

John Leary House -- 20th Anniversary



This issue of our newsletter is a call to remember and celebrate the past twenty years of 418 Massachusetts Avenue, better known as John Leary House. As we worked to put this issue together, we asked many people to write about their experiences in the house, from Alice Carter's reflections of the very first days to the thoughts of Dan Walters, the present live-in caretaker. The history of the house is rich with the fruits and lessons of community life. The many names, faces, and stories of the past twenty years make up a collage worth celebrating.

Continued on Page 8

IN THE BEGINNING

by Alice Carter

Mother of John Leary House, Seeker after the Truth, who finds herself both a grandmother and a graduate student these days...

In 1981 when I arrived in Boston with my two youngest children, Tamara Griggs and Peter Wilson, we were all newly emerging from a drug-and-alcohol rehabilitation community in California, which had become too violent for our well-being and safety. We had fled to Ireland and decided not to return to California on returning to the United States. One son, John Wilson, was in the navy submarine service and had applied for a Conscientious Objection discharge. He was stationed in New London, and it was this situation that brought us to Pax Christi, where John Leary was working, and eventually to Haley House, where John Leary also lived and worked in the soup kitchen.

None of us had ever lived in Boston and we knew nothing about Boston. Therefore, it made sense to me when John Belmont (who was working in the soup kitchen and had money burning a hole in his pockets or his conscience) suggested buying a building to house the homeless. The house was found through John's uncle, Bill Hauserman, who was on the board of a group called Low Cost Housing, which was run by an African American man named Rudy Waker (now deceased). Rudy offered us a house on Massachusetts Avenue that had nine apartments without stoves, toilets, bathtubs, or sinks. He thought we should make it a rooming house. We didn't. The stoves, toilets, tubs, sinks, and refrigerators were in the basement, and they were duly re-installed.

In July 1982 John Belmont bought 418 Mass. Ave. and left for California. My son Peter, my nephew Nick Carter, and another friend of theirs came to help me get all of the garbage



JLH by Eileen Lawter, friend and resident in the 80s.

out of the building. There was a huge amount—a barge load, at least. After that we took a look at the suggestion Kathe McKenna made: to rent a unit to a family housed inappropriately in the senior housing that Haley House had established at 575 Tremont Street. Our first family moved in. The mother had been at MCI Framingham, where an Ailanthus member, Suzanne Shanley, had met her while serving time for a nonviolent protest that got her arrested. (Ailanthus was the "peace" group that met at Haley House every Sunday evening and protested at Draper Lab [why did we stop?] every Monday morning from 8 to 9, handing out leaflets to employees and holding moral-injunction-inscribed posters to stir the hearts of the guidance system makers.) This family of four moved into the house in the summer. The night they moved in, the two little girls sat out on the stoop in the evening singing Jesus Loves Me. They were competing with Wally's Bar and Grill, one of Boston's oldest (Wally himself was 100) jazz and blues bars. The rest of the neighborhood was boarded-up buildings, and a small store run by a man named Bill. This family was followed by several others.

At the end of August, by which time John Belmont had returned from California, we had filled half the building. And it was then that John Leary died unexpectedly on his daily run home from Pax Christi; he was 24. He had been a huge support to my son and had found him a lawyer in Connecticut, helping in every way he could to make sure John Wilson received his CO discharge. We named the house after him, and often, often wished he were still alive as we discovered what housing homeless folks involved. Working in a California rehab community was not preparation for trying to house homeless families. I knew nothing about how to help them, and less about getting my own life together. But there were islands of

felicity: Grace Belmont making papier-mâché masks with the children in the Community

Room; Mark DeStefano patiently making potholders with a resident who had a tenuous grip on reality (not that reality got a great play from any of the rest of us); Tamara Griggs sitting on her bed, braiding and beading the hair of two children whose Christmas had gone amuck when their mother's boyfriend destroyed their tree and presents; John Belmont talking down a very angry ex-boyfriend who later helped build the brick path

in the back yard; Ralston and Rachel's study group on the *The Women of Brewster Place*; Vickie Combs's acerbic commentary on everyone and everything that was ballast to foolishness.

We staggered through the crises, the financial woes, the cockroach rebellion, and the rat invasion when the Orange Line dig began. We had a dachshund, Floyd, whose joy it was to kill every rat who dared climb up the fire escape. Floyd was not, alas, housebroken. I never knew what would happen next; sometimes it felt impossible to just go on living there, and then Vickie Combs and I would cross the road to Wally's for a beer and sad sweet blues. Simone Charpentier gave the best party we ever had with her friends, Blanca and crew from the South Bronx, who came with their guitars and music to cheer us all up. And one night Kathe McKenna brought the Haley House crew over with six-packs and wisecracks to light up the two bewildered founders.

