Bethany House - a place to come when there's no place to go...and a great place to spend Christmas!

Bethany House is a not-for-profit agency founded in 1978 in response to a growing need for emergency shelter for women and children who are caught in the crisis called homelessness. Bethany House defines its mission as a concrete response to the belief that every person deserves and needs adequate food, clothing, shelter and human warmth, provided within nurturing surroundings and a sustaining environment.

The expression “There’s no place like home for the holidays” rings true for each of us in different ways, but it is painfully true for those who are homeless. It is as if the whole world had a place to call its own except for you... as if there were not one little house, not one small room to keep the cold from your child and the snow from your feet.

Since our first Christmas celebration back in 1978, Bethany House has always been a very special place to spend the Christmas season. In fact, one of our frequent “return guests” is an elderly Jewish woman who comes to spend Christmas Eve with us each year because she loves to see the joy on the faces of our children (and their Moms!) as Santa arrives with wonderful gifts and surprises for everyone.

The true Christmas Season begins for us at Bethany with our Tree Trimming Party which is held on the Sunday before Christmas. All of our guests join numerous others who remember a past Christmas at this gentle house - children come from near and far to decorate this tree of memories which stands tall and proud in Bethany’s living room, a symbol of the love and concern of all of you who help to make Christmas happen for the homeless children whom God has sent to this little “inn” called Bethany House where there is always room! And, there is a quiet peace in this house that settles in the soul of every one of US who travels the earth in search of our eternal home.

Bethany House

The evening comes alive even more with the singing of traditional Christmas Carols and songs to the accompaniment of Iris’ guitar, and we all enjoy some scrumptious dessert provided by good people like you who share their richness.

And then, there is Christmas Eve - a magical time indeed for old and young alike! Santa never passes us by - in fact, he comes right on time each year, just as our supper of homemade lasagna and salad is finishing and our children are growing drowsy. For the past several years, the Megale family has seen to it that Santa and his Elves get to our house on schedule and...laden with gifts to thrill all the children and to amaze the adults.

Christmas morning brings us together to offer a prayer of thanks to God for the wondrous gifts of life and faith and love, as well as those of warmth, and food, and safe shelter. We prepare a delicious brunch with everyone’s help, and sit for a while to savor the sense of wonder that is ours. For, in spite of the chill of homelessness, in spite of the pain of rejection, and in spite of the fear of tomorrow, we live this day with Christmas joy!

This Christmas, we hope, will be much like those of the past eighteen years - the joy and peace will be there, but the gifts will be fewer and more sensible... mittens instead of a toy, a blanket in place of a new set of sheets, a warm sweater instead of a soft robe.

The cutbacks have cut deep, and we at Bethany House feel the pain of God’s poor even more sharply at this time of plenty. As you read on in this newsletter, you will realize how stark is the reality of those who are without resources at this time in our history. And, if there is any way in which you can help to ease the pain and struggle, I urge you to do so in the name of the Child born to us at this holy time. Peace to you all! S. Aimee
Imagine...

WHAT IT'S LIKE NOT TO HAVE ONE.

[Each issue of Turning Point will feature the story of a family or individual who has struggled with homelessness and how life has changed because of - and often in spite of - this crisis.]

It was a morning like any other morning. I woke up, looked out the window, and saw darkness. It was Thursday, November 25th, 1976. There were not too many passengers on yet. Usually by about 7:30 the train was packed because people started going to work about then.

I had this feeling inside of me that there was something different about today, but I had no idea what it was. It was strange. It felt like at least an hour went by, but there still weren't many passengers on the train. If I didn't know better, I would have thought that it was Sunday, but I saw the clock that has the date on it in Times Square the day before, and it said Wednesday, November 24th, so I knew that it was Thursday.

I started seeing people get on the train dressed in their Sunday best. More and more, passengers boarded the train. Where were they going? I had no clue. Anyway, at that point I realized that they entering meant my exiting. It was my cue to leave.

I walked the stairs to the cold, wet streets above, and headed in the direction of the theater where I usually went to keep warm during the day. When I got there, I discovered that the theater was closed. Then reality set in. It was the last Thursday in November, which, of course made it Thanksgiving Day. I suddenly felt so lost, so sad, and so very much alone. I mean...I had a family. I had always spent Thanksgiving with my family.

