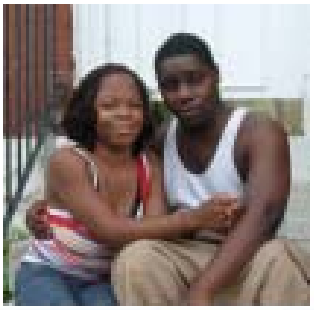
THE Round Table

Winter
2009

"...a path from where we are to where we should be." --Peter Maurin

Parenting



Holy Families

Why This Issue?

Our impetus in putting together this issue of the Round Table was our daily experience – in all of these ways – of family as a crucial place to carry out Peter Maurin's encouragement to build a new society in the shell of the old; to create a society where it is easier for people to be good. Those of us who are parents feel urgently the need to stake a claim to a larger and deeper model of family in society. Those of us who are not raising our own children want equally to proclaim our joy by sharing in parenting within hospitality and community. We want to share with you our questions, experiences and experiments, and to call on all of us to consider the necessity of sharing in parenting far, wide and deeply. We have come to see parenting as a necessary, difficult and exhilarating engagement for all of us, and we're grateful for the ways it transforms us as individuals, families and communities.

At a Catholic Worker, the traditional family of mom, dad and kids is the rare exception, yet holy families of many sȯrts happen within the context of hospitality. In one of our interviews, Sheena Hill talks with beautiful openness to Megan Heeney about the experience of being a mom with three toddlers struggling to be a family while receiving hospitality. In another interview, John Nolan relates the experience of an immigrant worker in the U.S. working to sustain family across national borders. Annjie Schiefelbein describes the goals at Karen House of offering a hospitality that shares in, yet respects, family integrity. In *From TC House,* Jenny Truax reflects on the joys and challenges at Teka Childress House in the long-term sharing of her and Annjie's home with a mom and her three children. Carolyn Griffeth brings another experience of family in the Catholic Worker at Kabat House, where she and her husband are raising their two adopted sons within a community of hospitality. Ellen Rehg offers a reflection on family and Catholic Worker values from living in a self-contained family unit. Ellen, who adopted a daughter while in community at Karen House, moved out of the neighborhood, later married another former Catholic Worker, and gave birth to two other children. Teka Childress completes the picture by reflecting on the place of the elderly in the family of community.

In this issue you will also notice a few format changes. We changed our typeface to improve ease of reading and adjusted our regular columns. *From Karen House* will continue to appear in each issue; Little House, Kabat House and Teka Childress House will rotate in providing an accompanying article from their houses. And finally, we have added a new feature, *Catholic Worker Thought & Action*, dedicated to the exploration of one of seven of the "Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker Movement" in the daily life of the St. Louis Worker communities. Tim Cosentino initiates this feature appropriately for this issue by considering children as teachers of personalism.

We look forward to hearing what you think of these changes — and about your own experiments in parenting for a society where it is easier to be good.

✚

- Virginia Druhe

Front cover: Jenny Truax
Centerfold: Megan Heeney
Correction: Last Issue's *Why This Issue* was written by Timmy Cosentino.

The St. Louis Catholic Worker Community

Karen House
1840 Hogan
St. Louis, MO. 63106
314-621-4052

Ella Dixon "Little" House
1540 N. 17th St.
St. Louis, MO. 63106
314-974-7432

Carl Kabat House
1450 Monroe
St. Louis, MO. 63106
314-621-7099

Teka Childress House
1875 Madison
St. Louis, MO. 63106
314-588-9901

www.KarenHouseCW.org

Providing Hospitality to Homeless Families: Parenting as a Non-Parent

by Annjie Schiefelbein

Catholic Workers often reflect on Peter Maurin's ideal that we create spaces where it's easier to be good. In houses like Karen House and Teka Childress House (TC House) which provide hospitality to families, we try to create a space where families can focus on issues other than meeting their basic, immediate needs (food, shelter, safety). For most of us reading this, our growing-up years, though not void of difficulties, were not spent in fear or destitution. We have some images of warmth and happiness. As adults, if we are people who choose to be responsible for children, we are trying to create safe, healthy spaces for these kids. The images of our own childhoods often shape those efforts. For those whose needs are not being met at the most basic level, those images of childhood, or the ability to create a space where such a childhood can happen, is elusive.

For most of the moms who come through Karen House, the idea of the peaceful family hearth and traditional family warm-fuzzy happiness are familiar - after all, they watch the same TV shows and commercials as the rest of the U.S. The daily reality of their lives, however, revolves more around questions like, "Will our relatives accept us sleeping again in their living room or did they really mean it when they said the last time was it?" "Is my one year-old's cough really a bad problem, or can he wait for an ER visit until I get his siblings back into school, get my ID, and go to the welfare office because they cut off my food stamps because the letter came to my cousin's house after he put us out?" These questions go on and on.

Moms and kids show up at our door distraught and exhausted with these questions. For the first days, the moms are fatigued and wary. Often they have come from situations where their safety was not certain, moving around from place to place until the options ran out and they ended up at 'the shelter.' It takes a few days for the moms to realize that their basic needs are going to be met here. Most of the families that come to us have been in other shelters, and are expecting the same: hard and fast rules, staff who will give them a hard time, shared space with lots of other people, and a high level of noise and confusion. In their first few days at Karen House, one can see the women visibly relax. They often wonder at the fact that we both live with them and want to hang out with them. They are relieved that they aren't required to leave our house during the day. The first week, we remember Dorothy Day's reflections on how grueling it is to be homeless and poor. It is a holy time, I think. We try to help more privileged people understand this, when they come for a tour of the house or when we are giving a talk about the Worker. The question often arises: do we "let people lay around," or do we "make them do something with their lives?". I want to ask those folks if they would be up for someone evaluating their time. I want to ask how much time they spend watching TV, or on their computer? I, myself, am relieved that my community does not evaluate how I spend my time on a daily basis. I would, however, expect them to challenge me if patterns arose that they felt were unhealthy, and so it is with our guests.

Kids transition fairly well into Karen House. My favorite thing about it is the greeting you get from the kids when you walk through the door. It matters little if you've been gone 5 hours or 5 minutes, a gaggle of children will often greet you, screaming your name as if your return is the MOST EXCITING THING THAT'S EVER HAPPNED! Aside from the at-

Annjie Schiefelbein is exhilirated (and somewhat embarrassed) by her newfound passion for professional tennis (and Roger Federer in particular).

tention the kids get, there is also some structure (and as it turns out, it is true that kids respond well to structure!). There are also a lot of other kids to play with, and often snacks to be had. There are people to help them with their homework, and an abundant supply of scrap paper on which to color (although strangely the wall remains the medium of choice).

Kids coming into Karen House may have an easier transition than their moms. It can be a hard place to be a mom. While I mentioned the volume and chaos of the other St. Louis shelters, Karen House is not without its fair share of both. We ask moms to keep their kids with them at all times since it's such a big house with so many people around. We also ask Moms to go upstairs with their kids at bedtime and remain with them there for the night. But do you know any parents that keep their kids around them at ALL times, including sleeping in one shared room? It's asking a lot, and we try to be gentle on the rules as long as it seems like the kids are safe.

A lot of our moms are homeless for purely financial reasons. In other situations, moms are mentally ill or addicted. This adds a new level of difficulty in both parenting and in other issues for the kids. In these situations, we often find ourselves in the situation of believing that a course of action a mom is taking (or not taking) needs to be altered.

The issue of challenging the moms who live with us or correcting behaviors in kids is a difficult one. Our community is pretty homogonous. Our ages, genders, and faith persuasions are diverse, but our race and parenting status are not. With only a few exceptions over the years (and none currently), we are a white, non-parent community living with mothers who are mostly African American. Usually this difference is uneventful. When it does come up, the Moms may ask, "Why do you think you can tell me what to do as a parent - you have no idea." We agree that, mostly, we do not. We want to constantly be aware of the divide between us and the guests, and do all that we can to obliterate it, to let go of our power and privilege and hold our guests up. So how do we ask these moms to go to parenting class, promote non-violent parenting, denounce junk food, endorse bedtime, and correct behaviors that we understand to be harmful to kids? The question, rephrased, is: "In a house of hospitality, how can a non-parent be responsible for kids while respecting the house, the kids, and the moms?" Karen House and TC House lead us to two different but connected answers to this question.

