

ENDING HOMELESSNESS



LEFSA team members held an information night for parishioners of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Manhattan.

LEFSA—A Place to Call Home

Carol De Angelo, SC, and Mary Sugrue, SC

The question was intriguing, “How does Life Experience Faith Sharing Associates—LEFSA—connect with the homeless, with people who have *no place to live*? Eight team members, seven of whom have been homeless in the past, gathered around the table to share with Sisters Mary Sugrue and Carol De Angelo the uniqueness of LEFSA. Here is how they describe LEFSA!

The obvious answer is respect and dignity! “Treating people with respect is ingrained in us!” said James Addison. “When people walk through the door into a monthly Leadership meeting from off the street they know they will be treated with respect and dignity.” These foundational values are clearly visible in LEFSA, its team members, and associates today.

To know LEFSA as an organization is impossible unless one knows the people—persons who have no place to call home: single adults, families, children living on the streets or in shelters. LEFSA, with its team and associates, carry on the spirit and vision of Sisters Dorothy Gallant, SC, and Teresa Skehan, RSM, LEFSA’s cofounders.

“Building community and relationships are two of the greatest strengths of LEFSA” says James Addison, who first met the two sisters when he was living in a shelter 32 years ago. Team members described from their lived experience and practice how LEFSA builds community and relationships.

Team member Mario Pimentel spoke of LEFSA as “creating a space where people share their life experience and how God is in it.” He says, “It isn’t easy. Many people are like me. Curious but not interested. I stayed on the sidelines.”

LEFSA teams of two visit shelters once a week and invite people to gather, pray, and share from their life experience. James Butler continued, “Possibilities emerge from the sharing. The people choose the topics. It can be about fear, hope,

procrastination, whatever they want. At the end of each gathering, people choose the topic for the next week. As LEFSA team members go into the shelters, they create a welcoming space. People gather...are invited to take ownership...to take responsibility for the role and the part we play. Empowerment happens. You can change, and then you want to change root causes.”

For over 32 years since Sisters Dorothy Gallant and Theresa Skehan first walked into the shelter, teams have been visiting weekly at city shelters. From the beginning, leadership training, enrichment, skills building, advocacy, and addressing root causes have been cornerstones of LEFSA. Currently over 100 people come to the monthly Leadership Day; over 40 attend the LEFSA annual three-day retreat; 30 women and men participate in the monthly Women’s Empowerment Group and the Men’s Spiritual Development Group, and the LEFSA Street Ministry has expanded and currently serves about 220 people in Midtown and Harlem.

Mario’s Story

Mario Pimentel has been a LEFSA team member since 2014. In 2012 Mario was living in a shelter, seeing no hope. When LEFSA team members and volunteers visited his shelter weekly he noticed them from afar, but he didn’t want to get involved. One day, “The topic of faith resonated with me and from that day I began to look at things from a different perspective. Seeing people stand up at weekly meetings and say they got an appointment gave me hope. That could be me. I realized that I had to work within the system to get out of homelessness. Being involved with LEFSA, I experienced people in the same situation and they were going from being homeless to having a home.”

For Mario, “LEFSA is more than just a community. It’s a family, not just friends but family...uncle figures and grandmother figures. We don’t have to be related by blood to be family. I didn’t find LEFSA; LEFSA found me. I was lost and then found. This means a lot to me since I don’t have family. More and more, as time goes on the bond becomes stronger.”

There were many factors that led to Mario’s being homeless. He threw himself into work after his wife of 23 years died. He became more and more depressed and lost interest in everything, which led to eventual homelessness. He says that what a person who has not experienced homelessness should know is that “LEFSA provides space and time for people who are homeless to voice their opinions, feelings, and what they are going through. This is so important because people who are homeless are often judged, not spoken to, and avoided by others. The Leadership Group, Men’s Group, and others are rays of sunshine through the clouds and darkness that the homeless walk through.”

Mario is glad to be a member of the team. “I’m grateful I can be doing something meaningful. I have a sense of purpose now. What was missing was the God perspective... That first step is the hardest. You are at the worst part of your life. You wonder how you got there. Your world has turned upside down. You have no other place to turn to. And then you meet the LEFSA team and volunteers. They are different from an agency. We are on the front line. We see people coming into the shelter where they feel all alone and desperate.”

“It’s so important for those who are homeless to know that the shelter is not the destination; that there is a way out. You lose faith in the system and in yourself. I remember talking one day to someone who had been incarcerated. He said, ‘Being incarcerated you know when you’ll come out. In a homeless shelter you don’t know when.’ So many lose hope because of the long time it takes to provide housing. People need patience, faith, hope, self-esteem, and community. They need to keep going, to continue to push on.”

As one of eight team members, Mario has varied responsibilities such as weekly visits to three shelters, leader of a

weekly Men’s Group, and street outreach. “People come up to me now on the bus, the street, people that I knew two years ago. They say, ‘I remember you. I was so down that day. You listened to what I had to say.’ It’s not that they tell me I helped them. It’s that they say, ‘You listened to me.’”

Georgia James

Georgia James has been on the staff of LEFSA for over 18 years. She was a resident in New Providence Shelter when Sr. Dorothy invited her to the gathering of faith sharing and empowerment. Through these encounters Sr. Dorothy recognized Georgia’s deep faith, thoughtfulness, and ability to lead and inspire others. When Sr. Dorothy was not able to attend meetings, she asked Georgia to substitute for her and facilitate. That is where it all started for her. Sister Dorothy’s belief in her was most healing and led to Georgia’s being employed as a staff member.

Georgia believes that participation in these prayerful gatherings enables participants to deal realistically with their current situations of homelessness. They are encouraged to get to know one another and they develop community strength, hope, and trust in overcoming the difficulties of not having housing. Commitment to the group process of decision making of the staff members promotes equality, dignity, and leadership.

Deborah Byrd

“I first met Sr. Dorothy and James in the shelter. They were having a gathering and I joined in the singing. From that encounter I connected with LEFSA. After I left the shelter, I heard the spirit telling me to volunteer and help others who are homeless. After two years of volunteering I was asked to be on the staff. Sister Dorothy reminded me of a flying nun. Her spirit was exuberant, joyful, just loving people, doing whatever she could for people. She loved the street ministry and reaching out to those who are homeless in Penn Station. Her spirit continues.”

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POTS

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It’s not likely that POTS will work itself out of business any time soon. There is an acute lack of adequate, affordable housing and public housing in the Bronx. Government funding is available for some programs at POTS and, when appropriate, POTS applies for additional governmental support. POTS also relies on a network of individual supporters, which is more dependable and is built on personal relationships.

Maeve Callagy is a staff attorney, a graduate of Fordham University and Brooklyn Law School. She is hopeful and dedicated to her clients. Maeve was aware of POTS as a child and now feels that this is her dream job. She represents clients in Housing Court, guiding them through the intricacies of New York City laws and regulations. Through the Legal Clinic

she helps those living in shelters to find permanent housing and the financial support they will need. The most frustrating part of her job, she says, is the lack of affordable housing in the Bronx and the difficulty of sourcing records that clients need to support their claims in Court. The POTS legal clinic was also successful in preventing the eviction of 424 families.

POTS volunteers come from all walks of life, local residents, college, high school, and law school students who enjoy standing with those they can help. Many express that they “get as much, if not more, than they give.” Board members show up on weekends to lend a helping hand, often bringing a spouse and children. POTS—the staff, volunteers, and supporters—have made a loving commitment to nourish the needs of the homeless in the Bronx. They are there when they are needed.

Visit us at www.potsbronx.org