



Bearing Witness

A NEWSLETTER of the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SHELTER & HOUSING CORPORATION

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Casa de Francisco Update

VOL. 1, ISSUE 2



Looking Ahead:
From inside Immaculate's Shelter at 560 Park Street
to the recently opened Casa de Francisco.

A Note from the Executive Director

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Immaculate is embarking on its 30th Year of Service to the homeless of the Hartford region. It all began on a very cold night, when Father Donagher found a man frozen to death just a few steps outside the front of what once was the Church of Immaculate Conception. And since that bitterly cold night, Immaculate has been serving those individuals most in need of assistance.

Over the years, many individuals have given of their time and expertise as volunteers providing meals, or in positions of influence as the executive or associate director, or as a dedicated board member wanting to do what is best for the clients of Immaculate. And this year, we plan to celebrate all of you, for Immaculate wouldn't be where it is today without the help of each of you who has borne witness in your own way.

So, this will be a year of celebrating those who have supported Immaculate, guiding the transitions over the years from an emergency shelter to an agency also offering intensive case management services, outreach and scattered site supportive housing. We have grown and expanded the services offered to the community, and those who had a hand in these accomplishments should feel honored.

It seems odd to be "celebrating" 30 years of service. In an ideal world, no one would be homeless, or need any of the services offered at Immaculate. However, those who have been part of the Immaculate family, bearing witness over the years, and who understand the mission "because housing is a human right," are people worth celebrating.

I look forward to seeing you at the upcoming celebrations.

May there always be room at the Inn,



Fred Lynn, *Executive Director*



Immaculate
Conception
Shelter & Housing
Corporation

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

In an effort to co-mingle the 25 formerly homeless tenants in Casa de Francisco with their 25 neighbors, Immaculate has hired staff to facilitate different groups, activities and outings that promote socialization. We encourage tenants to visit the Community Room of the building to play board games and bingo, put together puzzles, as well as watch sporting events and movies. We also have a group specializing in Arts & Crafts projects. You will see some of the Client Artwork throughout this issue of *Bearing Witness*.

We are looking for volunteers to supply tickets for and take tenants on organized outings to the movies, bowling and local sporting events. If interested, please contact Rich Luchansky, Associate Director: (860) 724-4823 x 42 or rich@icshc.org.

Immaculate, Then and Now

Submitted by Father J.M. Donagher



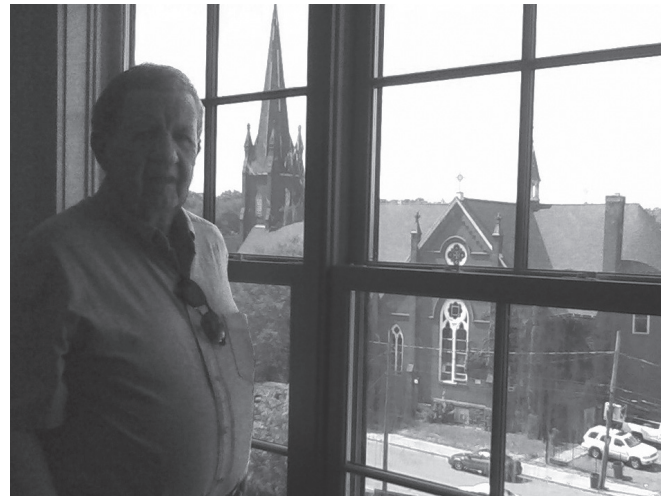
Recently, I had the pleasure of touring the Shelter and Casa de Francisco. This was quite an amazing experience for me. Thirty years ago, I opened the doors of the Shelter in the face of tragedy for the very first time. Initially, we were responding to great misfortune, an image that I will carry to my grave. I believed in an active church, “doing” rather than “waiting” to be asked. The shelter would have been the forerunner to the No Freeze of today. A lot of it was personal, assuaging my conscience that help was so close and proclaimed and yet someone died so near and yet so far.

My impressions on my visit to the Shelter were mind boggling. I was overwhelmed with the staff, impressed by the residents and blown away with what it has become. It was rewarding to see some remnants from the beginning. And today, to see Casa de Francisco. I was thankful that God had allowed me to begin, and humbled by what it had become. It's night and day.