Annjie Shiefelbein with "Jello," while volunteer Coco looks on
Photo: Beth Buchek

At Karen House, we may not have a lot of personal parenting experience, but we do have a ton of collective experience with families at the house. It is a unique space to raise a child, and we have experienced both successful and failed approaches over the years. In many ways, we know what works with kids at Karen House and what doesn't. And so we try to incorporate the mom's knowledge of her kids with our knowledge of kids at Karen House.

We ask many mothers to go to parenting classes. We try to offer alternatives to the physical discipline that we don't allow in the house. We decide on a daily basis if the behaviors kids are expressing require action or not. When we can't easily decide, we discuss it in our consensus-based meetings and talk to the moms about what we should do. We put kids in time-outs, and try to have their mothers both present and active in the consequence of their children's behaviors. One of my favorite recent episodes involved a very young mother of a 4 year-old whose behavior reflects her already difficult life. We've been trying very hard to get this Mom, not even an adult herself yet, to consistently do time-outs with us. I felt it a success when the mom, frustrated by her daughter, yelled at me in a voice sounding a lot like a young child, "Annjie, she is being bad and needs a time out but she won't gooooooooo!" I count that as a success!

At TC House, we are experimenting with another model of being non-parents in a house of hospitality with a family. Living at TC House with Jenny and me is one family (a Mom and her 3 kids). They will hopefully be staying with us long term, which has prompted much of this reflection on parenting. We've had the time and intimacy with this family to better understand the patterns that emerge for families living with long-term homelessness. Like the moms that live with us at Karen House, the family at TC House had been homeless for a great deal of their lives. They have lived out of bags, lived all in the same room, and had to buy quick, easy food (which does not translate into healthy). They've lost their personal belongings many times over, and so have little sense of treating something as their own, to be valued.

They've lost any hope for consistency with changing living situations and schools. And consistency, as our friend with 3 adult children told us the other day, is the hardest part of being a parent. Imagine how much more so for a homeless parent.

When a family has been chronically homeless, members necessairily focus on meeting very immediate needs. Not only do non-immediate needs (consistency, structure, attention) go unmet, but so does the opportunity to garner the skills necessary to meet these needs once the family is out of crisis. It has become clearer to us at TC House that, although Jenny and I are not parents, we may have insight into some better ways for the kids because of our privilege of never having been homeless. This is very hard to swallow. I feel it is an essential part of a Worker community (and indeed society at large) to go too far in assuming you don't know what it's like to be the other, to let go of your privilege, and to try fervently not to judge. It is with humility that I have come to realize I can try to hold myself and the kids' mom to a standard that will mean healthier, more fully realized kids.

The works of mercy are a wonderful stimulus to our growth in faith as well as in love. Our faith is taxed to the utmost and so grows through this strain put upon it. It is pruned again and again, and springs up bearing much fruit.
-Dorothy Day

I'm not sure this is the answer, or even correct, but we are getting lots of chances to practice it. We have unexpectedly (but happily) chosen to be more responsible for the kids than we planned to be initially (due to the Mom's work schedule). We are deeply invested in the long run with these kids, and each decision can feel like a heavy weight on us. Instead of worrying if the kids are in school, we worry about how they will perform on the standardized tests because it can make or break the future possibilities for an inner city child. We worry about smaller behaviors, understanding that we are in part responsible for the bigger problems that the accumulation of minor problems creates. We desperately want to ameliorate the unhelpful patterns this family has had to learn. Because there is a little more stability, our thoughts are on more future-oriented goals. It all feels so important and so hopeless, trying to create newness in the face of so many years of homelessness; so many years of living in a way that is focused on meeting only the most basic of needs, and ignoring anything else. Jenny talks about this in *From TC House* later in this issue - a lifetime of patterns based on homelessness does not just go away when the family isn't homeless. It is a difficult, frustrating, and holy lesson.

If we are to create places where it is 'easier to be good,' what does that mean for families? I think, at Karen House and TCH, it means creating a space where a kid can expect love with a delightful ferocity. A space where moms can focus on something other than shelter and food, so much so that they can complain about what's for dinner and bicker over the bathrooms. A space where non-biological parents can love, care for, and invest deeply in the lives of families without the need to shelter (both literally and figuratively) their own children. A space where children can have enough security to be able to remember as an adult a space and time that was sacred. I think we are succeeding. I think of specific faces, like the many times we meet a young adult who grew up, in part, at Karen House. They always smile and you can see them going back in time in their memories with fondness as they recount the Christmas they spent at Karen House, or the hiking trip they took with Tim, or their favorite meal, and on and on. Their families may have stayed homeless; their mothers may still be addicted or mentally ill. Perhaps the adult versions of the kids who lived at Karen House suffer with these things themselves. But they often look back with happiness at that time and space.

I think of a family we know well - Lorraine Stewart and her large family - who lived at Karen House a few times throughout the years. The family is now deeply entrenched in the lives of the neighborhood, and we see them often. They all consider Karen House a home base, a place of safety and comfort. I think of a woman who called the house the other day and said that she lived with her mom at Karen House when she was a small child. Her mother had just passed away, but before doing so she instructed her daughter to remember Karen House, though it had been 20 years since they'd been with us. The mother told her daughter that Karen House would help her once she passed on. The daughter called us, she said, because she remembered Karen House and knew her mom was right.

It is a delight, in the many faces of family's needs, to be a witness to places that try to meet all of the levels, and to watch the holy goodness that comes forth from it, for all of us.

Learning the Language of Values: Catholic Worker Ideals and Raising Children

by Ellen Rehg

I knew it was coming, and I was trying to avoid it, this conversation that would change my life. It was a kind of annunciation; the 'angel' was the unwed mother, and I was a reluctant 'Mary.' The baby was already a year old. My recollection is that we were standing in the hall at Karen House by the playroom. Her annunciation was the final, anti-climatic act in a months-long drama.

She had been telling me for some time that she could no longer take care of her one year old daughter, who was also my godchild. Her plan was to turn her over to the Department of Family Services. I kept telling her not to – I couldn't stand the thought of this child, who had won my heart, being plucked from the only home and family she knew to live with total strangers. I had told her mother that I would take over, when she needed me to. But I was dragging my feet.

I loved my godchild, Myrrah, enough to be her mother, there was no doubt about that. But, as a single, white woman living in a shelter, I wasn't sure that I stood much of a chance to legally adopt her, or even that it would be in her best interests for me to do so. What I couldn't quite admit to myself was that I also wasn't sure that I was up to the enormity of the job.

But Myrrah's mother had sought me out, and was telling me now how stressed she was, and that she needed an answer from me.

"When you get to the end of your rope, let me know," I hedged.

She looked at me and said, pointedly, "I'm at the end of my rope." I didn't know what to say. But later that afternoon, I asked Tom Angert if he would help me move Myrrah's metal crib from the room she and her mother occupied on the second floor, to the room next to mine in the attic on the third floor, a request with which he wordlessly complied. That was how I first became a parent, some twenty-five years ago.

Now, I am married and have two more children. Myrrah is almost 26, Gabe is 13, and Anna is 10. I have been a single, adoptive parent, and a married parent with biological children. I have parented in community at the Catholic Worker, and, presently, in neighborhood communities, in more of a nuclear family setting. Through these changes my desire to raise my children with the values expressed in the "Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker" has remained constant. The basic challenges of parenting have not changed much, whether I was married or single, had one child or three, adopted or biological. The primary thing that *has* changed is that I started out as a parent living in a Catholic Worker community, but now don't, and that has made a difference. My challenge has been – how do I still raise my children with the counter-cultural values of the Catholic Worker, when we no longer live in a Catholic Worker community?

For me, the values of the Worker are one of the best expressions of the gospel of Jesus that I know. Living simply, non-violently, resisting injustice, seeing Jesus in the face of the poor, living in community; I have learned that these are the keys to a life full of meaning and joy. "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly," Jesus told us. The Catholic Worker, and other communities I have participated in, have made that promise concrete for me.

Because I first became a parent while living at Karen House, it was natural for those values to form my vision of parenting. While I was living in community there, I didn't worry too much that I would be able to form my child in those values. I assumed

Ellen Rehg is doggedly pursuing her goal of becoming a 'Hartford Coffee House -class' fiddle player.

that that would happen pretty seamlessly as she witnessed the great love that her Catholic Worker community had for her, saw them care for the poor, share with each other, do cool things together, etc. I figured the superiority of our Catholic Worker way of life over our consumerist, individualistic society would be obvious!

