of who I feel like God made me to be. Knowing that none of the other core members or staff of André House would have any preconceived notions about who I was, I was completely free to do and say the things that felt right to me, which has proven to be such a gift. It's helped me identify what those parts of me are and act on them with confidence. I've learned that I am a fighter; I have a voice and when I see something that is unkind, I know that I can confidently speak up and fight for justice. I've learned that I am strong; in the face of tough situations and very dirty bathrooms, I know I can make the choice to do the hard thing instead of crumbling to the pressure. I've learned that I am a little rough around the edges and that is okay; the confidence to not hide those audacious parts of myself has garnered me some respect and a decent amount of laughs, especially with our guests. The freedom I've felt here has been a true blessing and I've come to realize two things about it. The first is that when I go home, none of it will be taken away.

Jesus wouldn't give me a gift that he is just going to take back; that's not how gifts work. I still have the knowledge and ability to act with confidence in all my actions, regardless of where I am. The second is that, though this space has been so helpful, it is time to go out. It is time to be stretched in new ways. When I first got here, the newness of André House is what pushed me to grow, and now as I am leaving André House it is time for me to step into the uncomfortable again and radically live in my home state. I am so grateful to have the confidence in the Lord and in myself that I have now and as long as I take that with me to Texas, I won't simply lose all these parts of me that I've grown to love, which leads me to my last and final point. (CONTINUED)

Trusting in myself and in God's work in my life is going to be the most important part of journeying back home and continuing my life back in Texas. I look to our most gracious, loving and confident mother--Mary--for guidance on this. She is the perfect example of how to fiercely trust in God and in oneself. I think of the visitation, when Mary journeyed to visit her cousin Elizabeth while pregnant with Jesus. When Mary arrives, Elizabeth proclaims "Blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Luke 1:45). Mary trusted God throughout her whole life, from the annunciation, through the crucifixion, and after the resurrection; and not only that, but through every single part of it she lived that trust through giving gratitude and thanksgiving back to God. Her example is exactly what I need to always remind myself of. Trusting in Jesus and living it through being grateful and always giving Him thanks is where strength and confidence comes from. Just as Mary lived and loved passionately and without fear, so too can I by following her example, no matter where life takes me.



## A Calling

Andrew Cece Core Staff 2020-2022

Prior to becoming a member of the core staff, my journey to André House began as a meal service volunteer in the summer of 2019. Though I would often start my shifts by helping out in the kitchen or around the building, I usually found myself eventually gravitating to the parking lot to spend time speaking with and getting to know the guests. I had done volunteer work in the past but none of those experiences had offered such a unique opportunity for direct connection with those whom I aimed to serve. The more time I spent being present with guests, the more I wanted to come back to André House. What had begun as a once a week volunteer shift quickly turned into a second home for me as I started to just sort of show up 3 or 4 times a week. Soon, I began forging strong bonds with numerous guests who had gotten used to seeing my face in the parking lot. I had recently left a career (and an entire identity) as a businessman, and this time I was spending at André House felt very aligned with who I was becoming.

Coming from a business background, I had been used to thinking that the best way to help someone was to provide them with solutions to their problems, but at André House, I was realizing that I would never be able to solve most of the problems that people were experiencing. This realization was accompanied by the silver lining of learning that I was already helping people in ways that I hadn't previously considered. I was meeting people where they were. I was offering them a safe space to talk about whatever was on their mind. I was accompanying them on their journey. This is what people were talking about when they referred to André House as a "ministry of presence" and every moment I spent there felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. This was what I felt called to do.

Needless to say, I was thrilled to be offered the opportunity to join the core staff, which I did in January of 2020. So, I started my year(s) of service in what is now referred to as the "normal" or "pre-covid version" of André House. Then within just a few months, the pandemic hit, and things haven't been the same since. We immediately had to begin coming up with new ways of meeting our guests needs and offering outdoor versions of our indoor services. In addition to all this adaptation, we had to figure out how to operate without our 30+ daily volunteers who are the lifeblood of André House meal services. Unfortunately, the covid versions of our services have not always been conducive to our ministry of presence. Walking around the parking lot telling people to put their masks on has not proven to be the best ice breaker for positive guest interaction. Additionally, being short-handed has often caused staff members to be busier meeting guests' immediate material needs which has led to less meaningful conversations and more transactional interaction.

It has been a privilege to be a part of this team and to have partaken in the miracle that is André House while we've weathered the storm of Covid-19, but I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't looking forward to bringing back the "normal version" of André House. We've recently been blessed to welcome multiple summer interns and seminarians who have quelled our staffing woes. Furthermore, we've also welcomed our guests back into the building by reopening indoor versions of our services like Pascente and the day room. As the current Core heads into our last 6 weeks together, I am very excited for everyone in the André House community to experience more quality time in each others' presence!



# Change

KARLEE BRADLEY Core Staff 2020-2022



Change is a good thing. Change is good when it means we can welcome our guests back into our dining room after the pandemic closed it for over a year. It's good when it means our friends can spend their time under the coolness of our fans rather than under the sun on the scorching pavement outside. It's good when people who lived for a year in a tent in a parking lot have the opportunity to sleep inside on a bed. It's good when vaccinations allow us to worry less about the health of our guests and focus more on making up for a year of covered smiles that went hidden under masks. It's good when we feel safe enough to welcome more volunteers, allowing the space for staff to spend a little more time being present with our guests. Change is good when it creates a new hope before the summer temperatures reach their peak.

Change is a sad thing. Change is sad when you have to part ways with four people you've lived with for a year—people who were once strangers but who now are your literal best friends. It's sad when you can't constantly be surrounded by these people you've grown so close and attached to. It's sad when you keep anticipating how much you'll miss these people who you love with your entire heart. Change is sad

when even though you know they'll be off doing such amazing things within this new chapter of their lives, you won't be with all of them to see it all happen.

