

Emmaus House of Hospitality: Serving the Hungry and Homeless

For too many people in Lake County, the American Dream is more like a nightmare. In this “land of plenty”, some people are on the financial fringe, struggling to pay for housing and for food. Sometimes they go without one or both.

About three years ago, a small group of St. Francis de Sales parishioners decided to do something about that. Building on their work with the Jubilee Garden, the plot on Route 22 on which parish volunteers grow food for the hungry, the group had a vision to provide transitional housing for families with children.

Dave Talbott, President of Emmaus House, (named for Luke’s Gospel about encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus), was one of that group. “We had high hopes,” Dave said. “But we didn’t have the funds or the knowledge we needed to pull it off.” While they continued working on housing, admittedly a longer-term goal, Emmaus House volunteers wanted to do something that would help people sooner.

“Someone came up with the idea of serving a Community Dinner on Sunday nights,” Dave said. “With the Parish’s support, we started serving maybe 30 to 40 people each week. Over time, those numbers swelled to as many as 150. Some are older and single. Some are one-parent and two-parent families with young children. Most of the people are employed, but they are stretched financially. They come to be fed both nutritionally and spiritually.”

Other ministries within St. Francis, such as the Knights of Columbus and St. Vincent DePaul Society, organize the dinners once a month. Other volunteers include students from Carmel High School, as well as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and other parish members who assist in preparing and serving food, and cleanup. In addition to the food served to guests for the Sunday night dinner, food also is available for guests to bring home for meals later in the week. This is food that is “rescued” from local retailers such as Dominick’s and Trader Joe’s, -- food that is approaching expiration date and otherwise would be thrown away.

“We serve the meal cafeteria-style with a real emphasis on community and family,” Dave said. “Jean McClaughry leads activities for kids. George Koll and Jim Hiemenz provide haircuts. We do health-care screening and minor clothes mending. We received a grant from Ela Township to provide infant care products. Guests also can take home donated clothes.”

Some three years after starting the Community Dinners, Emmaus House, received a grant for \$46,000 from the Housing and Urban Development Department. “The grant is to provide housing in three units,” Dave said. “We were thrilled to get it. But it means that we have to raise a lot of money and bring in more people to do all the related work, such as finding affordable housing in this area. We have a lot to do and not much time to do it. By the end of this year, we need to raise about \$30,000 to make our dream a reality.” Dave says that every time the group has approached a seemingly insurmountable barrier, help seems to magically appear. Sometimes it’s food. Sometimes it’s funds. Sometimes it’s hope.

"There are days when you wonder if you are making a difference," Dave says. "I've learned that you can't help the poor long-distance. You get involved. And sometimes that's messy. You see things that you wish you could change, but you can't. But in your heart, you know you are doing what God wants you to do."

Emmaus House is looking for people to become actively involved. "We need volunteers to commit their time, talent and funds," Dave says. He and his fellow volunteers aren't sure where these gifts will come from. But they have faith that they will come."

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Editor's note: Emmaus House has achieved its initial goal of three transitional housing units as of year-end, 2003. Three families will have a home as of early, 2004. The challenge now is to raise the funds to keep the organization running and to continue helping the homeless, as well as the hungry.