Thirty years ago, there was no vision per se; we just didn't want to let anyone else suffer like that man did. We were all about that day, just living to get closer to spring. I thought then, and think back today, that I was so much better for the experience, very blessed by those who came and so proud to call them friends. I received so much, yet gave so little: a roof, some food, and a hope that tomorrow would come.

Today, Immaculate is embarking on an extraordinary journey. What once was a Shelter run in the basement of an old church, is a full service agency, providing the same basic shelter of 30 years ago, but also outreach, intensive case management services, scattered site housing and now, Immaculate has its own building in Casa de Francisco, which houses 25 individuals who were formerly homeless.

Casa de Francisco gives not only dignity and respect, but also genuine hope not only that tomorrow will come, but also the possibility of so much more. What a great



Father Donagher admiring the view of Immaculate from the 3rd floor of Casa de Francisco.

place, so well constructed, clean, and independent. It's the mansion after the hut, not only as a building, but especially what it says to the men, no longer a statistic or forgotten. It's a caring, hopeful, loving place that sees these homeless individuals as God's creatures as much as any one else. In the era of increased revenues for the rich, this is a beacon that there are no strangers in the house of the Lord. What a great welcome mat to the 21st century for God's little ones.

I am so proud to be but a little fly on the wall for this great project. Impressed and grateful to all who made this possible, especially the residents, the staff, Fred Lynn and his predecessors. I bless you, honor you and applaud you for such a wonderful monument for these forgotten ones.

Save the Date!

Friday, January 28, 2011
20th Annual Messiah Concert
Our Lady of Sorrows, Hartford

Thursday, May 5, 2011
Coming Home Celebration
The Society Room, Hartford

If you would like to receive an invitation, and are not currently on our mailing list, please email your address to: Teresa@icshc.org.

A Look Back

The Gift

Submitted by Carol Rizzo, St. James Food Group, Rocky Hill

Sometimes gifts come in big packages, sometimes they come in small packages and sometimes they don't come in a package at all. One of the best gifts the community of St. James in Rocky Hill has ever received is the gift of serving a meal at Immaculate. No matter how bad the day or how tired you are— after a visit to the shelter your spirits are lifted and you realize the best gifts are the ones that can't be tied up with a bow. They are the gifts that come from the heart. We find this gift in the hearts of the men at the shelter, the hearts of the staff and the hearts of those who prepare and serve the meals.

With the opening of the No Freeze Shelter last year, the need seemed greater than ever and the daunting task of feeding that many people stretched our resources to the edge. But somehow, with the grace of God, we managed to be sure no one went hungry. At times, people have questioned the time, money and work it takes to serve a meal but I remind them how many lives have been touched and changed by this unique partnership.

Each month we bring teens to the shelter to help serve and the experience is life changing. They see men who humbly pray before eating, who extend a hand to greet the servers and who have a smile on their face despite the fact they may not even have the basic necessities of life. A life much different from the ones our teens have.

One particular memory from our many visits stands out in my mind. It was a damp rainy night in April, 2008, just before the shelter was due to close for the season. As we prepared to serve the evening meal we could hear some voices from the entrance. Two men were trying to get into the shelter but had arrived after it was full. Forlorn and tired they sat down on the cement stairs to rest...one was old, one young, one white, one African American. It seems homelessness knows no age or ethnicity. We asked the staff if we could bring them some food and as we handed it to them on the steps, they apologized saying they didn't want to be a bother but were just hungry and wanted to get out of the rain. We thought no more about it and finished serving our meal.



Watercolor landscape painted by a client

As we drove home that night, off in the distance we saw the shadow of a man, hood over his head, slowly walking down the street and realized it was the man we had served on the steps of the shelter. Dead silence overtook the chatter in the car as we all felt profound sadness at this image. "No one should be homeless," someone quietly voiced. "Can we please come back again," the teens asked from the back of the car. It was then that I knew those who had served the meal that night would never be the same. Lives had been touched.

Thank you Immaculate for giving us the gift of the heart.



In celebration of our 30th Anniversary, we will continue to take "A Look Back" in future issues of Bearing Witness.

