

APRIL, 1989

Dear Friends of Unity Acres,

In the March newsletter our 20th anniversary at Unity Acres was much in evidence but there is only so much that can be written. It was a joy to recall the faith beginnings and our call to faith now and in the future. It is important to reflect, perhaps to fire up our drooping spirits, so we begin again to dream, to pray constantly and to act by faith.

I get all confused as to what happened in the proper sequence but that is really not important. What is important is that so many people took concrete steps in faith. Rosemary and John Heaney, in helping to form the food teams with Carl Harrigan, began immediately to come every Thursday to be with us. Rosemary did this for many years.

The summer of 1969 was really exciting. We looked at the wrecked buildings and welcomed everyone to come. Every weekend we went into St. Lucy's on Friday night and pick up a bus full of families and come north until Sunday night. The mixing and community was very new and exciting. These were days of great joy. The students from Oswego State's Newman Club came and mixed and worked and prayed with much singing and laughter. In the fall of 1969 Frank and Nomie Arquette made the big plunge and with their family to live with us. Their spirit of oneness with the community of men here was an inspiration. The winter was hard but very meaningful for the overall spirit of our budding community.

Bob and Casey Russell were married and lived here in an old bus. Bob and Bobbie Detore also met here and eventually were married and lived here. Jim and June Homer also were married and lived first in the old bus by the creek and eventually a trailer. Earl and Ethel Haskins married at St. Lucy's and came to live here in the old bus and then a tiny trailer. Yes, God provided for us all in such wondrous fashion. It baffles me now but then it was NO PROBLEM! In the midst of it all a saw mill was set up. We purchased Dan, the faithful work horse and we were in the lumber business.

I think it was in 1970 and early 1971 that John and Alice Shaffer came to live in a trailer with their 5 children. Bob and Chris McVicker soon set up their little bus on the land. Frank and Nonie Arquette had already been living here since January of 1970. Soon Dick Guay and his children arrived as did Del and Eva Higgins and Ruth Thurston with their large families. Bill and Kitty Mills and their children also joined us.

The thinking at that time was simple. Come share our lives together - men and families sharing their lives and the good news of Jesus in action. There was no welfare for the families because we should love and share with one another. We were determined to break the welfare trap. The food teams expanded and all the families as well as the men had plenty to eat and sometimes even warm places to live. The unbelievable faith response of those who came and those who provided for our needs during those bulging days! We did not plan, we simply tried to respond with love and call all to love.

By the fall of 1971 we were dreaming of a wide based Christian community at the old military base in Sacket's Harbor and journeyed to New York City (John Schopfer, Kate and I) armed with a \$50.00 deposit to convince Mr. Gold to sell us his abandoned army base. He told us if the Bishop backed us it was ours for \$310,000.00. So we promptly returned and, not making much headway with Bishop Cunningham, we decided to have a sit-in at the Chancery Office so as to convince the Bishop to honor our simple request. We made no headway although I thought he had agreed to help us. How often I have looked back and attribute that so-called disappointment to God's merciful loving providence. Sackett's most likely would have been a disaster.

The pressures of daily living for family members and for the men was mounting. We had bit off (but with love - so NO PROBLEM!) more than we could chew. In the midst of this mounting pressure came the fire in 1972. Thanks be to God no lives were lost. We did lose 50 beds, our kitchen and dining room. Now the pressure was really at a peak. Dan Mylott organized a one day resettling effort and we did

Before this, I am not sure just when, a man had a dream. In his dream he saw a lonely man on a hillside and when he woke up he said to his wife, "I must go over to Unity Acres and see if I can be of any help". We all know this deeply loving man of God is Chet Williamson. Persis agreed that he come and inquire. A very important era had begun. We were totally overwhelmed at the time and Chet began immediately to drive men to medical appointments all over the world. He soon involved Persis who jumped in enthusiastically with much compassion and a keen sense of getting things done very orderly and smoothly.

The stage was set, Fr. Tony Keefe came to the rescue because Kate and I were too weary to go on. Chet and Persis came daily to the Acres and Fr. Tony moved from Holy Trinity to the Acres and Rosemary Heaney worked as part of the team doing all the financial matters, food buying, etc. So, as a team, they made the transition smooth. Yes, God does provide when all seems lost. NO PROBLEM! The new building opened and with enthusiasm, Fr. Tony, Chet and Persis and Rosemary brought new life and spirit to the Acres.

It will call for another newsletter or perhaps two or three to mull over the past 20 years but now to bind this letter together I would like to reflect somewhat on the illogical logic of it all. Again we need to go back to beginnings and see clearly the action of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The move from St. John's in Pulaski to St. James in Syracuse was traumatic. I felt deeply for the first time in my life the great division between the have's and the have-nots. I lived in an elegant rectory surrounded by secretary's, organizations, committees, etc. and one mile down the road were many poor unattached people beginning in Nedrow and throughout the Onondaga Indian Reservation. I felt so totally helpless to unite this obvious division. Please know well that I am not damning or pointing a finger at this parish but it is important to relate what took place in my own thinking. I was determined then to listen prayerfully, to keep listening and reflecting. I took a week off to take a listening journey. I drove to Harlem without calling ahead, just trusting that the Lord would guide me. The first two rectories said they had no room but the third rectory welcomed me to stay for one week. I simply looked, listened, walked the streets and prayed and fasted. It was a week of deep grace unexplainable but very powerful and enduring. This was the first key turning point. The second turning point in my prayerful listening was the many informal sharings of Dan and Phil Berrigan at Jerry and Carol's house. These were very frequent and extremely helpful. I said nothing and only prayerfully listened. The third little journey in listening was Tony Walsh who lived so simply and lovingly at Benedict Labre House in Montreal. I met him at Carol and Jerry's and spent again a quiet listening few days at Labre House and simply absorbed. It was during this time that I first heard of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker and began to listen and absorb Peter Maurin's and Dorothy's way of love. I must add two more key turning points of grace in this listening journey. One day at St. James I heard a bus screeching to an abrupt stop. As I looked I saw an elderly man sprawled out in the middle of Salina St. with a bag of clothes scattered all over the road. The bus just missed him. I ran out to meet my very inebriated friend Bill Ryan. I gathered up his clothes and we began a journey to try and find a place to live. I never forgot that scene and Bill's own journey never ended until Bill was taken Home in death. I had much to absorb. While still at St. James God sent another man who said much to my listening ears. His name was Russell Reisig. He was dressed in full military gear and revealed an extremely sensitive and vulnerable heart. A man too perceptive and too sensitive to be comfortable on this earth that so easily steam rolls over its fragile ones. He was a jeweler, a dreamer and a sensitive loving person. He could speak the truth about the Church's insensitivity to the poor, the little ones. He seemed to drink because he had felt his heart would break in two otherwise. We talked for hours and hours about what he and so many countless others had to endure all alone in the streets.

In next month newsletter I will reflect more on the connection of these 2 yrs of prayerful listening to all these ambassador's of God who spoke so clearly to us all.

A Blessed Easter Season to Everyone,
Fr. Mc. Vev