This year was different. It was different because I was 16 years old, I was sleeping on the subways and I was terrified - terrified that I actually had no place to go. I was actually homeless. The very word frightened me beyond belief. Here I was, looking like any other "normal" person - after all, I spoke like other people, I dressed like other people, and God knows that my heart ached and my spirit cried just like theirs whenever times got really bad. And times were really bad that day - the special day in November that we Americans set aside to celebrate our bounty!

It was gut-wrenching awful for me. The only difference that I could see between me and the "normal" people that day was that they had a place to go - family and close friends to visit, and a reason to celebrate. I did not. A fear swept over me, sweat poured down my cold cheeks, and I realized that I was utterly alone in the world, a world that celebrated its blessings without a thought of the thousands like me who could not summon up the joy to be grateful.

That was twenty years ago, and I will never forget the pain of those times. I am not homeless now. I have my family and friends, and I spend holidays with them. I enjoy a big turkey dinner at a table that is filled with people who know me by name and call me friend. I have much to give God thanks for on Thanksgiving...and every day.

As a result of my experience as a homeless person who lived for six months on the New York subway, I see life quite differently now. I have learned to be grateful even for those days when
- the best bed I could find was a clean seat on the subway;
- the best food, a stolen orange or a discarded candy bar;
- the best shower, a quick wash-up in a McDonald's bathroom.

I am ever mindful of our young sisters and brothers who, for even one day, have no meal to share, no bed to call their own, and no place to go that is called "home."

I do not look upon the person in need as somehow "less", but rather someone who has less because another has more.

Iris Gold

The first human problem Jesus faced on earth was the lack of shelter. There was no room in the inn for this young family in Bethlehem.

Today we see the faces of homeless men, women, & children - the face of Christ.

We know that
- in reaching out to the homeless among us
- in standing with them
- in defending their rights
- in working with them to secure decent housing - we serve our God!
The average person spends 365 hours a month at home -
Imagine what it's like not to have one.

Today, homelessness is a daily reality for
over 40,000 Long Islanders - and
more than half of them are children.

Join us in our efforts to change this reality -
provide a gift for a homeless child or family as you help to
decorate the first Christmas Tree at Bethany House's newest
facility, REST STOP:

A $5 donation will provide an ornament for Bethany's Tree and
round trip bus fare for a homeless adult.

A $10 donation will provide an ornament for Bethany's Tree and
mittens and a hat for a homeless child.

A $20 donation will provide an ornament for Bethany's Tree and
a cozy blanket for a homeless baby.

A $25 donation will provide an ornament for Bethany’s Tree and
a warm sweater for Mom!

A $50 donation will provide an ornament for Bethany's Tree and
snow boots for our homeless children or blankets for a homeless family.

A $100 donation will provide an ornament for Bethany's Tree and
Christmas Dinner for our guests at REST STOP.

I other suggestions for gifts for our homeless guests and their mothers are most
welcome! Call Janice (668-6866) with your ideas.

YES! I WANT TO HELP BETHANY TO PROVIDE FOR THE NEEDS OF HOMELESS CHILDREN
AND THEIR MOMS AT CHRISTMAS. ENCLOSED IS MY DONATION FOR: $__________.

NAME ______________________________________ PHONE: ______________________

Please make your tax-deductible check payable to Bethany House and mail it in the enclosed envelope to:
102 Whitehouse Avenue, Roosevelt, NY 11575 - attention: Sister Aimee

Bethany House provides shelter and supportive services to women and children who are homeless, regardless
of cause, and has served the Long Island community since 1978.
Thursday, October 24, 1996
7:00 PM: Helen and Jim begin unloading the seventy-odd box cartons onto Cedar Grove. Paul from Campus Ministry is checking the sound system and arranging his music. I’m taking a turn around the grove and collecting my thoughts. *What can go wrong tonight?* About eighty volunteers have agreed to spend the night out in a box on the Molloy Campus in solidarity with the homeless in order to raise funds for Bethany House - how many will actually show up?

A news team from Channel 12 is covering the event live - will there be anything to cover? What if there is? What if somebody gets an asthma attack, or has a stroke, or a *grand mal* seizure and dies in a box on Molloy’s campus? *That* would be news. What if some of the students misbehave--get high--get belligerent--fight?! Right now, *nothing* could be worse than their not showing up.