Life Happens While You Make Other Plans

Submitted by Rich Luchansky

Rich Luchansky is Immaculate's Associate Director. He holds a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice and has worked with disadvantaged populations for almost 30 years.

In the last issue you read about John*, a supportive housing client who exhibited both suicidal and homicidal tendencies, and the interventions that Immaculate's staff took to assist him in resolving his challenges. They managed to keep him housed, safe and in treatment with his mental health agency while assisting him to improve his quality of life.

The Quality Assurance Team, which consists of the Supportive Housing Director, Brian Bonds, the Clinical Director, Jim Riccio, his Case Manager and me, discussed specific strategies to further assist this young man.

John had frequently complained of being unhappy, and having frequent suicidal thoughts. He said he felt worthless and had nothing to look forward to in his life. The Team concluded that John needed more positive relationships in his life and a means of using his days in a useful manner. If he volunteered at Immaculate, the Team reasoned he would also be closer to staff in the event of another decompensation. This plan was discussed with John and his mental health therapist, with the caveat that he promise to attend his weekly therapy sessions, which he was prone to miss from time to time. If he missed a session, he couldn't volunteer until he attended the next one. Also, we would monitor his medication daily, ensuring he was taking it as prescribed.

He was extremely happy that he'd been asked and quickly agreed. John became the "greeter" at the office door from 10am – 2pm, monitoring clients who were waiting for an appointment and letting the Case Managers know that their clients were present. Feeling fulfilled with his work, he extended his work day. He assumed other duties and clients began making remarks about his outstanding abilities and the positive, courteous, way he treated visitors. John told me, "I'm the happiest I've ever been in my whole life!"



Drawing by Luis

However, considering John's disorder, exuberance is, at times, followed by being despondent. Just about every thirty days, John would decompensate and staff would spend hours speaking with him. At times, EMTs were called, and often, the police. We continued working with him as a volunteer, keeping in close contact with his therapist and recommending a review of his medication.

The second time John decompensated, he began threatening staff and clients and made suicidal gestures. After several hours of negotiation, John went to the hospital. The team collaborated on the next steps to best help him while maintaining order in the office.

The Team consulted with John's therapist, and it was decided that he would remain a supportive housing client, keep his Case Manager and receive all related services. However, he would no longer be able to volunteer until he exhibited a lengthy period of stabilization.

John had been working with his Case Manager to enroll in a community college. When John was approved for admission, it was suggested to him that since he was going to be on campus he might volunteer there. He was connected with a guidance counselor and a school therapist. Since he's entered school, we hear reports of him receiving all A's and B's.

It's that way sometimes. As John Lennon said, "Life happens while you make other plans." The first strategy worked for a while but wasn't quite the fit John needed. Staff needs to remain flexible and creative in offering options and assisting a client to achieve the highest quality of life he can. We wish John the best of luck with his studies, housing and future goals.

**Name has been changed.*

Moving into Casa de Francisco



Louis Cancel

Louis Cancel, who has been living in the shelter, is moving into the new Casa de Francisco building with his wife, Sherry. Louis and Sherry became homeless after he lost his job at Hartford Hospital in 2007. Soon after that, he could not afford rent. With no place to stay, Louis and his wife were out on the streets, trying to find a shelter bed every night. Louis explained, “It doesn’t matter how cold it is, you still have to be outside all day and still have to wait in line for a bed. Sometimes there would be no room in the shelters, and my wife and I would go to the ER just to stay warm.” Louis decided to apply for supportive housing because he wanted to break his routine of waiting around in the park or city until he had to find a bed. “I was getting tired of that, and I asked God to help and he did send a blessing down,” Louis said. “When I first read my acceptance letter, I cried. Yeah, a couple tears came out of my eyes.” He is most excited about the moment when he gets to open the door with his own key for the first time. This new apartment will give the couple more responsibility, and the opportunity to pursue other goals. Louis dreams of saving up for a car or a bike. He is also anxious to go to Florida to visit his mother without worrying about losing his bed. He exclaimed, “I want to go to Disney World! I’ve never been there before.”



