The Founding of Our New Bethany One

"The beautiful rests on the foundations of the necessary."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Every day we see experiences described as something "before" and something "after"—things like "before the storm, before the diet, before the neighborhood changed," or "after graduation, after supper, after taxes." It always involves change, sometimes dramatic, sometimes gradual. Think about our Bethany One..."before and after."

"Before" 1981, it was just a lonely, little neglected house in need of care and restoration. Along came some Amityville Dominican Sisters who decided it was worth saving and could be used for a special purpose. With the help of many good people, volunteers and neighbors, it was transformed into an "after" that could be used as an emergency residence for women and children in crisis. Of course, the process of "before and after" at Bethany One has continued gradually over the years. The basement was renovated in 1982, and the first extension was added in 1984. This home has always been the "hub" or Grand Central Station of the Bethany House organization. That will never change.

But the physical aspects of the home called Bethany One have changed once again, and the house has again been transformed into a superb "after." In the Fall of 2006, we undertook a major project involving another renovation: a large addition to Bethany One. The task of this challenging re-construction and expansion was made possible because of Brian Koonmen who was responsible for the entire project. Without his expertise, caring and diligence, coupled with many long hours spent at Bethany One, this could not have become an "after." His coworker John Taylor, was equally devoted, very knowledgeable, and worked with Brian every day and covered for him on weekends when construction crews were still on site. Clearly the two make a great team!

However, "before" this project could begin, we had to find a builder. Brian contacted Rob Turitto from TOP LADDER Construction Company who had done the expansion on the Bethany South facility in 2005 and convinced him to make us an offer we couldn’t refuse: TOP LADDER agreed to undertake the full expansion for approximately 60% of the going rate because the workers could “fit us in” between other jobs. Once again, Rob and his crew proved to be a caring, competent and giving group of people, and we shall be forever grateful to them.

This complicated process of construction, the daily routines of sometimes moving forward and sometimes backwards due to unforeseen difficulties, proceeded in stages. Brian explained the process as a series of "steps." First, we had to obtain the architect’s plans and apply for the required permits. In the case of Bethany One, before any new structure could be built over the rear extension, the foundation had to be strengthened by inserting underpinnings below it. Since the original foundation had been faulty, we had to dig out and put six-foot concrete footings all the way around.

Once this was completed, Rob and his crew, ably assisted daily by John and Brian, worked on the outside and erected the frame or shell for the addition. Then they were ready to install the outer walls, the windows, the siding and the roof. The [con't. on p.2]
next “step” was to gut the kitchen and remove some of the existing walls to provide the entranceway into the new addition. When the kitchen floor was removed, the sub-floor was examined and found to be sinking - and so, a new sub-floor was added to the necessary improvements. When the old walls were opened up, the electrician [another good and generous friend, Pat Stewart from P&C Electric discovered that the wiring was not only faulty but extremely dangerous. And so, Pat set out with John’s help to rewire the entire area, making Bethany One safe for our staff and residents once again!

The next “step” was to gut the upstairs bedrooms in order to redesign the configuration of the rooms, hallways, and bathrooms. Now we were ready to start roughing for the electricity, the plumbing, the fire and CO alarms, and an extra safety feature - a full sprinkler system. And, because of the specifications required by the sprinkler system, we have also upgraded the water service from 3/4 inch to 2 inch pipes.

Now, as we progressed, it was necessary for the Building Inspectors to come at various stages to view the work. They inspected the installation of the electric and plumbing, the insulation in the walls and the caulking. Finally we were ready for the drywalls. Once the walls were in place, the detailed work began. We had to hang all the doors [all fireproof], trim all the windows, install baseboard heat, tile the downstairs floors, install bathroom fixtures, kitchen cabinets, counter tops and kitchen appliances. At last, came the “fine tuning” or “cosmetics” which included: paint, carpet, “odds and ends” like outlet covers, etc., 50 doorknobs, closet interiors and gutters outside. Last you think we’re finished, we still had to move in the furniture, put up rods and hang curtains and blinds, make beds, assemble dressers, and attend to all the tasks that make a “house a home.”