8:00 PM: I learn that we cannot meet as had been planned in the college cafeteria because a big Republican fund raiser has been scheduled there. Well-healed party benefactors will soon look out the window on a *shanty town* that is populated by people pretending to be poor and homeless in order to understand the struggles of the “have nots.” *The irony tickles me.*

8:15 PM: For late October, the night is remarkably mild. Janice, Linda, Helen and Jim are setting up the soup kitchen. They’re all in a bubbly enthusiastic mood. I watch Janice, who cooked up this whole gleaned from portable radios are facts about homelessness, reports passed quietly through the throng, providing updates on the decisive Yankees/Braves game. And then, attention is quickly riveted on the podium as Iris tells us about her experience of living on the subway at only 15, and Lisette speaks of sleeping in the “Back Cave” in Hempstead before her rescue from homelessness.

The crowd roars when I announce Fr. Henry Benack’s most generous donation to our efforts. He had promised to *match* the funds raised by *BoxTown* volunteers up to $1,500! Mike, Campus Minister, exHORTS the multitude to meet the Benack challenge. Then, forgetting himself for a moment, Mike suggests that, since we are short a few boxes, the students might *double up* to sleep. This is a co-ed crowd --- I cringe - I’m ruined.

10:00 PM: We line up for soup. Hunger pangs make the wait difficult, but the taste of rich, hot soup helps us forget how cold we are, and loaves of fresh bread fill the emptiness inside as we settle in, trying to stay warm enough to sleep. The speakers’ words are beginning to have an effect on me. Each little discomfort becomes a source of reflection. Waiting ‘till 10 PM to eat --- what if a meal was not expected? What if the hunger were constant? Each inconvenience became a symbolic token of the experience of homelessness.

But could that experience even be conceptualized? After all, we choose to spend the night outside. What choice do the homeless have?

1:00 AM: As the night wears on, the cold becomes impossible to ignore. The dampness only amplifies our
discomfort, and the line for the porta-potties is growing by the minute. It is 3:00 AM before we attempt to sleep.

Removing my keys from my pocket, I remembered what Lisette had told us about the significance of having them. I went through each to remind myself what was at the receiving end of each—an apartment, an office, a car—and I blessed my luck. Thinking is thanking, said Heidegger. Molloy Security had given me a walkie talkie (for those emergencies I worried about) and now I had to put it somewhere in the box for safekeeping. But where? If I fall asleep, it could get stolen. It’s right out here in the open! It’s so vulnerable, and so am I. More symbols. More tokens. Live in a box and you’re as vulnerable as a mollusk out of its shell, a shivering hare surrounded by cougars.

I didn’t sleep. The ground was hard. My bones ached. Even my skin hurt. Volunteers told me later they got chilled to the bone. Dressed as I was, I wasn’t too cold, just sore and exhausted. Driving to work a few days before, I saw a real BoxTown under the overpass on the 96th Street entrance to the FDR Drive—boxes sitting on concrete. Cloth-lined and news papered. The next time I passed there, cars had crushed the boxes up against the wall—wrecked.

5:00 AM: I stumble to my feet, visit the port-o-john and meet a Security Guard assigned to protect us during the night. Lisette earlier had said that the presence of police signaled danger—some thug who would drive you out forcefully. Here to me, was a friendly face in the twilight, a guardian. He told me he was called up as an auxiliary to guard the BoxTown “residents.” He said he realized that the sprinkling system was due to come on at 3:00 AM in Cedar Grove, and he awakened the maintenance man to shut the system off before we were all soaked—definitely friendly!

At five, I watched the BoxTown community sleep...finally. Mike from the Sociology Department had stayed up until 4:00, talking with the students. But even “Iron Mike” flagged and sought repose. Two selfless volunteers slept in the open air, having given over boxes to the newcomers. Quietly I watched over the sleeping township of a day, and contemplated the solidarity and affiliation that should exist between those who face adversity. But Iris had, in her address earlier, reminded me that many of those who are homeless have such a sense of worthlessness that they feel no affiliation, no sense of solidarity, no sense of communality—so much so that they even have trouble asking for help or even of expecting it.