Change is a hard thing. Change is hard for our guests. It's hard when people who you've shared your life with for a year have to exit your life. It's hard when it takes a while for you to trust and rely on strangers and when one year is too short of a time period for that. It's hard when you'll have to spend months building new relationships that will be difficult to keep once the next July rolls around. It's hard to keep in contact with people who will be across the country. It's hard when some of the only consistent people in your life won't be right around the corner from you almost every day anymore. Change is hard when you've been losing people you love for years, and you know you're just going to have to do it all over again in less than two months when staff members depart André House.

As the core year comes to an end with July only a few weeks away, I have not been happily anticipating the day things will drastically change. This year has been enormously different from "normal" André House due to the pandemic. Fear of having to shut down André House if staff got sick left my core to interact solely with each other—Friday meetings through Zoom, no Third Fridays, no Men's House dinners, no gatherings with volunteers or board members. We've missed out on André House traditions, and a lack of in-person communication with the admin side of André House left us to feel supported only by each other. Thus, I know I have grown so attached to the other core members that not living with each other anymore makes the end so sad for me to think about. However, as the countdown to Hello-Goodbye keeps shrinking, I've been reflecting more on the idea that though this change will be hard for me, it'll be even harder for a lot of our guests.

A lot of my friends experiencing homelessness have spent years with numerous and changing André House cores. And quite a few of those friends have consistently reminded me that they hate change, especially when it comes to familiar friends leaving and having strangers replace them. When staying in the Zone has decreased your trust in others, and when you feel comfortable enough putting some trust in core members, I'm sure it may feel almost like an act of betrayal when those core members abandon you year after year, leaving you to have to start over in building similar relationships. So whenever I find myself dreading the end of this core year, I remind myself that it's selfish without thinking about how this change will affect our guests, which I believe is something we all fail to consider.

With that being said, I find comfort in knowing that because I have made the decision to stay on core for another year, I will continue being a familiar face to our guests. I feel content knowing that I don't have to abandon all of my friendships here, and instead, I have the opportunity to spend an extra year loving and knowing those I have the privilege of serving. I also have the pleasure of discovering what "normal" André House is like as we brainstorm and implement developments that allow us to better serve our guests while worries of the pandemic diminish. And though I will miss this year's core I had the delight of loving and living with, I am looking forward to what a new core has to bring to our community. All in all, I'm so excited to spend another year at this place that is filled with so much love. I hope that my staying can help provide a smoother transition for our guests, and I can't wait to continue serving and being a friend to all those who walk through our doors.

# Just A Pair Of Socks

Fr. Dan Ponisciak, CSC Andre House Executive Director



I keep a pair of socks next my computer. They've been there for the last six months. I think they were donated at some point and I don't quite remember how they wound up on my desk or when I put them there. But, regardless, it's one single pair of black socks rolled together. They serve as a reminder to me that the needs of our guests is sometimes so simple – just a pair of socks. They also remind me of those early days of the pandemic when we were trying to keep our guests fed and clothed with no volunteer support. We had contingency plans in place for almost anything except a pandemic. There is no playbook for running a soup kitchen that is primarily volunteer led *without* volunteers.

Covid-19 wreaked havoc on everything we thought we knew about how André House could or should be operated. We tore the whole thing down to the basics – no volunteers and minimal services – because we didn't have a choice. The priorities were meal service, restrooms and showers. Without regular access to restrooms and showers, our guests would suffer greatly. We needed to find a way to keep those services in play. Everything else was scrapped in those early days of the pandemic.

We needed to find a way to survive so that our guests would have a chance.

Sometimes I reach over and hold the pair of socks and just squeeze. They work as a quasi-stress ball. They remind me of those early days of the pandemic with no volunteers that I often refer to as a second Lent. 40 days with no help *not* because people didn't want to help, but because we just didn't know what to do about this new mysterious disease and we had to protect our guests. So, our small staff did everything, took only one day off a week and avoided going pretty much anywhere. We took it a step further and devised a plan if the government locked the country down. If that happened, we had to be prepared to make sure our guests' needs could be met. Everyone, including our administration team, did what we needed to do to keep André House open. And it was exhausting. Covid was such an unknown phenomenon that we were guessing as to how to respond. But there was good news. We weren't alone. The Holy Spirit was with us. My friends, I can't begin to tell you how truly present the Holy Spirit was with us in those early days of the pandemic. Our decisions, our ideas were informed by the Holy Spirit's promptings and we continue to trust the Holy Spirit as we begin to move forward into God-willing a post-covid world.

So we move forward. We move forward with hope for the future. Just recently, Pascente, our office that welcomes our guests in off the streets, reopened inside. We also opened our dining room for daytime heat relief. We are moving forward. But, we don't do it without reflection upon where we've been. We have so much to be thankful for. We are thankful for the people who carried us through those very uncertain early days of the pandemic. We are thankful for the core staff who will never see the way André House is normally operated. We are grateful for their dedication and their sacrifice. We move forward knowing that many of our friends experiencing homelessness passed away due to the terrible heat last summer. We carry them with us as we move into what will be another hot summer here in the valley. And we move forward as we say goodbye to several members of our team and prepare to welcome a new core staff in July. We have so much to be thankful and we look forward to August 30 when God-willing, we will reopen the dining room for meal service. But until then, we continue to trust in divine providence that we will do God's will throughout these next couple of months. Follow us on social media, keep up with our updates, get vaccinated and pray for us. Those of us that have endured the pandemic are tired and yes sometimes emotions get frayed. Please bear with us as we move forward and we look forward to welcoming everyone back at André House this fall.





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