Throughout this construction, Linda Wilkonski kept her office there, and Linda, Theresa Sparrow and Lucille A’Hearn were often on hand to help with the "clean up" as the rooms progressed. Sometimes other volunteers came to help: Jane Banfield, one of our Board members, spent many days helping us to keep some semblance of order [which is a necessary function in construction], and this helped tremendously. Therefore, we were able to celebrate Christmas with our Wrapping Party in Bethany One. On January 16, 2007, we officially moved into our new residence and what a glorious occasion it was!!

I asked both Brian and John to comment on the construction business - both agreed that “It’s never-ending!!” And we all agree that we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for their extensive knowledge and their many skills AND for giving us their 110% throughout the before and after months of Bethany One. Brian and John have now moved on to the next Bethany to undertake whatever tasks are necessary to keep our homes in the superb condition that we have proudly come to expect. Let’s face it: they spoil us!

Jessie Fentner

What’s in a Word?

Foundation

Foundation is a complicated word. It can be an institution, a cosmetic base, an article of clothing, a fundamental principle, or a structural system that supports a building. However, it is always important that the foundation or underpinnings be sound in order to maintain and support its purpose. A faulty foundation leads to imminent collapse, which no one would choose.

Therefore, when we chose to build an addition to Bethany One, it was necessary to examine the existing foundation to determine its stability. It was faulty. It would not support new construction because it was built improperly and not “according to code.” To rebuild a faulty foundation is difficult; sometimes it is necessary to “tear it down” and begin again.

And so it is with the women and children who come to Bethany. Frequently they have no support system, no strong foundation to rely on...some how, some way, they have lost their underpinnings and don’t have the skills to rebuild without help and guidance. Coming to Bethany can be a new beginning for them. They soon realize what it means to be living in a stable, supportive environment "according to code" where they are helped to develop a strong foundation of healthy values and boundaries. It may be necessary to “tear down” the old way of life in order to rebuild a foundation of positive attitudes, dignity and purpose to enable them to function independently.

All kinds of foundations can crumble; all kinds of foundations can be rebuilt. Isn’t this our mission at Bethany House - to help people restore and rebuild their crumbling, neglected foundations?

Jessie Fentner
The cornerstone for BOXTOWN was laid in the Spring of 1995 when HAVEN, the Molloy College/Bethany House Coalition for the Homeless, sponsored an all-day college-wide series of workshops on homelessness entitled Living on the Edge. From this evolved an event called BOXTOWN that was held in October 1996 at Molloy College. Over eighty students "spent a night out" in a cardboard box in solidarity with the homeless. Supper was skipped that evening, with bread and broth as its only substitute. The BOXTOWN participants had to brave the elements - just like the homeless. This event was not only a consciousness-raising effort, but sponsorships also made it a fund-raising activity, netting $9,000 to assist with Bethany’s newest Program, REST STOP.

October 1997 gave us BOXTOWN II, thanks to the continued support of over 150 students and faculty members led by Dr. Stephan Mayo and Dr. Meritta Cullinan, both members of Bethany’s Board of Directors, and this event raised $15,000 for the needs of Bethany’s families. The tradition of a shelter in a box was firmly established, and this strong foundation enabled it to continue and grow through 2005.

For those many years, Bethany went to BOXTOWN on the Molloy campus – it was time for a new approach: BOXTOWN comes to BETHANY was begun in February 2007 wherein participants actually spend an evening at one of Bethany’s residences to understand firsthand the struggles [and the tremendous strength] of the homeless family. In a classroom setting, theory and facts are usually all that can be transferred in the learning process. But within the rooms of Nassau County’s premier women’s and children’s homeless shelter, Molloy College students were laughing, crying and learning experientially as they put names to the faces of Nassau’s homeless population.