6:00 AM: We survivors stumbled into the cafeteria for hot coffee and a delicious breakfast provided for by Dr. Martin Synder, President of Molloy College, and served by the elegant staff of the Nursing Laboratory. Happy was I that I had a good excuse for appearing before my neatly scrubbed and coiffured colleagues as unshaven, uncombed, rumpled, and unwashed as I was. Another symbol, another token. How can you manage a kempt, clean appearance at work, while homeless?—a daily challenge for thousands.

BoxTown has to date raised over $9,000.00 for the REST STOP program which is designed to provide emergency housing for women and children who do not qualify for assistance under new, more restrictive guidelines but who are homeless nonetheless. What more has it done? I think about how, from either selfish or other-regarding motives, I had worried about any pain, threat, or hazard that any one of the BoxTown “residents” might have to endure. But BoxTown isn’t just at Molloy...it’s BoxTown, USA. It’s BoxTown, EARTH. Isn’t it? Steve Mayo
Christmas Message from
Washington: Less Is More

How will the new Federal Welfare Reform Bill (H.R. 3734, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996) affect families living at Bethany House? Since the law stipulates that in effect all federal welfare entitlement programs are eliminated, replaced by a block grant to New York State to distribute to the families, the answer to the question is quite clear when it comes to the Feds, and quite unclear when it comes to the state.

If a woman with dependent children received federal assistance to raise the children, she will receive it no longer. The Reform Bill went into effect in October, 1996. From now on, the family in need will have to rely on the state for whatever monies she may receive.

It is important to note that part of Bethany’s operational budget has been supplied by federal funds that channel through the Department of Social Services. In the future, these revenues may have to be supplied by New York State.

If New York picks up the tab, then why worry as long as the needs are being met? The state will have about 1.3 billion dollars less to work with.

Moreover, the Federal government has placed tight limits on the autonomy of the state in utilizing these funds. For example, to qualify for the grants, states cannot offer an individual assistance for more than five years over that person’s life-span. If a woman has received assistance for five years while her children were young and later loses her job and subsequently her apartment, she is on her own.

In order to care for anyone who is beyond the five year restriction, Bethany House will have to shoulder most of the expense. The state cannot extend the benefits beyond five years, but it has the authority to terminate benefits even before the five year ceiling.

Many of Bethany House’s guests have legally immigrated to this country. When necessary, some of their needs had been met by the federal assistance programs. Not any more. Legal immigrants have been totally cut off from all such aid.

Reform Bill mandates that all non-exempt recipients of assistance must participate in community service projects within two months of receiving assistance and secure employment within two years. However, there is no definition of “employability” in the new bill, and there are no longer exemptions based on disability. How the Feds can wave the magic wand and suddenly eliminate all mental and emotional impediments to one’s ability to work is a mystery indeed!

An additional burden on Bethany House will be to provide day care for parents while they meet the work requirement for state public assistance. The single parent of a child under one year of age may be exempted from the new work requirement; but before the child reaches his/her second year, the parent must find work. States that fail to meet the mandated work-requirement quotas will receive greatly reduced grants.

In the past, some of the children living at Bethany House had received SSI because of physical handicaps, mental or emotional disorders, or multiple impairments. The Welfare Reform Bill stipulates that only a medically determinable disability will qualify a child for SSI. Learning disabilities, behavioral problems, emotional and mental problems will no longer be factors in determining disability.

It makes no difference how extreme the need, how urgent the situation, states are forbidden to provide SSI or food stamps to immigrants. Emergency medical assistance, mandated immunizations, and certain educational programs may still be available to them.

Many of Bethany’s guests have struggled with emotional and/or psychological problems which tend to impede the ability to obtain and sustain employment. The Welfare

I worry that there are too many children who are going to fail by the wayside. I raised my child partially on Welfare and I know how much it can help, even if it is degrading. It gave me some breathing space, and gave me a little bit of dignity. It needs to be fixed, (but) there needs to be a safety net.

Steve Mayo

Whoopi Goldberg
Pataki’s Plan: Harsh on Women and Children

Governor Pataki’s plan “to end welfare as New Yorkers know it” is to scrap the state’s two major welfare programs: AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), and Home Relief (Welfare Assistance for single adults).

Pataki recently stated: “My plan (“NY Works”) will replace welfare checks with paychecks. We must return welfare to its original intent: a temporary benefit to help those in need move back into the workforce.”