Our first resident mother graduated from the University of Massachusetts and works in a courthouse now. Another mother became a carpenter, helped build houses for Jimmy Carter's organization, and became the owner of a three-bedroom house through its lottery. Another became an MBTA trolley driver. Fay and Rick found spacious quarters in

Tent City. Rachel got her master's at UMass-Amherst. Mark emigrated to heaven with Anna, the gentle, kind-hearted rent collector. We celebrated one wedding, and four babies were born, two in the house with the help of a midwife—John Leary's former girlfriend. We were always happy to see the boys from Area D; peacekeeping was not our strength. When the boyfriends got thrown out, there was always a hassle about their TV and their mother's picture. Belongings were packed in big black garbage bags, which one policeman helpfully loaded into a truck for a lady of the night who had stayed with a resident. Later he looked for his squad car keys and sure enough—they were in one of the big black bags. It was the 1980s, when everyone in their right mind was making money, and the atmosphere in Boston was more greedy than gracious. Our big financial bonanza came from Jim Ryan in Maryland. We paid off the mortgage, bought a van, paid down mortgages on the Farm and at 575. Arm-wrestling Rudy Waker got him to clear the liens on the house so that Haley House could buy it free

The Mission

"The house at 418 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts, which is being purchased by John S. Belmont, will provide some units of low-cost housing for people who cannot rent in today's rental market due to income limitation or other special considerations. Other units will be rented at a higher rent in order to help carry the basic costs which low-income tenants can't meet."

chased by John S. Belmont, will provide some units of low-cost housing for people who cannot rent in today's rental market due to income limitation or other special considerations. Other units will be rented at a higher rent in order to help carry the basic costs which low-income tenants can't meet."

The Name

"John Leary House was named for our friend, a young man who lived and worked at Haley House upon graduation from Harvard University. His exceptional dedication to the poor, especially expectant mothers without a place to live, lively wit and humor, and his deep roots in his own Catholic tradition, were very much a part of the original inspiration for this house. John died suddenly at the age of twenty-four—and we felt that naming the house (and the work) for him was an appropriate way of saying that his life as he lived it is in many ways what this house is all about."

tion from Harvard University. His exceptional dedication to the poor, especially expectant mothers without a place to live, lively wit and humor, and his deep roots in his own Catholic tradition, were very much a part of the original inspiration for this house. John died suddenly at the age of twenty-four—and we felt that naming the house (and the work) for him was an appropriate way of saying that his life as he lived it is in many ways what this house is all about."

...excerpted from the original brochure

and clear, except for the taxes. When the dust settled I hit the road to pick up the loose, and I mean very loose ends of my own unfinished life.

On one of the warm February days we had this year I walked by JLH and decided to take a look. The front hall had some beautiful plants; there was carpeting

"When people try living and working together voluntarily, they naturally create many problems that try the patience... The frustrations we experience must become exercises in faith and hope." - Dorothy Day

on the floor. The doorbells were all buttoned up with a phone system. There were no vacancies. Despite the struggles, the disappointments and the sorrows, we were thriving even though we didn't know it at the time. The house too, thrives: full of folks and a source of funds for many good projects at Haley House. The wind picked up, and I walked away—from the most outrageous, risky, difficult and rewarding work I ever saw.



I was home unexpectedly the other afternoon, having raced out of work to pick up my eight-year-old son, sick at school. It's always a challenge for me to change gears and slow down to pay attention to the kids when I'm still in that "accomplishment mode." That day I gave in to the moment, and in dozing off with my sleepy child, I started to remember my home at John Leary House. It was the perfect space for me: two rooms, compact but also somehow rich, and I was pleased to belong there.

I always remember exactly when I lived at John Leary House (1988-89) because it was just before I met Joe and just before we got married. I had intended to stay at Leary House longer. I had given the decision to move there a lot of thought and was eager to enter into the Catholic Worker life wholeheartedly. It seemed the natural next



step after working the Thursday elderly shift for awhile with Bill Fitz, Dan Walters, et al., and having become recently unattached. I think it was almost a monastic calling. Simone and I talked about it at length on a silent retreat. I felt full of purpose to do good and accomplish much!