And there are great things about living in a CW community with a child, especially as a single mother. I wasn't isolated; I had lots of support. Myrrah had relationships with all kinds of people who loved her. At the same time, there were drawbacks. Twenty years ago at Karen House, I was the only mother with a small child in the community; the community structures were set up for adults. The neighborhood was largely vacant with abandoned buildings and empty lots. Myrrah had no peers, except the children of our guests who only stayed temporarily. This was a large part of the reason that prompted me to move, with a heavy heart, to the Forest Park South East (FPSE) neighborhood. I was sad to leave the Worker; being a Catholic Worker has always felt to me to be my vocation, and the way I want to live my life. Fortunately, living in FPSE was the next best thing.

ABOVE: Bill, Anna, Gabe, and Ellen

BELOW: Anna and Myrrah

We moved there in order to share in the life of the Kopavi Community, another wonderful set of people trying, with their families of young children, to live lives radically rooted in the Gospel. This meant living in community with each other, in solidarity with the poor of their marginal city neighborhood, living a life of non-violence and of resistance to social and political injustice.

Again, I assumed that the richness of our gospel way of life would stand out in favorable contrast to our culturally impoverished society. And Myrrah was a joyful soul, apparently happy with our lifestyle, appreciative of what she had. Maybe we didn't have cable television or a dishwasher. Who needed them? They were just things. We had community, "marvelous comrades," as the Stylus Jesuit song says. I thought then, and still think, of our way of life and the values that informed it, as precious gems, family heirlooms, that I was doing my best to preserve and hand on to the next generations.

I married Bill Miller, another former Catholic Worker and fellow traveler, when Myrrah was ten, and we subsequently had two more children. We shared the dream of trying to remain true to the Catholic Worker values that had so formed us as single adults, even as we chose to buy a house and live as a part of our neighborhood communities. In addition to the Kopavi community, many other people intentionally populated our neighborhood, forming a community of families who wanted to live more radical lives (somewhat similar to what people are doing now in the neighborhood surrounding Karen and Kabat House).

But living in the larger culture brings changes that are impossible to ignore. Where you live becomes the 'language' that you speak. Abiding by the values that shape the Worker when you don't live there is like trying to teach your children Spanish in an English-dominated land. They can learn it, but they don't learn it by osmosis. Imparting those values becomes more deliberate, a second language at best.

I think of our family as having feet in two worlds; again, like immigrants who live in a ghetto filled with their countryfolk, but whose children go to schools with a mix of people. Because of this reality, I have been forced to think differently about my relationship to the larger culture. Instead of resistance, which is how I would describe my attitude towards the larger culture when I lived at Karen House, I would say that I am now following a model of encounter. 'CW-inspired counter-culture' meets the 'Consumer-inspired larger culture', you could say. I am hoping that Bill and I, and our neighbors, are providing an

One of our darling Karen House toddlers
Photo: Beth Buchek

example of a life rooted in the Gospel, and that we bring these values to the other worlds that our children inhabit. They, in turn, leave the world we've constructed for them and become ambassadors to us of the larger society and its values.

Somehow, the locus of the encounter seems particularly focused on consumerism and simple living. Children tend to prefer non-violence over violence, particularly when they see that everyone wants to be treated how they want to be treated, they tend to love community and having more kids to play with, and they can learn to have compassion for and friendships with the poor. But, not having the cool, expensive pants, the cool, expensive electronics, or just whatever consumer good their heart desires – that's the hard part!

I have learned to move to the model of encounter only gradually, through the experiences I've had with my children. One memory especially stands out for me. After I got married to Bill we began celebrating Christmas with his sister and her family. One Christmas, her Aunt and Uncle gave Myrrah a red Adidas jacket. It had the three white stripes going down each arm. Naturally, I hadn't known that Adidas jackets were 'in'. I don't think that Myrrah had asked for one; she probably would have felt that it was a lost cause.

She liked the jacket a lot. She wore it every day to school. I didn't realize how much she liked it, though, until she brought home her school pictures. As I slid them out of their slender package, there she was, with a somewhat beleaguered smile, wearing her jacket. She had not only kept her jacket on for the picture, she had zipped it all the way up so that you couldn't see anything but that. Either she really didn't like the clothes she had been wearing, or, she really liked that jacket, I thought; I suspected it was the latter.

This photo tugged at my heart. What it told me was that what something meant to me was not what it meant to her. I could place 'expensive trendy clothes' under the larger category of 'materialism' and therefore, something to be resisted. And of course, there is truth to that. But, I hadn't been seeing it from her perspective. *'I may be the only kid in the community who has a single parent, I may be the only black kid in my class who has a white mother. We may not have our own car or house, but hey, I have the same jacket as you!'* I imagined her 'telling' her peers. That's what that photo said to me. I realized that she had to adapt to her world; and that I had to find out what things meant to her, not only tell her what they meant to me.

I can now say two things with confidence about parenting for peace and justice when you are in a position like this - a position of having to encounter a culture that you believe to be seriously flawed. First of all, the community in which you live is crucial in counteracting the influence of the culture. Your children cannot help but want to adopt the values of the people around them. What they are taught in their school and what their peers' families value and do has a huge influence on them. It has to - people want to belong, want to fit in with their social group. We aren't, actually, isolated individuals able to invent our identity all by ourselves. This means that my children will be formed to an extent by the larger culture.

However, this cuts both ways. It has been a great help to me that our neighborhood community is populated by people who share many of our countercultural values. When Gabe and Anna were little, I didn't have to worry about what they were seeing on someone else's TV (or even that they were watch-

> God is revealed to us in the weakness of a small child.
> -Unknown

ing it all that much), or whether anyone had a gun in their house. When a spat arose between neighborhood kids, I knew that the adult who helped them to work out their differences would be teaching them how to resolve their problems non-violently, and with respect for each other. My children have seen our neighbors speak kindly to, and help out, the folks who knock at our doors and ask for food or bus fare. They have played with their friends at peace demonstrations, and have played outdoors, with large groups of kids, for hours on summer days. They have not been dismissed or talked down to because they were children; they have been treated with respect and affection by the adults around them. Living in a context like this has given them what they bring to the larger culture, and has been crucial in helping me to form my children.

I have also shifted my thinking somewhat with regards to what it means to impart my values to my kids, which brings me to the second thing I have learned. I had been trying to instill the value of simple living by adhering to that principle in our lifestyle, assuming that instilling Catholic Worker values meant imparting the principles, the dogma, that I care deeply about. But as I let the 'lesson' of Myrrah's jacket seep into my pores and shape my understanding, the Catholic Worker tenets that I more and more turned to in my parenting were those of personalism and non-violence. Both of these values helped me to embrace the model of encountering the culture. Personalism teaches that responding to the concrete individual standing right in front of you takes priority over adhering to any abstract systems of thought. Living non-violently means not assuming that you have the whole truth. Instead, you have to listen to the person with whom you are in conflict, and try to discern whether there is any truth to their view. If I let these tenets inform my parenting, I had to consider the needs and perspectives of my children, in addition to my own needs and perspectives, when I was trying to get them to live simply, for example. Some of their perspective is informed by different values from mine. I don't see the need for a grade-schooler to have a cell phone, for example! But I now see that even parenting for peace and justice is not just about imparting dogma; it's just as much, maybe more, about the process of doing so.

This has been an on-going process for me, as my children grow up and choose their own path. I am learning to accept the differences in values between me and my adult child, for example. While I can't say that Myrrah will ever want to live as a Catholic Worker, I can see how she has been formed both by that experience and the experience of our neighborhood community life. Myrrah is a very confident person and an independent thinker, gifts of both her native personality and of the great love she has received from a community of 'parents' and 'siblings.' (She has regularly called several adults 'Mom" and "Dad,' but has clarified to me that she only has one Mommy and Daddy!) She is generous and giving, involved in service to her community, and values her connections with family and community. For a while, she was holding communal dinners in her apartment for her friends and acquaintances! "I wonder where I got that idea?" she joked.

