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.

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by Alice Carter

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

In 1981 when I arrived in Boston with my two youngest children, Tamarra Griggs and Peter Wilson, we were all newly emerging from a drug-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 Conscriptional 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 H.L. 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 conscience) suggested buying a building to house the homeless. The house was found through John's uncle, Bill Hassenman, who was on the board of a group called Low Cost Housing, which was run by an African American man named Rody Walter (now deceased). Rody offered us a house on Massachusetts Avenue that had nine apartments for $7,000, a bargain.

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It was a large and solitary building that was empty. The building was next to a drug house and a high school. The neighborhood was not the best. We had to learn to deal with the problems that came with the building. We started with a small group of people who helped to convert the building into a home for the homeless.

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 or buy truly marginal 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 H.L. House upon graduation from Harvard University. His exceptional dedication to the poor, especially expectant mothers without a place to live, lovely and humane, 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."

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

The House was saved, and clear, except for the rates. 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 J.L.H. and decided to take a look. The house had some beautiful plants; there was carpeting on the floor. The doorbells were all buttoned up with a phone system. There were no vacancies. Despite the snow, the disappointments and the sorrows, we were thriving even though we didn't know it at the time. The house too thrives, driven full of folks and a source of funds for many good projects at H.L. House. The wind picked up, and I walked away—from the most outrageous, risky, 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, Nick, 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 it 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 prayer hours (which I often regretted missing), and our wonderful Passion Sunday procession through the house. I would have liked to have stayed longer to free with Ann, Dan Walters, too. He often joked that I get him into it and then quickly left.

I still 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 being in love. As Joe and I have been married now for 10 years, I'm still trying to do good and accomplish much. Those days, taking time to do 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.

Ten Years in Exile

Dan Walters

Brother in shoe 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 afternoon for several years. I first began volunteering with my students at Fontbonne Academy in Milwaukee than with monks in formation from Gloucester Abbey in Hingham. It was on a Thursday afternoon, during an elderly shift, that Kitty Ryan, a John Leary staff person, asked if I knew of anyone who might want to live at John Leary House and help put with the running of the house. I thought about it for a few weeks and then suggested that perhaps I be the one! So following August, I took up residence with Kitty, Bill, and Susan Fitzgerald, and a whole new set of characters.

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

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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, Empea, Jose, and Stephen! Empea just moved to Boston last September from the Philippines, where she grew up. Stephen and Jose are known to us all through their great work with What's 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!

What's Up

Things are moving right along with What's 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

perform. What's Up is also expanding its new Venice 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.

Live-In Community

While for most the natural world, winter is a time for slowing, 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 to think and move on 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 Noooday 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 neighborhoods associations have been visited with them to share with them the initial scope of work. The tenants advisory committee has also been meeting offering their wisdom and perspective.

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Spring 2002
This poem by Anna Wilson is a selection from Speak! Twinkle, an unpublished manuscript. Wilson, at different periods in her life, served as a top kitchen worker, an assistant 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. It’s hard to know what Anna would feel if she could see our children and grandchildren. We miss her very much.”

AS FOR YOU

Inspired by Ariel Dorfman’s The Last Song of Manuel Sendoro

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
twisting,
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

SAVE THE DATE

August 31 - Sept. 1, 2002
A Celebration of Life
We will gather to share, reflect, and celebrate the life of JOHN LEARY (1958-1982). Details to follow. 617.236.8132

A STABILIZING FORCE...

Bill Fitzgerald

Our term of tenancy at JLH was so different from our time at 575 Tremont St! The stoop at 575 was always filled with loud ongoing sociopolitical 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, it’s 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 so a house in every kind of transition. That we were identified as a stabilizing force should have been sufficient warning. John and Aena, Zandra and Daryl, Stacey and Simon, Rick and Maye, Mark, and a stairwell of kids, and then Kitty and Dan – all of us had a surefire 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? Hmmmm... Anarchy? yes; Christian? maybe...

10 Years in Exile - cont. from page 4

Our ten 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 time 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.