During this six-hour program (which was offered on four different evenings), the student-participants were each given the identity of a homeless woman and her children, based on an actual case history - a character they assumed for the full time of the event. In their new identity, the students spent time learning from Bethany’s residents what they would encounter when going to DSS [Department of Social Services] to seek help and how to cope with this new, frightening, and challenging experience of actually being homeless.

This powerful experience continued and heightened when the rather nervous participants in character were transported to Bethany South, a warm and inviting residence located on a quiet street in Baldwin. The women residing at Bethany South took on the role of case managers for Bethany’s newest guests, welcoming them, setting their minds at ease, sharing tips on how to make the most of their time at Bethany, and teaching real life lessons to the students who were most eager to learn.

Professional staff members from both Molloy College and Bethany House were on hand throughout the evening to anchor this event, but it was most obvious that the respectful and deeply-felt relationships that spontaneously developed between the college students and the sheltered women and their children were clearly "what it is all about." The experience ended with Bethany’s song, Living on the Edge, and all gathered agreed that they had experienced a much deeper meaning for the song’s words “We’re all one underneath this pain – there’s no difference once we know a name.”

Although the activities of BOXTOWN have changed over time, the emphasis and purpose are unchanged: to understand the struggles of the homeless and to help to change their plight. The FOUNDATION laid for BOXTOWN over 12 years ago has remained strong and vital to our mission at Bethany House. We thank you!

[Please see related article on p. 6]

Jessie Fentnor & Deborah Weinmann
someone like YOU... Brian Koonmen and John Taylor

Bethany House owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to two fine young men who inspire us by their dedication and amaze us with their varied skills: Brian & John surely care “a whole awful lot!”

When Brian Koonmen was only 4 years old, he and his brother loved to come and visit their aunt Mimi [Aimee], sleep on the couch and spend fun time with her. This is Brian’s earliest recollection of Bethany House. As a teenager, he was the “only guy around,” and when he visited Bethany he was a big help working in the food pantry, organizing clothing donations, and unloading the pickups. Anything that needed to be done, Brian did; and - he hasn’t changed! He can tell you how Bethany House has grown over the years from his own earliest experiences.

In the summer of 1992, Brian began working at Bethany after graduating from high school. When he started college, he moved to Baldwin and attended SUNY at Farmingdale so that he could continue to help Bethany. Once again, anything that needed to be done, he did. Brian learned many useful skills from his father who is a construction manager and applied these skills at Bethany. While working on a degree in Business Administration, Brian used his many talents to become proficient in many areas: computer technology, computer graphic art, masonry, architectural drawing and design, carpentry, and digital photography. As he looked at Bethany’s needs and his skills, he saw that there was a good match. Knowing that we had so much to be accomplished, Brian became a full-time employee here and... the rest is History!

Along the way, Brian was most fortunate to meet Adriana [who was working at Bethany as our bookkeeper], and they were married in 1999. Brian will tell you that Adriana is meticulous with money, a welcome asset in any newlywed household and a great asset to Bethany as well! In fact, she continued in her husband’s footsteps, remaining at Bethany, and she is now our Finance Director. Brian and Adriana started a “new generation” of Bethany children with the birth of their son Michael in 2001, and now Michael comes to Bethany to spend fun time with Aunt Mimi!

In certain ways, Brian grew up around Bethany House. It is as if his early days with his aunt have steered him to the course he follows today. Brian has a wonderful understanding of Bethany’s mission and every day he shows it in all the tasks he performs. He has worked tirelessly, often seven days a week, bringing both his sophisticated technical ability and his unique people skills to every aspect of every project. He is involved in some aspects of staff training, and his networking has led to many long-standing connections for Bethany. Brian’s knowledge of computers has enabled him to create all kinds of programs for Bethany, including effective ways to keep track of inventories and purchasing patterns, and even formatting the layout for this Newsletter! He’s superb at fundraising and there is nothing he can’t create with a camera and a computer. He is in charge of all of Bethany’s operations and large purchases and can carry out any building project as evidenced in his invaluable work on the construction projects at both Bethany South and Bethany One. It is an understatement to say that Bethany House has profited tremendously from Brian’s expertise. We thank you most sincerely, Brian Koonmen, for all you have done for Bethany and for all of your love and concern that has enabled us to become what we are today!