This year's Santa (slightly resembling Beth) with China
Photo: Annjie Schiefelbein

I have learned to be a lot more open to the material things that my two younger children ask for. We're still holding the line on cable television and cell phones! Living simply is still an important value to us. But I now know that they have important values, too. When they both lobbied hard for a game system of some kind, (granted, this process took about a year!) in a precedent-shattering move, we ended up getting them a Wii for Christmas. Oh well, I thought, it is, after all, just a thing.

Parenting without Privilege: Two Interviews

by Megan Heeney and John Nolan

Editor's note: *Some names and facts in this story have been changed to protect the identity of those involved. The interviews for this article were conducted in Spanish.*

Soledad Viacruz wakes up at three in the morning to go to work. All day, she stands at a table packing fruits and vegetables for less than seven dollars an hour. Usually, she works until noon, but sometimes they keep her until eight at night.

Soledad never complains about her job, or the erratic schedule. If she had time, she would learn English and get a better job, but for now she concentrates on working, and making as much money as she can. She has to make a lot of money if she is ever going to get home to her sons.

Soledad's sons, Jesús and Martin, live in Mexico. Jesús is 16 and works to support himself. Martin is 12 and lives with relatives. The boys' father, Manuel, abandoned the family when they were babies. In Mexico, Soledad sold tacos and *sopes* on the street to support them. Eventually, she rented a little place and opened a restaurant and bar. It was a lot of work, but she made enough to clothe and feed the boys, and send them to school.

About three years ago, Manuel went to her for money to go to the US. He wanted to get a work visa, but the legal costs amounted to several thousand US dollars. Soledad borrowed money from her friends and family to give Manuel the money that he needed. He was granted a work visa, but he decided to stay in Mexico. The visa expired, and the money was lost. Manuel talked Sole into getting money for him two more times, and both times he balked at leaving Mexico. Soledad was stuck with $9,000 USD in debts to her friends and family. She was determined to pay them back, but saw little hope of making that much money in Mexico. So she scraped up even more money for her own visa, and came to the US. A produce company contracted her at the border and brought her to St. Louis.

When she arrived, she moved into an apartment owned by the company. She stayed with eight other people in an over-crowded and over-priced apartment. The work was long, monotonous, and didn't pay well. In over two years she hasn't been able to find a better job.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, Manuel has taken custody of her children, but he doesn't take care of them. Manuel also swindled Soledad's parents out of an expensive piece of land. Her parents are in their seventies, and she has to pay them back for what amounted to their life savings. Manuel also took several additional loans in her name. Soledad calculates that Manuel has caused her $16,000 USD in debts. On top of that, she needs to hire a lawyer to fight for the custody of her children.

Jesús and Martin have been living with Manuel's family since Soledad left. She sends money to pay for their clothes and to send them to school, but she thinks that Manuel's family keeps the money for themselves. Her boys are afraid to speak freely to her on the phone, but they do tell her that they don't have certain things that she sent money for. Several months ago she sent money for shoes for Martin, but he never got the shoes. Last she knew he still wasn't in school.

Despite all that has happened, Soledad is a cheerful person. She likes to joke, and she giggles as she kids her friends. That changes when she speaks of her children; her tears quickly cut her off. She told me that she is very tired from so much crying.

Telling the story wasn't easy for her, between the tears and the confusion of having her life taken from her, piece by piece. Sometimes the facts of her story weren't consistent. Did it cost $2,000 for

Megan Heeney recently inspired her fellow Karen House community members by (mostly) kicking her diet soda addiction. **John Nolan** is one of our neighborhood's newest SLU graduates.

the visa, or $3,000? Where were the boys? Where are the boys? At one point during the two weeks in which I communicated with her, Soledad didn't know exactly where Jesús was; then he was with family.

The plot always remained the same. At times, I found it hard to believe, but I feel the same way about most immigrant stories — these stories are completely incredulous to 'nice white people,' who rest on the pinnacle of empire. We can't understand why. Why did she take on so much debt for a man who had abandoned her? Did she think that he would send her money from the US, or did she simply want to get rid of him? Isn't there another way to make the money? Eventually I realized that Soledad is a refugee. She is fleeing an abusive relationship, a country where she couldn't protect herself, and an economy that only offered her a lifetime of subsistence.

Is there a moral to Soledad's story? Maybe it is a tragedy that goes like this: A loving mother is separated from her sons because she had too much patience with a worthless man (and no one waits to see how much blood spills before the scene is closed). But her story isn't a tragedy, because Sole and her boys are still alive. She still cries for them, because she refuses to accept their fate. So she continues to wake up at three in the morning and go to work. She is determined to be with them again, and hopes that eventually they will understand why she had to leave.

Jerriona, still our Karen House sweetheart
Photo: Beth Buchek

Editor's Note: *Sheena lived with us at Karen house for 6 months in 2007. Now she lives with her 3 children in their own home. When Sheena was at Karen House, her girls were 1½ (Jerriona) and 1 month old (twins Jerricka and Jerrinee'). Jerrinee' was not able to live at Karen house because she had so many health problems. Sheena is a recovering drug addict. She has been clean for four years, and has come from a cycle of homelessness, drugs and abuse.*

RT: What are the challenges of parenting/raising kids in Karen House?
SH: The biggest difficulty was the age difference between my daughter and the other kids at the house. She did not have other kids who were her age to play with, while the other kids could play in groups.

While I was at the house she began her terrible twos, so I had to take extra care and notice. I was a parent who was experiencing having a two year old for the first time; I was pretty much winging it. I tried to take clues from other parents in the house but none of them had two year olds and so it wasn't much help. Since I grew up in foster care, I was learning how to do something that was never shown to me.

Sometimes having so many people (community and other guests) watching me was really difficult because it made me feel inadequate, when I knew I was a good mother in a hard situation. When I got my check my kids came first, not me. They were always my first priority, I made sure of it.
RT: What were difficulties in having a newborn at the house?
SH: I had to deal with trying to be the sterilizing mother in a place that is not sterile. It was a struggle trying to sterilize bottles, to watch out for the kids and to keep them away from germs. It was really difficult living in a community with a bunch of other stressed out women. When you have a newborn, you deal with waking up every three hours. Getting up and walking with them is difficult when you are in a shelter. People get upset with you in the middle of the night when your daughter is crying, but it's hard to tiptoe through the house with a crying kid without making other guests upset. You are awake three to four times at night, but have to wake up at 7 to get on the ground and get your life in order. I was trying to do all the proper stuff to get resources, housing and make myself stable. Waking up that early was so difficult.

I was not only having to find resources for my own housing, but I had a daughter in the hospital with a serious life or death condition. I worryied that every time my cell phone rang it would be the hospital telling me to get there...but I was also in a shelter with too few options.

Our Holy Families

What does the Catholic Worker mean, -- what is it? -- people often ask. One may answer: voluntary poverty. Another says: an unjudging care for the destitute. Another says: mutual aid; still another: the family. Every House of Hospitality is a family with its faults and virtues, and above all, its love. We can all look at each other and say, "You are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," we are all members one of another, since all are members or potential members of the Body of Christ. Even those dread words, pacifism and anarchism, when you get down to it, mean that we try always to love, rather than coerce, "to be what we want the other fellow to be," to be the least, to have no authority over others, to begin with that microcosm human, or rather, with ourselves. -Dorothy Day

Tammy, LaShay, DeAngelo, Roshell and Roland at Karen House Christmas, 2008.

Elizabeth, Megan, Teka, Beth and Colleen
at Karen House Community Retreat

"Family is the people throughout our lives,
whether we like it or not, that we consider
in all our decisions and actions."
- Joe-Joe Eggleston, Karen House Housetaker

"Family is my mommy, daddy, my baby sisters,
Emani and candy in our house."
- Jerriona Marshall, 3 year old who used to
live at Karen House

Family is difficult for me, because it is something I have to create wherever I go. Family are the people that both nourish my growth and challenge me.—James Meinert, Karen House Community.

"Family is life-given"
- Douglas Melgara,
a member of the
Kabat House Family.

It is the life of the family in this world which most concerns us, and its temporal needs for land and bread and the work that goes with them
- Dorothy Day

Carolyn, Tery, Ghana and Finn
in the neighborhood.

I was on edge, and being with women (sometimes women can be very catty,) made it very hard. People who have been hurt know how to hurt people, so if something stressful was happening in people's lives and I was on edge, things would come out of other women's mouths. It always came down to the bigger picture.

RT: What was the bigger picture?