John Leary House was a changing place at that time: fewer needy families, a turnover in staff and a time of taking stock. I took on the role of architect to inventory and work on the building "master plan." I was also trying to figure out my own and others' expectations of community. The building part was quite logical; the community part wasn't at all.

Some memories of my short tenure include watching carpenter Dan Lawrence construct a new opening between rooms to create a family-size home for Faye, Rick, and Tiffany; analyzing the rear wall's water problem; and strategizing at the staff meetings about how to collect rent from Mark. I also remember the ever-present Mark's friendly greeting to me of "Hey, ba-boo," coffee with Sue Fitz, our community monastic

prayer hours (which I often regrettably missed), and our wonderful Passion Sunday procession through the house. I would have liked to have stayed longer to live with Bro. Dan Walters, too. He often joked that I got him into it and then quickly left.

I didn't know it then but John Leary House was a turning point for me in learning about how I idealized community. Along with the rich memories, I've had this enduring image of "not doing it right" there and feeling confused about unspoken expectations. Looking back, I think I expected a lot of myself then. Seeing my limitations, and

knowing how to give voice to them would have helped me negotiate some ambiguous community relationships. I have drawn on this experience for community attempts since.

I always felt that I didn't "accomplish" community at John Leary House because I was too busy falling in love. As Joe and I have been married now for 10 years, I'm still trying to do good and accomplish much. These days, taking time to doze off with my kids is one of my most challenging accomplishments.

Wife, mother, architect, organizer-par-excellence, Kitty is clearly being taught much by her children...

REFLECTIONS

Kitty Ryan

Ten Years in Exile

Dan Walters

Brother to those in need, friend to the homeless, elder statesman of Haley House and St Francis House, a man of quiet strength...

ARRIVED at John Leary House in August 1989. I had been a Haley House volunteer on the elderly shift on Thursday afternoons for several years. I first began volunteering with my students from Fontbonne Academy in Milton, and then with monks in formation from Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham. It was on a Thursday afternoon, during an elderly shift, that Kitty Ryan, a John Leary House staff person, asked if I knew of anyone who might want to live at John Leary House and help out with the running of the house. I thought about it for a few weeks and then suggested that perhaps I be the one! So the following August, I took up residence with Kitty, Bill, and Susan Fitzgerald, and a whole cast of interesting characters.

My initial request of the Benedictine monks was that I be allowed to take a leave of absence from the monastery for

continued on page 7



perform. Whats Up is also expanding its Vendor Outreach Program. We have three volunteers going to three different locations that serve the homeless and disadvantaged to inform them about our magazine and the opportunities we offer. All in all things are looking good and we are

moving forward.

Bakery

The Bakery has been moving right along this year. We've had a big change in staff. Teri, one of the original bakers, has left the Bakery. Thank you, Teri, for your years of work and love; you will be missed by all. Thankfully, Teri will remain a part of the community, working on a Sunday Elder Meal every month. Also leaving the Bakery is Josh, who has been with us for the past six months as production manager. Josh has helped the bakery grow like a beanstalk during his time here. Good luck, Josh. Another departure is Paul, who worked with us part time for the past six months. Thank you Paul, and good luck.

So, how did we fill the big hole left by these great individuals? We hired three more great folks: Welcome, Erma, Jesse, and Stephen! Erma just moved to Boston last September from the Philippines, where she grew up. Stephen and Jesse are known to us all through their great work with Whats Up! Welcome to the Bakery!

The Bakery menu has been augmented with more fantastic savory items.

Be sure to stop in, and tell your friends!

Live-In Community

While for most of the natural world, winter is a time for silence and hibernation, this is not the case in the live-in community. It has been a time of energy, of work, of talking and of much laughter. We have had many, many guests over the last few months—from college students on break who painted our walls with much good humor to the usual stream of travelers and friends who always teach us much and leave us with new ideas about how communities can and do work. Our community has spent a lot of time over the last few months discussing community, work, our various faith traditions, and the ties that bind us together. Most recently, that conversation took place on a wonderful one-day retreat out at Noonday Farm. It has been a beautiful and fruitful time and has resulted in a renewed commitment to our guests and to each other.

Housing Project

Since the tentative designation of Haley House and Madison Park Development Corporation as developers of the four BHA buildings in the South End, our team has been finalizing funding and design. All of the local neighborhood associations have been visited to share with them the initial scope of work. The tenant advisory committee has also been meeting offering their wisdom and perspective.

