

Joseph's House prepares for another cold winter

By John Klein

It's Saturday, April 30, 2011, 9 p.m. The second floor of a former Lutheran church is crowded with homeless women and men. Most are tired and hungry; some in need clothes and a shower. The room is dimly lit, the tiled floor is showing signs of wear and tear, and as they gather into a circle, voices are heard thanking God for warmth, shelter, food, friendships and a momentary respite from the streets.

In Joseph's House first year, 45 homeless women and men have been coming each night to this space, seven nights a week. They arrive at 9 p.m. and leave at 7 a.m. the next morning. Here they find nourishment, fellowship and hospitality, and the basic human kindness and compassion we all need. Joseph's House overnight café has been their refuge from cold nights on the streets of Camden. The café provides warmth and welcome to all. Tonight is their last night; the café closes until next winter, and tonight they gather to give thanks.

Joseph's House of Camden is a non-profit dedicated to caring for the homeless. For almost 18 months our board studied the issues around homelessness, discussed these issues with service providers in Camden and Philadelphia, and ultimately decided that our outreach should begin with a café. Throughout Camden, but especially in the downtown area, increasing numbers of women and men were sleeping on the streets, under highway overpasses, and in abandoned buildings. A café would bring immediate relief to this growing population of fragile homeless.

Our mission is to provide a safe place to stay, nourishment and clothing, and an opportunity to build relationships that can lead to more permanent solutions. By bringing vital partners together with generous volunteers, and raising funds from individual donors and foundations, the first year of Joseph's House was a success.

For as little as \$14 per person per night, we were able to hire and train staff, many of whom were formerly homeless, provide nightly food, drink and clothing, give nightly access to showers and laundry facilities, and provide blankets and sleeping bags to those without.

Through the winter season, 135 different women and men came to our door. We provided 4,410 simple meals, many more cups of coffee and tea, and thousands more conversations: conversations rooted in shared kinship; conversations brimming with possibilities.



A volunteer helps prepare a meal at Joseph's House, an overnight café for the homeless men and women of Camden.

We made countless referrals to city and county service providers; referrals for temporary housing, counseling for drug and alcohol addictions, veterans services, and job training and placement. But perhaps the most important outcome of last winter was the renewal of faith and hope in the minds and hearts of so many of our guests. We believe in the

She showed up one night battered, pregnant, alone and afraid. After several failed attempts to engage her in conversation, one night Mary confided in us.

God-given dignity of us all. We believe that everyone can change; every circumstance can be improved. We believe in our guests even if they don't, and we believe until they believe in themselves. It is surprising how far \$14 can go when it's focused on the heart of a person.

Operating the café last winter, we reached building capacity of 45 almost every night and were faced with the difficult task of finding emergency referrals or turning people away. In response to last winter's need, continued high unemployment, and the lack of affordable housing in Camden, this winter we will grow our capacity. We will open two sites, two cafes, in November

2011. Of course, this creates an immediate fundraising challenge, but our focus is on the faces of those we met last winter, on their stories, and on the hope in their hearts. By walking their journey with them, and working together to find solutions, we can make a difference.

'Mary' is a guest for whom our café made a big difference. She showed up one night battered, pregnant, alone and afraid. After several failed attempts to engage her in conversation, one night Mary confided in us. She had been in an abusive relationship, one she tried to escape but didn't. The pregnancy only increased the abuse and she came to us because she was homeless with nowhere else to go.

After contacting partners and service providers, we were able to find a way to assist her. Mary is now receiving pre-natal care, has safe housing and a part-time job, as well as individual counseling. Our hope, and hers, is that she'll continue her journey toward permanent housing and the personal healing she needs to raise her child free from the fears of the street.

While we will focus our energy and resources on our cafes this coming winter, they are not the limit of our vision. Together with St. Joseph's Carpenter Society, a well-respected and well-established provider of affordable housing in Camden, we look forward to more permanent solutions to homelessness.

We need your support to continue our mission and grow our programs. Please join us in reaching out to our sisters and brothers experiencing homelessness. Your support will definitely provide them with immediate comfort this winter, but it may also make all the difference in the world.

Donations can be made payable to Joseph's House of Camden and mailed to 20 Church Street Camden, NJ 08105, attention John Klein. Also, if you are interested in volunteering at the cafes, call John at 856-9649777 ext. 606.

Finally, please mark your calendars for Sunday, Oct. 30. at 1 p.m. and join us for Mass and a reception as we gather to thank God for his generous love and abundant grace this last year and to ask for God's continued blessings on our work and ministry. The Mass will be held at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, 642 Market Street, Camden. A reception with light food and refreshments will immediately follow Mass. Parking is available in the cathedral parking lot.

John Klein is executive director of Joseph House.