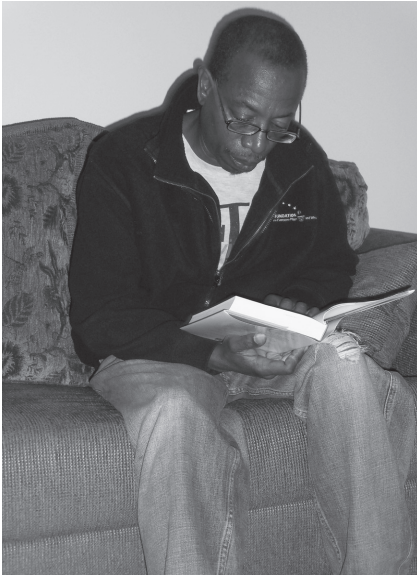
Louis and Sherry talking about their day as Louis finishes washing the dishes after dinner.



Enjoying a challenge, Gerald is spending a rainy day doing a puzzle.

Gerald Scovens

An apartment in Casa de Francisco is the first apartment Gerald Scovens will ever have. He has been homeless ever since his parents passed in 2001 and had no other place to stay. After using up his time at McKinney Shelter, Gerald came to Immaculate Conception. He has been staying in the shelter for almost a year, and thinks that the shelter is wonderful. However, a shelter bed is not a home. Gerald applied to the supportive housing program because he needs a place where he can be comfortable. In the next few months, Gerald needs to have a surgery on his foot. He cannot be on the streets all day if he is recovering from the surgery. This immediate need highlighted the long term need for a home in Gerald’s eyes. “When I opened my acceptance letter,” Gerald described, “Oh boy, I think I screamed!” Gerald was ecstatic about the new apartment, as was his fiancée, Delores, who will be moving in with him. Together, they can build a positive life together. Gerald understands and is ready for the responsibility that comes with an apartment.



Eric enjoying some quiet time reading a new book.

Eric Johnson

Though Eric Johnson is happy about moving into his new apartment, he already has his sights set higher. Eric will be completely happy once he is also gainfully employed. A self-described responsible and family-oriented man, Eric became homeless after losing his job and missing rent payments. He stayed in the shelter for about eight months. He applied to the supportive housing program because he wanted to get back on his own feet, and this seemed like a good stepping stone. Eric wasn't sure if he would be accepted, since he had not been at the shelter for as long as many of the other applicants. But when he opened the letter, he "felt like Elvis and slid across the floor!" For Eric, this apartment is a breath of fresh air. He wants the opportunity to prove himself. With his own space, Eric believes he will be able to gain some peace of mind that is hard to have living in a shelter. He will be able to come home, relax, and cook himself dinner. Eric is most excited to be able to invite his beloved children over to his new apartment. His children, who Eric refers to as "little ones" despite being all grown up, are a top priority in his life. He lights up talking about his four handsome sons and one beautiful daughter. With this new apartment, Eric will be able to visit with his children more often, and even attend his son's high school football games. Overall, Eric feels blessed to have this opportunity. He said, "I am not better than anyone else. I just got lucky."

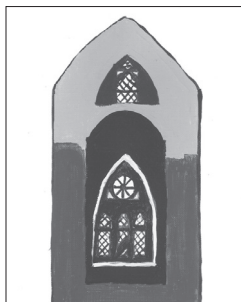


Reaching Out

“Running the Outreach Program is the best thing that happened to me— it gives me a sense of the real world. I get to meet a lot of people, hear their stories and help them. And helping people means a lot to me. I really love my job!” ~ Tony Mack, Outreach Coordinator



The Street Outreach Program, in operation since 1990, employs staff who travels daily in a van providing essential services to those who are chronically homeless and living in the streets, under bridges, in parks or in abandoned buildings. Tony Mack, who leads the outreach team, will be the first to tell you that establishing trust by regular visits, and offering food, blankets and even friendship, is what gets someone off the streets and into the shelter.



Painting by M. Rahmeen

Before taking the step to enter the shelter, some take advantage of Immaculate’s services; be it with assistance to receive entitlements or use of Immaculate’s address to receive mail. Once at the shelter, assessments are made and referrals to case management, health and counseling services are offered.

Tony was instrumental in assisting three of his outreach clients to become residents of Casa de Francisco (CDF). Tony helped with the necessary application paperwork, and assisted in preparing them for the admission interview.