SH: For me that picture was getting my daughter out of the hospital, getting myself into a house where my daughter could come home to me and her sisters. If I couldn't find a place, DFS would have had to take her, because an infant with Jerrinee's severe heart defect couldn't live in a place like Karen House. At that point she was on life support and ended up having five operations in the six months my family was at Karen House. Two were severe eleven-hour heart operations.

Three months into my stay at Karen House, Jerricka was rushed to the hospital to find out she had a terrible illness. At the same time, I was dealing with Jerriona in her terrible twos. Jerriona was going through her 'dethroned period;' she wanted all the attention and acted out in her own ways. She caught on quickly that she had to find a niche. Her niche was that she became the Karen House sweetheart, and still is today. Every volunteer group would come in and look for her. That helped because they helped me parent in the midst of stress. They would come and say "Don't worry about it, we will take Jerriona with us." They would take her on outings to give me some down time so I could hold on. Twenty, thirty, or forty-five minutes of down time kept me from snapping during the stressful periods.

RT: What were some of the joys in living in community with children?

SH: You can pawn your kids off on people sometimes. The play situation is easier in a communal situation; the children have more interaction with other kids. Now Jerriona does her own thing, and it is often things she shouldn't be doing. She teaches her little sisters to follow suit. Having two pretty healthy twins and a three year old is a whirlwind of chaos, even in my own house. When you have your own house that's yours, if you don't feel like cleaning that day you don't have to, if you don't want to cook but have frozen pizza you can. There aren't twenty or thirty other people who you have to be concerned about. In my house there is my little square and the circle that surrounds my square that I have to take care of. In community it's a ripple of circles, which is sometimes good and other times more difficult. But at my house it is just us and I like my little square. If someone is in my square that I don't want, I have my own front door that I can ask them to leave through.

RT: What are unique struggles for women with kids who are homeless?

SH: If you are a single woman and you are put out of a shelter you can figure out a way to survive. When you have a kid, it is your child you have to figure out first. Does she have a roof over her head? Does she have breakfast in the morning? I'm alright if I don't eat, but I'm not alright if she doesn't eat, that's a problem. If she doesn't have a roof over her head it's a problem!

Bouncing around from shelter to shelter is terrible. I have to take responsibility for why I bounced around: a lot of days I forgot the bigger picture. The most troubling times are when people treat me or my children with a "you are beneath me" attitude; it's the hardest when it's directed at your child.

RT: In a perfect world, what resources should be provided for women and their kids?

SH: When it comes to getting housing, women with kids should be first in line - kids are the future- why would we start our future off in a bad situation? This would also apply to fathers raising kids.

The medical system should not be as hard as it is; we need more medical resources, easier transportation and easier appointment making. Mothers who are homeless are not bad mothers; we need society to change the way it views people. Instead of taking people's children, DFS should start helping women get the resources to raise their children well.

In terms of the way society sees ex-drug addicts, once an addict doesn't make us always an addict. Drugs don't rule our lives forever; we can become productive members of society, but we need the help of society in doing that. Instead of jail, give people access to quality treatment. Don't just ignore us. You have to give everyone a chance to try.

Mothers with a lot of kids get stressed out; maybe we do want to go to school, but daycare at $150 per child is impossible, especially when we have to pay for gas, light and rent bills. How are we ever going to go to school when we can't get daycare?

RT: What do you want for your kids?

SH: I want my kids to know that 2009 was a great year and anything is possible. I want them to understand that education is very important. I want them to know they need to love their siblings and that supporting their siblings is so important. I want them to know and see what I went through for them, so they don't have to do that. It is not necessary to have this cycle continue. This is the cycle I'm trying to stop. I am trying to stop the cycle of homelessness, drugs and abuse for myself and for my children. They don't have to do what I did, they can do it better.

Committing to Family Across Generations

by Teka Childress

It is funny how some things strike you. When I was in my early thirties I saw a woman in her seventies standing at the end of the walkway leading up to her apartment. She was waiting for someone to pick her up. It was early on Easter morning and she was all dressed up. I don't know how long she had been waiting or how long it had been since she had seen the people for whom she was waiting, but her vulnerability, her aloneness and her frailty, hit me like a lightning bolt. Perhaps it is because I am now in my 50's that I have become more acutely aware of the isolation of many older people. Thus, when we were talking about the current Round Table issue on families, I found myself insisting we have something exploring the place of older adults in their families. One can always simplify and romanticize images of the past. I think of the Joads in The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck and how the bond between the different generations appeared unbreakable. When a greater number of people in the United States lived on family farms, there were multi-generational families living in one household. People lived on the same land for generations. Perhaps there would be multiple houses on the farm if the families had enough wealth, but these households could be easily combined as parents got older, lost spouses or needed more assistance. Among Native American communities there were special places for the elderly. Yet these communities lived together and moved together.

Teka Childress at Karen House, 1998
Photo: Ann Marie Appel Widnerbaum

In some ways there are now many commonalities to these earlier times. How many grandparents are there who are helping with their grandchildren? How many are there who are actually raising their grandchildren for a variety of reasons? Yet, while this is so, in many ways our culture is quite different from that seen on the family farm, especially among members of society with greater resources. Younger members of the family commonly move to a different city to go to college, sometimes a thousand miles away, and often end up living in their adopted home after school. Jobs call people to move to different towns. With the variety of work that people do and the sense of vocation that goes with this, many people move to follow their sense of calling or simply move in order to be able to continue at their job. Thus the task of maintaining strong family ties and relationships between the generations, providing assistance for elderly family members and a place in their family, is quite challenging.

It is tempting to try and offer one solution to the problem of providing a home and perhaps care for elderly family members but in fact the factors involved are many and the decisions in how to provide family and care for elderly parents and loved ones involve many facets. Included in the equation is how long adults are now living, the variety of illnesses they have, and the type of care they need. Also involved in the decision making is whether a family can afford to have a member stay at home to care for a parent if

Teka Childress continues to inspire her fellow community members with her grace and kindness, and is still learning the art of taking a day off.

Lorraine Stewart and seven of her wonderful children
Photo: Annjie Schiefelbein

needed. Following are a few stories of people sharing their lives with older family members.

I first heard about "Uncle Marvin" from my husband, Mike Baldwin. Mike is good friends with Greg Stevens (the owner of Peace Institute Printing and printer of *The Round Table*.) Greg's uncle, Marvin Stevens, was living in San Diego when he had a stroke and could no longer live alone. He moved in with his niece in L.A. for a time and then came to St. Louis with the help of his nephew. Greg helped him get his own apartment in the recently built senior apartments at Manchester and Kingshighway. While Marvin will be the first to tell you that he finds the restrictions of his life due to his disabling conditions very hard, he still has the consolation of his nephew who comes to see him daily for dinner and who has incorporated Marvin's life into his own. A great father and grandfather as well as a nephew, Greg is indeed a family man.

Stewart Griffeth came from Champaign/Urbana on one of his visits to see his daughter, Carolyn Griffeth. One day, while he was here, Carolyn heard that a neighbor was moving. She walked down to speak with the neighbor and learned the woman was moving to take care of an aging father. When Carolyn returned home, she asked her dad, "What are you going to do when you get old?" He pointed out that he was already seventy years old, but said that he thought he might move near one of his daughters. Carolyn asked, "Which one?" Since Carolyn's sister was in Mongolia, he said, "Well, I guess, you." She then asked him if he wanted to go look at this house down the street that was being vacated and within the hour he had decided to make an offer on it and now lives down the street from Carolyn and Kabat House. His presence in the neighborhood has not only been a blessing for him and his family but for the neighborhood and for the Kabat House community as well. Stewart has become sober in the last couple of years and finds happiness in sharing his fellowship in AA with many guests at Kabat House who need a ride to a meeting or encouragement. He further carries on the Catholic Worker tradition of hospitality by providing housing to two men who have come to the neighborhood, one a former guest at Kabat House.

Mary Watson, who lived to be ninety-five years old, lived with her granddaughter, Lorraine Stewart. Lorraine's son and Mary's great-grandson, DaJuan Adams was telling me how he used to take care of his great-grandmother. When he was a teenager, he would bathe her and change her diaper. He laughed while he told how she would ask him to fetch her coin purse and would pull out a quarter to give to him. All of us at Karen House who have known the Adams clan over the years have been so amazed at what a strong family they are. Many of the young men of our neighborhood have interesting "street" names. DaJuan's is one of the nicer ones. His friends call him, "St. Juan."