Whats Up

Things are moving right along with Whats Up Magazine. Currently, we are hard at work on the next issue, which will focus on many aspects of health. We will examine everything from the high price of prescription pills to the overall mental state of America to homeopathic remedies. This publication will be on the street in the beginning of April. Also, we are planning our second fundraiser for March 24 as well as celebrating our fifth anniversary this April with a blow-out celebration at the Middle East, where over seven local bands will



This poem by Anna Wilson is a selection from *Sleeper Awake*, an unpublished manuscript. Wilson, at different periods in her life, served as a soup kitchen worker, an accountant at John Leary House, part of the Catholic Worker community in Boston, and was a wife, the mother of two, and a student in Purdue University's writing program. She died in 1995 after an acute asthma attack at age 36. Her husband, John Wilson of Battleground, Ind., who submitted her work, writes: Anna "infused me with inspiration through her spirit, and faithfulness, bringing a healing grace to our lives, marriage and children. I miss her very much, but feel that I can share the beauty of her voice with others. It helps with the grief, sorrow and anger I sometimes feel toward God. If I feel far away from God, I simply need to only read from Anna's poetry, and I know the He holds me in the palm of His hand."

AS FOR YOU

Inspired by Ariel Dorfman's *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*

As for you,
Mr. Dorfman,
isn't it enough
I carry a Salvadoran cross
between my breasts
as if to keep one pair of hands
safe
one heart
close.
I read your book
on the train to work
fighting
the sour knot of tears in my throat,
the corners of my mouth
twitching,
ashamed of my shame
to weep.
Now
making the beds,
through the children's squabbling
and laughter,

seasoning the soup,
I hear their voices
the father taken after the Sunday picnic
the mother in her apron, the kettle left boiling
the children playing Mummy & Daddy

What do you say when they take me away?
What do you do when they take you too?
And if they come for the children?

Who are your people, Mr. Dorfman,
that they can forget
their own mothers
fathers
brothers
sisters
sweet baby flesh

and as for mine
another military aide package
U.S. interests abroad
in the interest of national security
the fight against communism
my husband on the phone
to an aide in an office
in Washington
pleading,
raging.
The bill is approved.

Mr. Dorfman,
who is listening?
Spring 2002

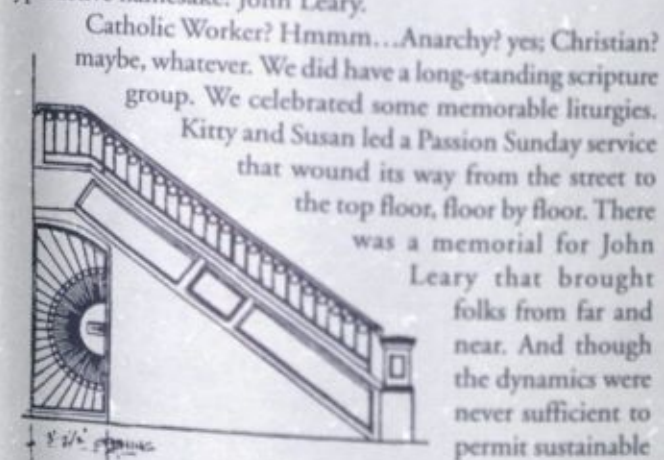
A STABILIZING FORCE...

Bill Fitzgerald

A devoted husband and father for whom education is his vocation as well as his job...

Our term of tenancy at JLH was so different from our time at 575 Tremont St.! The stoop at 575 was always filled with lofty ongoing sociological theorizing about the street life that passed before the half-dozen or so who always gathered there to watch night come. At JLH it was dodging traffic, subway crowds, and police calls. The do-gooders at 575 were constantly converted by the residents' laid-back "it's God's will" attitude regarding just about anything. At JLH, the symbolic interactionists' altruism waited on nobody, not even anyone whose last name was Divine.

Susan, Isaac, and I were called in by Alice to be a stabilizing force to a house in every kind of transition. That *we* were identified as a stabilizing force should have been sufficient warning. John and Anna, Zandra and Daryl, Stacey and Simone, Rick and Faye, Mark, and a stairwell of kids, and then Kitty and Dan -- all of us had a sure-fire, social strategy for building everlasting community and equity. Unfortunately, each of us had a different strategy. It was a house that would have made Peter Maurin speechless. Still, it was a house full of the energy, idealism, and resolution of its hyperactive namesake: John Leary.