They’ve literally gone from the streets and into their very own apartment. Aside from CDF, a number of clients



Tony preparing bagged lunches to bring to his outreach clients.

have also been given apartments in one of our scattered site supportive housing program over the years.

Outreach, or rather, the act of reaching out, has its challenges, as many have either had a bad experience in another shelter and don’t want to enter another one, or because of their pride, don’t want to walk through the doors of Immaculate. That’s the part of Tony’s job that makes use of his patience. It takes weeks, months, even years of his regular visits with food, coats, toiletries and blankets before he can break down the walls and get people to agree to come to Immaculate. And once they do, it doesn’t take long to see the doors open to many new opportunities.

Once again, Immaculate will be operating the **No Freeze Shelter** this winter


season. This will increase the number of clients by 60 each evening from December 1-March 31.

We are looking for Food Groups to help feed the No Freeze Clients. If you are interested in getting a group of family and friends together to cook and serve, please contact Tara Clerkin 12 or Tara@icshc.org.



Immaculate Gives Back...with Vegetables!



ur first Community Garden was a complete success! The Immaculate Community Garden was facilitated by Mabel Cabrera, Employment Specialist/Case Manager of Immaculate, and tilled, watered and grown by shelter and housing clients, as well as community volunteers such as Ansel Harding and Patrick Tyman, who either work or live in the community.

The fruit of their labor was abundant. Plump white and purple eggplants, jalapenos, habaneras, green peppers, red, green, and yellow tomatoes, grape and cherry tomatoes, carrots, cucumbers, assorted beans, green beans, squash, corn, basil, parsley and cilantro. Once full-grown, vegetables and herbs were bagged and handed out to passersby's by shelter resident Juan Sierra who religiously sits at the foot of the Park Street gate to the Immaculate Community Garden.

Thank you Knox Parks Foundation for the generous donations of flowers and vegetable plants and seeds, flower beds, and, of course, your amazing compost that you rightfully refer to as "black gold." The Immaculate Community Garden would not have been possible in such a short period of time this past summer season without you!

See you next summer, Community Residents, as we anticipate a more abundant variety of vegetables and beautiful flowers.

Left: Immaculate's vegetable and flower gardens naturally beautify Park Street.

Right: Juan Sierra hands out vegetables, herbs and flowers to community residents.

Stay Connected...

You can now view Immaculate's Video on our web site www.icshc.org and on YouTube. Also, stay up-to-date with news about Immaculate by "Liking" Immaculate Conception Shelter & Housing Corporation on Facebook and by joining our Mailing List by logging on to our web site www.icshc.org.



Q & A with Fred Scott

How did you become homeless and end up here at Immaculate Conception?

I moved from Chicago to Atlanta doing roofing. I ran into some people running this family company for a cleaning product called Supreme. It could apparently clean any mess and was biodegradable. They brought twelve men up to this area, including myself, to be door to door salesmen in 2001. We were supposed to have all our expenses paid and receive an additional \$350 per week. The whole operation turned out to be a scam. I left the program with some of the other men. Without any money and without knowing anyone, we ended up in the shelter.

How did you become a peer advocate for Immaculate Conception Shelter?

I was doing temp services for Immaculate Conception at the time. Immaculate bought bus tickets for all of us to return home. I decided I didn't want to leave the area. So I turned down the ticket and stayed. I tried to get into Shelter Plus Care, but they had so many requirements to qualify. Immaculate Conception provided supportive housing, even if the clients weren't clean or still had problems. I got an apartment through Immaculate in September of 2005. Soon after, I became a peer advocate. As a peer advocate, I serve as a go-between between the case managers and the clients. I go on home visits sometimes with the case managers and spend time in the shelter. Sometimes it is easier for a client to talk to me about their problem or goals than the case managers because I have been where they have been before. I help with the little things, but it makes a difference. I serve as an example of what can happen if you do try to stick to your plan and work towards your goals. I am a break from the routine pattern of the clients day after day. I tell the other men that if you keep on trying you will have something to look forward to.

You are not only moving into Casa de Francisco, the new building across the street. You also have been hired as the new full-time maintenance man. How will having both of these new opportunities change your life?



Fred enjoys the view of Hartford from his apartment.