Marian Andrews raised seven children, one of them was Marie Andrews, a long-time friend of Karen House who cooks for the house and makes curtains for its windows. Marie said that she lived with two of her grandparents when she was growing up and so it was simply understood that her mother would most likely live with her or one of her siblings one day. Marian had been living in North Little Rock, Arkansas and in time for her eighty-third birthday got an apartment at a senior apartment building after selling her house. She had thought it similar to living in a dorm and rather fun. Shortly after moving there, however, it became clear she might not be able to stay. Her arthritis was getting severely worse. She was unable to get out of bed in the morning and had great difficulty getting around. Marie went to stay with her for three and one half weeks and discussed with her mother and her brothers where Marian might live. She told her mother that she could stay in the nursing facility in Little Rock, or come to St. Louis to live with Marie and her family. Marian chose to come to St. Louis. She is an active woman. She knew how hard it is for people with the best of intentions to get out and visit people in nursing homes. She decided she would rather stay with her daughter. She is now living with Marie and her family and goes to the Y and the Senior Center. While living with Marie she has actually been able to do several things independently again.

It is an inspiration and consolation to me that people find ways to care for their loved ones. I have seen it in families and have experienced it in communities. When I was young I thought that there were great things to do in the world and I have since learned that there are great things to do, and sometimes they are the simple things right at home.

Forging Family: Reflections on Adoption, Homeshooling, and Community

by Carolyn Griffeth

As a single mom, Dorothy Day was well aware of the conflicting demands of raising a family and living in a Catholic Worker house of hospitality, a combination which she considered "a most particular vocation." Nonetheless, her faithfulness to this vocation, both as a mother, and as an active grandmother, has inspired an often overlooked micro-movement: a stream of married couples and of single parents who have likewise chosen to raise their children within the Catholic Worker Movement. Each year at Sugar Creek, the Midwest's Catholic Worker gathering, the topic of "Family life and the Catholic Worker" compels a lively Round Table discussion. Together, parents and increasing numbers of parent-hopefuls gather to discuss the joys and trials of parenting in community. The stories of other CW families who have gone before me have been a great encouragement as I've sought to balance motherhood and Catholic Worker community life. In this essay, I will share my own story of adopting, home schooling, and forging a community, in hope of empowering other parents to make CW community life work for themselves.

Finn and Tery

In the winter of 2000, I returned from two months in Mongolia with my malnourished, thirty pound son, Ghana, just in time to celebrate his seventh birthday, the first he'd ever known. It was an awesome moment for both of us, as full of love, grace, and thanksgiving as any I've ever known. I felt so happy to have Ghana as my son! I was twenty seven at the time, single, and part of the Catholic Worker community in Chicago known as St. Francis House. My fellow community members, who were very supportive of the adoption process, greeted us warmly, but our reunion was bittersweet: St. Francis House, a crowded house shared with homeless singles, was no place to raise a child. Thus, motherhood forcibly displaced me from the happiest home I'd ever known. For a little while, I lived instead at Su Casa, another Chicago Catholic Worker, which provides hospitality for homeless families. But right or wrong, I didn't feel comfortable asking for the hospitality I needed as I learned to be mom. Almost overnight, motherhood had altered my identity from that of a distinguished go-giver, to that of a burden. I felt I had nothing left to give, so I fled. Luckily, I had another option: I moved in with my boyfriend who lived in yet another intentional community, named Riverroot, which was very much like a Catholic Worker House, without the hospitality to the homeless, but with a greater capacity for hospitality to a struggling new mom like myself.

Carolyn Griffeth would like to thank Kabat House and so many individuals in the larger Catholic Worker community for help with homeschooling, and for investing in the lives of her sons.

Despite the support of my soon-to-be-husband and new community, I found my daily life caring for my very needy son crushing. The demands of motherhood seemed to separate me from anything that had previously given me a sense of belonging in the world beyond the two of us. Yet I still held on tightly to the ideal of the Catholic Worker, a community of hospitality to all, where each is embraced for their inherent worth, rather than what they have to give, be it wealth, ability, or even sanity!

It was this ideal which lead my husband, Tery, and I to move to St. Louis after our marriage, in order to participate in the life of Karen House and the Dorothy Day Co-housing Community. In order to have a space to begin our new family we rehabbed an abandoned house not far from Karen House which we immediately began sharing with others. While having housemates cost Ghana the chance to have his own bedroom, each also contributed much to his life and many are still his close friends.

The Dorothy Day Co-housing Community (DDCC) was founded in part by several moms, who were former guests of Karen House, who sought more permanent mutual-support for themselves and their children. In the context of this community, I realized that motherhood itself can be profoundly connecting. For one thing, I could tangibly feel the love these mothers had for their children as well as their fierce hope that their children would have opportunities previously denied to them. For several years, the main form of hospitality I practiced was inviting children living at Karen House or within the DDCC to play at our house or join Ghana and I when we went swimming, hiking, or just to the park. Some of these children became our fast friends for years.

During the same years that I was part of the DDCC, my son Ghana attended a small Catholic school, where he was in constant trouble. To make matters worse, his teacher was planning to hold him back. I couldn't bear the thought of my son, who admittedly only had kindergarten level skills, turning eleven in second grade the following year. So rather than telling Ghana that he didn't pass, I told him that he didn't have to go back. Grinning widely, he replied, "Thank you, Mom!"

At that time I made my first appointment with a child psychologist. After taking a detailed history of my son's background he exclaimed: "Why would anyone adopt such a child!" His words, while probably rhetorical, resounded throughout my being and begged for an answer. So I told him, "I believe all children, all people, deserve a chance at life . . .a chance to be loved . . .a chance to be happy. That's what I think life is about….What else is there?" He told me, honest to God, that he used to be a Christian too. When I asked him about the results of my son's testing he told me flatly that my son could be diagnosed with every learning disability and that he was unlikely to ever learn to read. Although I tried to brush off his words, I couldn't shake the impact of our encounter. In our meeting I was confronted with my deepest fears as well as my darkest self, the part of me who shared the belief of the doctor: that not all people were equally deserving of life and love.

That Fall I began home schooling my son, determined that he would some day read Harry Potter. Although I worked with him hours every day and tried everything to make learning enjoyable, it seemed we were getting nowhere and I felt tremendous despair. Nonetheless, I dutifully trudged along until a major event came and shook up our world: the unplanned adoption of our second son, Finn.

Holy Family: The Flight into Egypt
by Fritz Eichenberg

We met Finn's mother just days before his birth and not long after she had paid $7,00 to be smuggled across two borders in her journey from Guatemala to the Los Angeles airport. At a public clinic, Antonia told her health care provider that she wanted to give her unborn child up for adoption, never wanting to even see him. As it was, this provider was also a friend of mine who mentioned in passing the needs of Antonia and her unborn son. Upon hearing her words, it seemed the Holy Spirit jumped within me; I practically ran home to ask my husband if we should offer to adopt this unborn child. "Absolutely," he answered. Two days later we met Antonia for the first time. I had prepared a photo album of our life in community, our families, and our son, Ghana, which really caught her attention. We explained the values we live by, that we didn't have lots of money but had lots of friends, and that we dearly loved our adopted son. By the end of our meeting, without a shred of paperwork or formality, we had forged a deep bond of trust which would be necessary to get us through a difficult adoption ordeal that lasted nearly a year.

Days later, I held Antonia's hand during Finn's birth by C-section. Although we had planned otherwise, Antonia ended up moving in with us and therefore got to know not only us, but also her son.

Family and Community: Folks around Kabat House

This time also allowed me to broach the subject of forging an open adoption with Antonia. The summer before, we had been in Mongolia visiting Ghana's family, including his mother, who is disabled. I explained how important this connection was to Ghana and my belief that a child can never have too many people who love them, nor too many moms. Apparently something had turned within her; she agreed. Finn has grown to love Antonia, who we call his Guatemalan Mom, and visits with her monthly in a St. Louis suburb. He also talks fondly of his grandparents and sisters who we visited in Guatemala.