Catholic Worker? Hmm... Anarchy? yes; Christian? maybe, whatever. We did have a long-standing scripture group. We celebrated some memorable liturgies. Kitty and Susan led a Passion Sunday service that wound its way from the street to the top floor, floor by floor. There was a memorial for John Leary that brought folks from far and near. And though the dynamics were never sufficient to permit sustainable prayer, the opportunity (and the necessity) for conversion, over and over again, was constant. Catholic? Sure, if by that you mean James Joyce's epigram that "Catholic means here come everybody!" I wanted to be a monk, Dan wanted to be a Franciscan, Kitty wanted Joe, and Susan the Convert constantly railed against us cradle Catholics who acted "like a bunch of typical Unitarians with some new urban slant on social justice, this week."

**Catholic Worker?
Hmm... Anarchy?
yes; Christian?
maybe...**

structure. It was the house that provided the skin for the environment that nurtured our urbanized humanity. Kids cleaned the stairwells, residents painted the apartments, volunteers fixed the veneer, and sponsors paid for repairs. The theology of the house is strong in the Catholic Worker nontradition; it was certainly the catharsis of community at JLH during our brief stay.

There were days when drug dealers were climbing out the back windows at the same time burglars were climbing the fire escape out front. There were evenings when the warm jazz notes from Wally's wafted off the walls, through the alley, and so gently in to the bedroom window on a soft summer's night. There were times of prayer and times of rage. People came and went, and with them new schemes and dreams. Stable or not, there was always a lot of life at JLH and, in retrospect, an awful lot of good was done... Even if it was done over and over and over again.

10 Years in Exile - cont. from page 4

one year. This plan was agreed on after several discussions with the abbot of the monastery. My hope was to live at John Leary House, get a job, and be self-supporting. At the end of the year I asked for an "indult of excommunication" for three additional years. Well, here I am, finishing up my tenth year in exile! I still keep in touch with the Benedictines, but for all practical purposes I have flown the monastic coop.

My years at John Leary House have been, for the most part, very good. I have found myself being stretched in new and wonderful ways. I have worked with an assortment of people. Sometimes we get along great and at other times there is a bit of tension. I have discovered that I can be difficult, cranky, and even passive-aggressive. But, on occasion, I can also be kind and thoughtful and charming. I have learned that I don't always need to be right and that sometimes I need to let go and not be in control. I've discovered that I am not necessarily at fault if someone is having a difficult day, or even a difficult life. I know that the people at John Leary House, much like people everywhere, arrive with a life's worth of baggage. I have found that living at John Leary House and being part of the Haley House extended community has been a blessing for me and has enabled me greatly on my spiritual path.

Continued from Cover

The doors of John Leary House opened in 1982 in order to provide housing for people who could not afford to rent an apartment because of the ever-rising cost of housing in Boston. The idea was truly one of "mixed-income" housing, where those who could pay more, did, and those that for various reasons could not, did not. It fit in perfectly with the mission of Haley House: one more way to share resources and to struggle to reclaim justice in a society crying out for it.

Today, this comfortable building continues to house those who need it.

The same sort of abandon characterized both John Leary's life with God and the beginnings (and workings) of the house that bears his name. It was an abandon to the unknown; to an experience—an experiment—and to the idea that living together was better than living apart. It seems to have grown out of the belief that our ideas were meant to reside not only in our heads but were also to be tested and tried, regardless of outcome, in the daily workings of life lived in community.

Before its doors opened, before John Belmont

signed on the dotted line, the first tenants of John Leary House were with us. J. lived in our Rooming House with her three children. Even though many people conducted a mighty apartment search while she awaited her release date from Framingham prison, nothing was found that she could afford. The one and a half rooms were perfect for an individual, but it meant severe over-crowding for this family. Still, this was preferable to the streets or a shelter.

Over the years JLH was home to so many facing overwhelming circumstances. One family had a very sick child and needed to have a constant presence at the hospital, severely limiting their income. Several people with AIDS, and sometimes dementia, lived and died while living here. A small family whose newly purchased home was burned was housed because their insurance did not include rent while the repairs were being made. A hardworking family trapped in a shelter because they had insufficient paperwork to be eligible for subsidized housing moved in. Many single mothers with their young children shared child-care, wisdom, and their lives with each other.

♻️ Printed on recycled paper



Haley House is a spiritually based community nurtured by the personalist tradition of the Catholic Worker Movement. As a community and as individuals we struggle to carry out our double mandate: to minister to the needs of society's forgotten people, and to challenge and offer alternatives to the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and perpetuate suffering and violence.