Going from shelter to shelter gets tiring. You have no where permanent to lay your head, and you have no where to be during the day. You have to be out by a certain time and in by a certain time. You get into the routine of going to the park with the other guys, drinking and smoking all day. With an apartment, I was able to break that routine. In my new apartment at Casa de Francisco, I will have the opportunity to continue with what I have been doing. With the new job, I have the opportunity to do the job that I want to do. I am looking forward to being able to save some of my paycheck. I am opening up a bank account for the first time in my life soon.

But even with this job, I don't want to give up peer advocacy. If it wasn't for Immaculate Conception, I wouldn't have anything. I want to keep on letting the guys know that if they have common sense, give it a chance, and do their part, they can make changes in their lives. Some of these guys feel as if they are worthless. But if someone else, like me, pays attention to them, asks them how they are doing, it can slowly build up their esteem to thinking that they have worth. That helps them to take the plunge and make more efforts towards big or little changes in their lives. Nothing for me ever changed dramatically. I just never gave up, and my determination has brought me here.

What are you looking forward to most in the new building?

I am looking forward to having a steady paycheck. I won't be living from paycheck to paycheck anymore. I am also looking forward to the security. Having a controlled environment with all the security makes me feel more comfortable.

Graduate Shares Gifts with Immaculate

Submitted by Sara Kurker, a first year nursing student at Curry College in Milton, MA.

M

y senior year at East Catholic High School was to be filled with excitement, fun, decisions for my future and of course studying. I never thought my community service through the Disciple Project would play such an important role in so many facets of my life, including where I would attend college.

Volunteering at Immaculate helped me to see a great need in our community. From grocery shopping, to cooking and serving, it was a rewarding and eye-opening experience for me. Advice and reminders on the magnitude of making wise life decisions from the residents were amazing and made me realize the significant power of choice I had.

A large extended family graduation party was topic for major conversation in my home just before my graduation. The thought of being the center of attention with gifts made me quite uncomfortable. Needless to say, this led to a great deal of discussion. I was reminded that extended family and friends needed to celebrate this



Sara Kurker on her graduation day with her Grandparents.

“joyous occasion,” as my parents referred to it. That is when I realized my graduation party could help a community organization I had grown to love.

Instead of gifts for me, I requested that donations be made to Immaculate. It was a success. I was notified of money donated to Immaculate in honor of my graduation from East Catholic High School. The party was this summer and turned out to be one of the last events my grandmother attended before passing.

Thank you, Immaculate, for making such a lasting impression on my life. You helped me make the right decision.



Drawing by Jesus

WISH LIST

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| Flatware service for four | Microwave ovens |
| Pots & pans | A van |
| Full size sheets | Men's winter clothing |
| Full size comforters, quilts and blankets in gender neutral colors | Non-perishable foods |
| Pillows | Small household appliances |
| Kitchen trash cans | Small kitchen appliances |

Donations are distributed to supportive housing and shelter clients. Contact Teresa A. Wierbicki if you have items to donate: teresa@icshc.org or 860-724-4823 x 43.



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About Immaculate Conception Shelter & Housing Corporation

Since 1981, Immaculate has been providing emergency housing and shelter services to thousands of homeless individuals. We focus on men who are most vulnerable, including those with HIV/AIDS or other health issues, alcohol or drug abuse problems, and mental health issue.

Mission

Because housing is a human right, Immaculate Conception Shelter & Housing Corporation will provide housing and decent shelter with unconditional love to those with no other options.

Immaculate's service delivery is based on a Housing First model informed by a public health, harm reduction framework. Home is seen as a right and a foundation upon which fragile, broken and vulnerable individuals can, with proper supports, focus on improving the quality of life.

Programs

- Street Outreach
- Education and Employment
- Emergency Shelter
- Permanent Supportive Housing

Within these four components, Immaculate offers shelter, food, clothing, medical and mental health services, case management, alcohol and other drug counseling, entitlement assistance, education, job training, referrals and housing services.

For more information on Immaculate or to find out how you can help, call Fred Lynn at (860) 724-4823 ext. 33.

A Special Thank You...

Immaculate would like to extend our deepest appreciation to Connecticut Light & Power, A Northeast Utilities Company, for providing the printing on Issue 1 and 2 of *Bearing Witness*.



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