I like to think that Finn's adoption, much like Ghana's, was a miracle conceived by the Holy Spirit. I imagine many adoptive parents feel likewise. He came into our lives at the perfect time and filled us each with love overflowing. Nonetheless, homeschooling a special needs child while caring for an infant felt like being continually pulled in two very different directions on very little sleep! Something had to give! The first thing was my attitude.

Other homeschooling moms helped by teaching me some important things. One was that helping to care for a newborn is itself amazingly educational and an essential life skill. This change of emphasis not only helped Ghana decompress from the stress of school, where he was never able to do what was expected of him, but also allowed him to receive lots of affection and affirmation for being the best big brother ever, which is hardly an exaggeration.

The other thing I learned was that as a mom the BIG thing I pass on to my children is what I am - so I had better be loving and kind. Therefore, I committed myself to practicing loving kindness, faking it until I make it, at times. This practice has challenged me to fully embrace Ghana for the gifted individual he is, and to let go of who he isn't. In this journey I've also had to liberate myself from the values of this current culture of "education" with its narrow emphasis on academic achievement over much greater personal and social goods such as the capacity to communicate well, to empathize, to ask forgiveness, to seek balance, to know oneself, to create beauty, or to know right from wrong. Practical skills, the art of doing common things well, like mopping floors, or growing food, receive even less appreciation. Nonetheless, I value these things, and have placed them at the heart of our homeschool curriculum, alongside reading and math. As a result, Ghana has really grown in his relationships with others. He is particularly talented with babies and little kids. He also has a great work ethic and is often called upon to help with moving, gardening, and hauling wood.

There is one last realization that has transformed my experience of motherhood: It is recognizing that kids are a gift meant to be shared and learning to ask my community for the support I need.

Around the time Finn was one, Tery and I made the difficult decision to move out of our shared home, which we called Kabat House, and into a much smaller house across the street. With a toddler, I strongly felt the need for an orderly home—a space of our own, not littered by other people's dishes! We also dreamed of transforming Kabat House into a house of hospitality to serve the increasingly marginalized Spanish-speaking immigrant community. Over the last two and a half years, Kabat House has attracted a stream of wonderful community members and guests, and has become the center of a dynamic community which continues to grow in surprising ways. Our community emphasizes not only hospitality to the poor, but also to one another, and I truly believe that every one of us feels loved, nurtured, and empowered to do good. We also try to practice many forms of mutual support including car-sharing, bike repairing, food growing, listening, house-rehabbing, community meals, and last but not least, supporting parents and children.

Although two babies have been born while living at Kabat house, Tery and I are the only parents that live

here on a permanent basis. As a stay-at-home mom, my reality is thus markedly different from that of my fellow community members, yet I rarely experience isolation, even when I don't leave the neighborhood for days at a time. I enjoy having people stop by throughout the day and that I only have to go across the street to hang out with friends. More than anything, I appreciate how each community member contributes to my sons' lives, which on a weekly basis includes not only helping watch Finn, but also heling teach Ghana, and "fighting," running, making art, and playing cards with him. For about a year, there was also a weekly Dungeons and Dragons game in which the men of the community gathered to initiate Ghana, at 14, into the community of men.

It is a really humbling to accept so much help from my friends, and honestly I don't know how I'd manage without it. I wish that every family had equal support, particularly single parents and those with a special needs child, and that every child had a handful of adults that they looked up to and knew they could count on. This not only enriches the lives of the children, but also adds a world of meaning to the lives of those without children, and essential preparation for those who someday will. I also dream that our society will come to accept the giftedness of all people and the fullness of what it means to be human, rather than trying to force every child into a one-size-fits-all model of humanity. This would require a fundamental reform of our educational system away from narrow academics and towards cultivating all types of skills, talents, and means to personal wholeness. But educational reform itself is not enough to insure happy, whole children. What is really needed is the birth of a multitude of small "villages," whose projects and values emphasize the inclusion and support of parents and children. The Catholic Worker is one place where increasingly this is happening. I am convinced that this is necessary if the Catholic Worker experiment is to remain relevant in the times ahead.

ROUND TABLE RESOURCE:

Guidelines for Empowering Families to Service

1. Invite all family members to regularly join in service efforts.
2. Present a wide variety of means and occasions to serve. Make it a point to discuss situations where people are victims of injustice, and point out those who are working for change.
3. Seek out actions that are within all family members' capabilities. Building on previous experiences rather than multiplying new ones helps. Respect your children's needs in terms of time.
4. Integrate service with fun. The hope is for children to be involved because they want to be there.
5. Promote relating on a personal level. Service means doing "with" more than doing "for."
6. Provide hospitality. Open your heart and home to others who are alone, in need, or away from home.
7. Integrate service with faith. Recognize that we are all members of the human family.
8. Combine your efforts with those of others. Working with others helps us to overcome fears, increase effectiveness, provides accountability, and can be more fun!

-Source Unknown

From Teka Childress House

by Jenny Truax

This past Labor Day, we celebrated our one year anniversary of Teka Childress (TC) House. TC House is a block away from Karen House, and Annjie Schiefelbein and I are doing hospitality on our second floor for a mother and her three kids who lived at Karen House with us in 2006. It's been a year of learning and growing, for both us and the family.

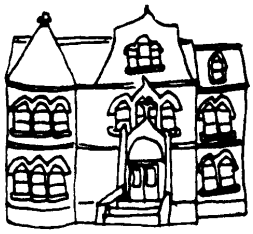
Just as Annjie and I were unprepared for the painful three-year rehab of the physical building, we were also less prepared than we thought to do this style of hospitality. At Karen House, families stay with us short-term (usually less than a year,) and we focus on moving the family toward more stable housing. This is "acute care" hospitality; we take women who have been sleeping in cars, overcrowded apartments, and abandoned buildings. At TC House, we're doing longer-term, "preventative" care, if you will. At Karen House, crises are fairly common - flooded bathrooms, verbal fights, ringing doorbells at 2am. At TC House, we work with the mother on budgeting, give the kids their daily medication, and do after-school tutoring during the week. We definitely have the occasional crisis, but since starting TC House, we've had to expand our energy, constitution, compassion, and set of skills that Karen House has taught us. It's also been a transition from being short-term relief for a mom (taking the kids out for ice cream, running an occasional errand) to being the ones really responsible to the mother and kids (implementing time-outs, working towards better grades, and talking about responsibility, anger management, and health issues.)

In our first year at TC House, we've witnessed both the long-term effects of homelessness on families, and the rebirth that can happen with stability. Coping mechanisms, developed during extensive periods of homelessness, show up later as difficulties in planning ahead, in being consistent, and in transcending a disposable mindset. Just as families visibly relax when they enter the warmth of Karen House, we've watched this family branch out and dig into a safe space. It's a deep joy to watch them engage in previously inaccessible activities: Robert (14) is on the basketball team, Macean (12) loves to do crafts, Laurence (9) is wonderful in the garden, and Tondelayo, their mother, has led the whole family in some rousing games of *Uno*. De La Salle Middle School has added to this process of branching out in a huge way. Robert and Macean have attended leadership and personal development classes, gotten individualized attention from astonishing teachers, gone on multiple school trips, and will have access to good high schools and hopefully, college - all as a result of their De La Salle education.

This past year, we've faced our own limitations in new ways. Single-parenthood is a daunting task, so Annjie and I try to fill in some of the gaps for Tondelayo, who works full-time evenings as a cook. For lots of reasons (primarily, our own limitations), it's impossible to fill in all of the gaps. We'd love to provide healthy meals 100% of the time, implement a consistent bedtime, and successfully encourage exercise. The process of discerning what needs we can meet, what needs we can encourage Tondelayo and the kids to meet themselves, and then letting the rest go, has been a both profound and painful process. Catholic Workers are used to running around like chickens with their heads cut off, helping people! The model of long-term hospitality has humbled us, forcing us to realize that we can't meet all, or even most, of this family's needs even as those needs stare us in the face daily.

Talking with parents, especially single parents and parents of teenagers, has been one of the most helpful things we've done. By choice, we're responsible for the kids a great deal of the time; on a typical day, the kids come in from school, we chat about the day, and they do their nightly reading with a snack. We eat dinner together and then get to homework. It's been helpful to realize that most parents don't have all the answers, are not consistent 100% of the time, and struggle mightily. This has taught us to be easier on ourselves, to not take mood swings personally, and most of all, to try and provide a loving, open space for the kids. With all we want for this family and for ourselves in this hospitality, we hold on to the hope that if the only thing we can provide is a stable, loving environment, we'll consider this Catholic Worker experiment a success!