To help parents find and keep jobs, Pataki proposes that state spending on day care next year would be increased by $55 million and job-training funding would be hiked by $70 million.

PROBLEM 1: How much of this funding will come to Long Island, and will it be effective?

PROBLEM 2: Under Pataki’s plan, single mothers with children will lose 10% of their benefits after 18 months and 45% after 4 years. After 5 years, there would be no aid at all (in compliance with the new Federal Welfare Law).

PROBLEM 3: Immigrant mothers and their children would be left without even the most modest support after the 5 year time line. Radical cuts for them would create serious quality-of-life problems for all on Long Island.

Families Need More Protection than Pataki’s Plan Offers:

PROBLEM 4: Many Bethany House residents hold regular jobs, even during their period of homelessness. But for those who are not employed, the work requirements for state assistance will prove quite daunting because:

1. New York’s economy is not growing as rapidly as that of the nation.
2. New York’s unemployment rate is higher than that of the nation.
3. Jobs grew by 39,000 last year on Long Island, but most of the growth was in high tech jobs rather than entry level or unskilled jobs.
4. In April 1996, 57,000 Long Islanders were considered unemployed.
5. The estimated 23,425 welfare recipients in the area are expected to find employment. They will have to compete with the presently unemployed for work. This translates to mean that over 80,000 Long Islanders will compete for only 39,000 jobs, leaving 41,000 people without jobs and without assistance.

All told, Bethany House had better batten down the hatches for the oncoming storm!

SOLUTION: Increased donations and volunteer support are most necessary for Bethany House to continue to meet its obligations of caring for homeless women and children here on Long Island. Because of the severe cutbacks, BETHANY HOUSE NEEDS YOUR HELP, now more than ever before!

Connie Kerwich

If you can help provide the rest
(Food, shelter, and safety for the night)
then Bethany House can provide all the rest...
(the counseling, referrals, and human warmth needed to restore dignity and purpose to those who are homeless)

REST STOP

CORPORATE SPONSORS: Make a difference in the life of a child...
For $35 - you can provide shelter and services for a mother and her children for a night
($1,000 per month)
For $15 - you can provide shelter and services for a child for a night
($450 per month)

CORPORATE BENEFACCTOR:
For $10,000 - you can provide for a family room, food, and all services for a FULL YEAR

REST STOP is the newest program of Bethany House which provides crisis housing and support services to families who are deemed ineligible under the guidelines of the Welfare Reform Act. FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO ARRANGE TO MAKE A TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION, PLEASE CALL: SISTER AIMIEE OR HELEN GRIMALDI at (516) 868-6866
The Children's Corner

Hi! I'm back again - my name is Maritza, and this time I'm wearing my Christmas dress. It was given to me last year with lots of other wonderful gifts. Every Christmas since 1978, the good people from North Shore Hospital have made Christmas real special for the families at Bethany. A big truck pulls up and happy, smiling people jump out and begin to unload giant boxes into the living room - I can even hide behind the stack because it is so high! All the families (children and moms) get lots of great gifts. There are new clothes (like my dress), toys, warm blankets, coats and mittens, and boxes of food and fruits... and candy. It's hard to be homeless at Christmas, but if you're homeless at Bethany House - you'll probably forget all about it for a while because there are so many kids and moms there to make you feel good and give you hugs! Bethany House is always HOME to me, but most especially at Christmas!

When the Christmas tree is lighted, we all stop and pray for everyone who helps keep Bethany's doors open so that many homeless kids like me can feel warm and safe and happy inside and - we never have to worry about our moms.

- Merry Christmas - Happy New Year - Feliz Navidad - Feliz Año Nuevo -

Maritza

XXX

Breakfast with Santa - you can bring your gift or donation*
for the children of Bethany House to:

WHERE? B.K. Sweeney's Restaurant
636 Franklin Avenue, Garden City

WHEN? SATURDAY, December 14, 1996 between 9 AM and 11 AM

FOR? A complimentary breakfast with Santa
...kindness of the Sweeney Family!

* suggested minimum donation: $10.00

Bethany House of Nassau County
102 WHITEHOUSE AVENUE
ROOSEVELT NY 11575
516 868-8866

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