

June 2006

Dear Friends,

There I was—in the Martin Luther King Jr. Library in downtown DC to see a movie about racial discrimination—on my right arm a transgender Latina, on my left a gaunt African American ex-crack dealer—both of them afflicted with AIDS. I thought, “What in the world am I doing here?” This is not the picture many of my friends and family would have imagined for me in my almost senior years. Obviously there have been some changes for this former pastor of a white, middle-class, “next to the University” church in the desert southwest! So what happened?

About eight years ago, after *preaching* about working compassionately for justice for the “least of these,” those our culture marginalizes, Dorothy and I moved to the inner city of Washington, DC to immerse ourselves in the *work* of justice—first in a volunteer year and then as permanent residents of this diverse city. Dorothy’s calling has been to developmentally disabled adults through the wonderful L’Arche Community. My calling has been to come alongside homeless people with addictions to empower them to rebuild their lives. After 4½ years directing a transitional housing program for one of the largest faith-based non-profits in DC, I have been called to an exciting new mission—*brand* new! At the beginning of February, I became the director of the fledgling Cornerstone Community.

Cornerstone is a community of caring where formerly homeless people with AIDS and chronic substance abuse can rest, heal and grow towards a positive future in the loving, accepting, patient environment of home.

Cornerstone is the child of Joseph’s House (www.josephshouse.org), a beautiful community where the formerly homeless with terminal illness (mostly AIDS) are accompanied with great love and care in the last stages of their illness. In recent years—with new medications and more effective treatments for those with AIDS—some recover their health enough to leave Joseph’s House only to face some of the same challenges they faced before coming to Joseph’s House—a dearth of safe, stable, affordable housing and needed supportive services—sending most of them back to the streets or shelters or worse. The vision for Cornerstone was born out of this need.

Thinking back on helping Larry move to the shelter once he got too well to stay at Joseph’s House, led me to my vision of Cornerstone. Our time together in the car would be the last time I was with my friend. Larry was attacked that night and died a few days later. ... Tommy Zarembka, founder of Cornerstone

Cornerstone will ease the ache when a man or woman gets well enough to leave Joseph’s House—only to return to the streets and shelters because they have no place else to go. Now there will be the possibility of moving to Cornerstone to continue the healing of heart and body that began at Joseph’s House, perhaps at a deeper level. Such a simple, good, rare thing; a place to call home, a community that wants you, brothers and sisters who believe in you. By extending the love and care and respect of Joseph’s House around the corner to our home for those who become well enough to be able to live again, this time clean and sober, and still within the extended community of Joseph’s House—Cornerstone will be an answer to prayer. ... Patty Wudel, Executive Director of Joseph’s House

I am compelled by the need and drawn by the nature of this new community. After my mom died last month, I went to Colorado to live with my dad in the room he and my mom had called home for the last year and a half. It was an intense and amazing time of reconnection for us. During the week, Dad frequently expressed his love for this assisted living facility and its staff. I finally asked why. His answer struck me: “Some places they treat people like patients, but here they treat you like friends.” That’s what I am drawn to about our work at Cornerstone—we are not a transitional house where a staff works with clients or patients—we are a community, a home where we make friends, where we come alongside to accompany those who have to learn to live again. At Cornerstone, *relationships are our specific therapy*. I am drawn to this personal, relational way of life—a way of life—not just a job. This fresh approach to those with addictions is rare but feels so right ... and quite sobering.

I am not naïve about community. It is demanding and precarious—especially for those from diverse backgrounds and cultural influences. At Cornerstone there are those of us coming to “help”—with our white, middle class cultural influences and our “vision”—our expectations—what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls “wish dreams” which he declares are the “death of community.” Then there are those who come from a totally different culture, who have experienced the depths of pain, prejudice and exclusion—from a street culture where they have learned to survive by shutting down, distancing, conning—medicating life’s wounds with alcohol and drugs. It sounds daunting—learning to be together in a loving, healing, respectful community—making a home with people who are so different. What a challenge, what a risk! But we consider the potential for healing well worth the trouble.

It will not be long before we are able to welcome our first residents to Cornerstone. We have leased (with hopes to buy) a wonderful house just around the corner from Joseph’s House. Tommy and Pierre have done wonders with the place with help from other volunteers. It is becoming a beautiful place to make our home with these dear ones so they can continue the healing and rebuilding they began at Joseph’s House.

We have begun our regular practice of community prayer at 7:45 AM on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the house. It feels good to welcome our Higher Power into this home and community. If you would like to join us some day, please come.

I want to close by expressing my gratitude to Joseph’s House, to Patty and especially to Tommy for responding to this vital need. I am blessed to be part of it. I hope many of you will be called to join us with your prayers and support for Cornerstone. If you can support Cornerstone with a financial gift, we would be grateful for whatever you can give. For now, checks should be made out to “Joseph’s House” with “Cornerstone” written in the memo line.

In the near future, we will be looking for volunteers for things like cooking, shopping and just coming alongside the members of our community. Please call (202-595-7001) or email (tcopps2000@hotmail.com) me if you are interested. If you know of someone who would like to hear from us or someone we may have missed, would you please send us their information? Thank you and ...

Peace to you all.

Tom Copps
Director of Cornerstone

WHAT IS CORNERSTONE?

Cornerstone is a community of caring where formerly homeless people with AIDS and chronic substance abuse can rest, heal and grow towards a positive future in the loving, accepting, patient environment of home.

We hope that as each is able, the residents of Cornerstone will ...

- receive all the unconditional love, acceptance and support of genuine community, so they can in turn give love
- discover a sense of joy and celebration in recovery and live a clean and sober life with all its benefits
- maintain their physical/mental/spiritual health ... understand their health issues and do what is necessary to stay healthy
- find meaningful work - chores around the house, regular volunteer work or a job that gives a sense of pride and fulfillment - all carefully matched to a one's strengths and to whatever limitations they may have
- strengthen support systems (friends, family, faith community) ... find reconciliation in the significant relationships in their lives
- develop necessary daily living skills
- find long-term, healthy, recovery friendly housing

At Cornerstone we believe that ...

- ♥ Each life is precious and intended to be lived with meaning.
- ♥ All members are equally important to the life of the community. Within each individual is the Spirit of God. So no matter how scarred and broken a person is, within a loving and safe environment s/he can find healing and learn to give and receive love.
- ♥ Love and forgiveness are the most powerful agents for positive personal change. Relationship is the specific therapy of the Cornerstone Community.
- ♥ Community operates best without judgment, punishment and violence. There is structure to facilitate the life, health and safety of the community and each of its members, but always within the context of love, acceptance and forgiveness.
- ♥ Each individual has all the gifts, abilities, knowledge, character and answers within them that they need to live and grow into their new life. We just come alongside to nurture and water the soil that will produce the unique fruit of a fulfilled and loving life.