Jenny Truax has been busy helping with maintenance at Karen House, cooking with donated food, and re-discovering her Trekkie roots.



From Karen House

by Colleen Kelly

Greetings and Happy New Year! The last couple of months have been incredibly busy and full of joy and new obstacles for me. I moved into the house in September and promptly quit my old job to take on new challenges with the National Farm Worker Ministry and organizing for Instead of War. In the midst of these personal changes, I have had the chance to experience life at Karen House more fully, which has included Thanksgiving, Christmas, the birth of a baby to one of our guests, (which I was blessed to witness), and community living. It has been a rollercoaster of adjustments and has contained powerful teaching moments. I am learning to engage in personalism, especially when it can be uncomfortable, and in community living, which demands an intimacy that can be challenging to someone used to living in her own apartment. However, as I have settled in over the last six months, I've realized that the benefits of community far outweigh the difficulties, and have been amazed at how wide the embracing hands of community extend.

The holidays at Karen House were filled with awesome cooking, lopsided trees with too much garland (some people thought), generosity, funny gifts, a Santa Claus that slightly resembled Beth, and loads of sweets. It also took a lot of coordination with and reliance on other members of the larger Catholic Worker Community. It was really an amazing glimpse into our broader St. Louis community. It was also a real learning curve for me, in terms of how much work goes into pulling off a Karen House Christmas. I also had the experience of being the only community member in the house for a couple of nights. Those nights were a bit hectic, but afterwards, I really appreciated those strings other members in the house hold onto and I realized that the work of the house is completely dependent on many hands!

Beth, Timmy and Colleen at Camp Hope

After the holidays, I went right into an incredibly busy month, which included "Camp Hope" (the campaign Instead of War had been working on with Chicago-based Voices for Creative Nonviolence) and the board meeting for National Farm Worker Ministry (NFWM). Camp Hope was an interesting (and freezing cold) experience. We vigiled for nineteen days outside of President-elect Obama's Hyde Park home out of a desire to create an expectation of change and accountability. One of the greatest things about my busy month was that both Camp Hope and the NFWM board meeting had me meeting organizers from around the country, many who have been shaped, in part, by the Catholic Worker movement. Again, it was a glimpse into how large the ideas of the Catholic Worker community extend. I got the chance to hear from long-time Catholic Workers that shared experiences and wisdom about balancing the challenges of hospitality with organizing work that often takes you outside of the house, about voluntary poverty, and about the highs and lows of living within a community of passionate, dedicated people.

As I write this article, I am recalling Annjie's *From Karen House* last issue. She talked about the permeating grace of the house; that as individuals go through changes and challenges, the house remains the same. I have found this to be incredibly comforting and solid. My 'first set' of guests have moved on, and the house is filled again with new faces and relationships to be built. I know I will see other busy months and hectic nights, but getting a chance to encounter the gigantic network of others who have faced the same busy, hectic times helps me to see that beauty lies in the lopsided Christmas trees, in building relationships in -17 degree weather and most of all, in watching a baby born at 4:30 in the morning.

Colleen Kelly, our second-newest community member and craft aficionado, can often be found reading to kids in the Karen House library.

Catholic Worker Thought & Action

by Timmy Cosentino

The Catholic Worker movement is grounded in seven different tenets called the "Aims and Means." This new section is dedicated to the exploration of the Aims and Means in the daily life of Catholic Workers. One of the central tenets of the Aims and Means is personalism. Personalism is not a glorified version of individualism nor is it a fluffy concept of treating each person as a unique person. Rather it can be seen as a middle way between isolating individualism and dehumanizing communism. Personalism both rejoices in the person and also demands personal responsibility. Personalism treats each person uniquely depending on his or her circumstances while at the same time holding each person responsible for his or her actions. At Karen House, personalism is played out in many different ways. I would like to look at personalism with kids specifically.

Personalism with kids is sometimes a nebulous concept. Kids are not always considered people, so it is hard to be a personalist to someone who is not considered a person all the time. The first time I actively thought about the idea was while spending a morning house shift with Annjie Schiefelbein. I was sitting on the floor with two other friends, and we had four kids with us. You can do the math, but there were three laps for four children and so we were involved in a very fluid game of musical laps. Annjie saw this and told us, “If you ever wondered what personalism to a child looked like, you now know.” This has stuck with me for a couple of reasons. One is that there are a lot of children at Karen House, and it is a good idea to be reminded of my personalist commitment to them. Another reason is that for some time now I have felt that young children have some wisdom about life that they can teach to the rest of us grown folks that they do not even know they have. Through exploring personalism with children I hoped to be able to get closer to this secret that children have.

I think what really is going on is that children are actually personalist to us. I am not saying that children are intentionally practicing personalism in their daily lives, rather by the fact of being children, they inadvertently are personalist. For children, being a personalist is often just a natural result of being a loving child. Even the “musical laps” incident was giving my friends and me an opportunity to do good, as Peter Maurin would say.

To be fair, I admit that children are also by nature extremely self-centered, but are prone to other-centered moments at sometimes very surprising times. These are the moments when I learn how to be a better personalist. It can be as simple as a well-timed hug when I am in a bad mood or innocent actions that have a more profound meaning. The best example I have is this past Halloween while out trick-or-treating. One of the little girls who used to live with us started to give the people answering the doors some of her candy. At each house she would walk up with her sister, say, "Trick or treat," as best as she could, and hand the person who answered the door a piece of candy.

Peter Maurin has a wonderful easy essay on personalism which I believe comes to life in a whole new way when looked at as children’s personalism. Kids are kids, but sometimes they are amazing personalists too.

✝

The Personalist Communitarian
by Peter Maurin

A personalist
is a go-giver,
not a go-getter.
Personalists try to give
what they have,
and do not
try toget
what the other person has.
They try to be good
by doing good
to the other person.
They are altro-centered,
not self-centered.
They have a social doctrine
of the common good.
They spread the social doctrine
of the common good
through words and deeds.
They speak through deeds
as well as words,
for they know that deeds
speak louder than words.
Through words and deeds
they bring into existence
a common unity,
the common unity
of a community.

Timmy Cosentino, when not searching for his child guru, is experimenting in the art of crock-pottery.

Karen House News

* We send out a **once-a-month email** with current Karen House needs and discussion announcements. Call (621-4052) or email (karenhousecw@gmail.com) us to receive this email and get more involved!

* This RoundTable issue is also available **for download** (in color!) on our website: www.KarenHouseCW.org

The Karen House Adopt-A-Window Project

We've raised over $20,000 to replace our decaying 100 year-old windows. Only $40,000 left to go!

How you can help:

* Adopt part, or all, of a regular ($300) or historic ($800) window by donating on our website

* Adopt a window for a graduation, birthday, or anniversary present (Download an attractive gift card on our website)

* Organize your church, school, or social group to adopt a window

A Windows Fundraiser!

Check the Karen House website for a possible concert with our favorite band, Girlyman!
Tuesday, April 28th

Girlyman features three-part harmonies, catchy acoustic tunes, and soaring folk music with a sense of humor!

Teka Childress House Needs:

Donations for school tuition and uniforms, movie passes for kid's outings

Kabat House Needs:

Refrigerator, gas stove. Join us:

* Free, group Spanish lessons- Sundays at 2pm
* Friendly neighborhood soccer games - Sundays at 3:30pm

Check **KarenHouseCW.org** for windows resources, info on Karen House and the Catholic Worker, an archive of past RoundTables, and more!

The Round Table is the quarterly journal of Catholic Worker life and thought in St. Louis. Subscriptions are free. Please write to *The Round Table*, 1840 Hogan, St. Louis, MO. 63106. Donations are gladly accepted to help us continue our work with the poor. People working on this issue include: Joe Angert, Megan Heeney, Colleen Kelly, Virginia Druhe, Teka Childress, Carolyn Griffeth, Elizabeth Drisoll, Timmy Cosentino, Christen Parker, Ellen Rehg, and Jenny Truax. Letters to the editor are encouraged; we'll print as many as space permits.

The Round Table

Karen Catholic Worker House
1840 Hogan ■ St. Louis, MO. 63106
Return Service Requested

PRSRT STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Louis, MO
Permit No. 495