As is true with most effective leaders, they have a right hand that is “in sync” with their ideas, philosophy and work. John Taylor and Brian are...
such for each other! They met when they were working on the renovations at Bethany South in 1994 and became fast friends and supportive coworkers. Much of their relationship was based on mutual respect for each other’s abilities and a great camaraderie that they shared after work hours. But then John relocated to Florida.

Even though he was gone for a while, John and Brian always kept in touch. And, as Bethany continues to expand, Brian knew that he really needed John’s help. He called him up and asked him to “come home.” John did, and we hope he’s here to stay!

John also believes strongly in Bethany’s mission and works to ensure that our houses will always be ready and in their very best condition for our guests. In addition to his daily work schedule, John lives in one of Bethany’s apartments in Bellmore to provide extra security for our single-parent families who reside there. He is our eyes and ears, and he oversees the day-to-day happenings at the apartments. In reality, he is the “Super” – and a super one indeed!

We couldn’t do what we do without John! It doesn’t matter which house you visit, chances are you will meet John making a delivery, working in the yard or fixing something. He says he enjoys his job every day and the diversity of tasks holds his many varied interests. And might we add that we enjoy John everyday and truly appreciate the devotion and compassion that arrives each day with him. All of us at Bethany thank you, John Taylor, for everything that you have done and are doing for us.

John and Brian complement each other and make a great team as they care a whole awful lot each day - we hope that both of you will be around to help us for many years to come!

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A Basic Foundation: Education

In the early Spring, Sister Aimee Koonmen and Jessie Fentnor were welcomed at the Admissions Office of Nassau Community College by Craig Wright, Vice President for Student Academic Affairs, and Evangeline Manjares, Associate Dean in charge of Financial Aid, to discuss educational opportunities for the residents of Bethany House. Both of these seasoned professionals showed a great deal of interest in Bethany’s mission and its dedication to educational advancement for our young mothers, and they assured us that they were both willing and happy to help.

Therefore, it was no surprise when three representatives from NCC came to Bethany South to visit with all of our interested guests and to explain to them the many things that could be done to help them get started on their new educational path, which would surely lead to a stronger foundation for their futures. Evangeline Manjares brought Fannie Lee, Financial Aid Officer, and Carol Ortton, Assistant Director of Admissions, with her to Bethany and they enthusiastically explained the various aspects of "getting started" at NCC. In their presentation, they included information on Placement Tests, brush-up courses, Lifelong Learning credit, GED requirements, remedial classes, financial aid, choosing majors, Certificate Programs, Work Study Programs and Day Care at the college. It was very informative and most encouraging for all of the young women who attended.

Thank you, Nassau Community College, for taking the time and interest to come to see us and to help us build strong foundations for our young families. One of our most important goals at Bethany is to give our young women the necessary tools which will empower them to continue with their formal education so that they will be able to lead independent lives in the future and raise their children in a financially stable environment. NCC, you have helped us show to them the way.

Jessie Fentnor
Bethany House - The Foundation Model

Observations on the Boxtown Experience

In early February of this year, I had the distinct pleasure of participating in a training exercise with the residents of Bethany House and the students of Molloy College. As I sat listening to what was unfolding before me, I was reminded of the seminal works of Jane Adams in the 1860s. Ms. Adams was a strong advocate of the Settlement House movement. She promoted the view that there should be in many indigent communities a Settlement House where in the residents worked to assist other residents who were under-served or not served at all by government programs.

Bethany House is one of the embodiments of the Settlement House tradition. It is a place to go when all other doors seem closed. In my work with homeless individuals [especially women], I often had to call upon Bethany House staff. My clients, for various reasons, were not eligible for government services. Their situations were critical and it was most important that I locate a residence that was safe and would keep them from harm’s way. Bethany House was that haven.

Not surprisingly, Bethany House in those early days was not the Bethany House of today. The agency is now composed of four residences that provide a variety of programs to single women and women with children: client advocacy, skills training, supportive interventions, and play therapy are but a few.

The BOXTOWN learning experience between the Bethany residents and the Molloy students took place at Bethany One and Bethany South. It required that each participant take on a character role: the residents were the service providers while the students were the service recipients – I was Mary who had a plethora of personal problems! As one can imagine, what followed was a lively exchange of information, emotions, and humor. Again, Jane Adams came to mind… the residents must learn to access their government and the larger social system. I saw at Bethany an environment where residents were helped and encouraged to work within the system and to be socially responsible for themselves and their children.

Both students and residents acted out their roles with enthusiasm and good spirit [some more than others]. At a later group discussion, it was clear that a host of preconceived notions and views about homelessness and those who struggle through it were engaged and changed. Although the Bethany residents shared the angst of homelessness, they also shared their strength, hope, and courage: thus creating a community of people all working together in a self-help effort to build understanding and foster independence.

Kudos to the staff, the residents, and the students!

Herman Tibbs, LCSW
Bethany House Board Member

BOXTOWN was a wonderful experience for all of Bethany’s children as well – when asked what she found most surprising about Bethany, one of the students responded, “That the children were so happy!”
Bethany News Items:
Bethany’s Founder Is Honored

Fortune 52 is a weekly Feature Column in the Long Island Press that honors Women of Achievement who have made significant, unique and lasting contributions to their communities and workplaces. These women have all laid strong foundations by their lives of service.

It was no surprise that our Sister Aimee was chosen to be honored as one of the Fortune 52! On April 12, 2007, these 52 women gathered at a cocktail party held prior to the Mother Earth Concert at the Tilles Center. After enjoying the Concert in front-row seats, each of these special women was presented to the audience as a Long Island Woman of Achievement. Several staff and guests from Bethany House attended the event to show support for Sister Aimee.

Previously, each of these women had been featured in the Fortune 52 article which is written each week by Beverly Fortune in the Long Island Press. On February 15, 2007, Beverly wrote about our Aimee. The article introduced her with this opening statement: When Bethany House opened its welcoming doors in 1978, it was the first emergency homeless shelter to operate on Long Island. Almost 30 years later, Sister Aimee Koonmen, one of the original Founders and now the Executive Director, continues to oversee this unique organization which has grown to become one of the most respected and emulated homeless residences in the United States.

Of course, Sister Aimee, who has so many reasons to be proud of Bethany House, proceeded to explain Bethany’s mission to homeless families and our numerous accomplishments throughout the remainder of the article. She is a great spokesperson and makes us all proud of Bethany House!

But we at Bethany are also very proud of her - Fortune 52 and the Long Island Press could not have chosen a more wonderful example of a woman who has made and continues to make significant, unique and lasting contributions to her community and beyond. Congratulations, Sister Aimee, for this well-deserved honor!

Coming Events at Bethany:

11th Annual Golf Outing:
On: Monday, July 23, 2007 ★
At: Tam O’Shanter Golf Club
10 AM Check in
For an invitation packet, please call
Linda at 868-6866 ★

August 21, 2007: ★★★
Bethany begins the Celebration of its 30th Year! ★★★
- More information coming soon!

The Fall Fashion Show and Awards Luncheon: ★
On: Saturday, Sept. 15, 2007
At: The Rockville Links
- More information coming soon!

Dominican Sisters’ Gala: ★
- Honoring Sr. Aimee & Bethany House!
On: Friday, Oct. 26, 2007 ★
At: The Garden City Hotel
★ - More information coming soon!
Imagine...

WHAT IT'S LIKE NOT TO HAVE ONE

Bethany House of Nassau County
102 WHITEHOUSE AVENUE
ROOSEVELT NY 11575
516 868-6866

"a place to come when there's no place to go . . ."

Reminder:

Bethany House will host its 11th Annual Golf Outing

Monday July 23, 2007

at

Tam O' Shanter Golf Club

Our honorees are

Hugh McNamara

and

Garden City Printers & Mailers