

April 12, 2010

WE'VE MOVED TO ARKANSAS!!

... Avenue that is. On the fourth anniversary of our existence, the Cornerstone community moved from our beautiful, inviting home in Adams Morgan to a larger, less expensive house about two miles away that used to be home to a residential treatment program.

It was hard to move. So many memories and so much healing in the Ontario Road house. Such convenience – stores, shopping and transportation and my beloved Potter's House so close by – Joseph's House around the corner – the energy and diversity of the Adams Morgan neighborhood. It was hard to move – we are grieving. And it has been difficult to believe we would be able to recreate the beauty and “hominess” of the house we had poured so much of ourselves into. But we believe it is the best move for the future of our beloved community.

When we first visited the new place, it had an institutional feel to it. As we entered for the first time, we were challenged by a female voice announcing loudly in her best security guard voice that we had entered through the front door. Then in the hallway we were confronted with a huge, ugly white board that had a color-coded schedule for the program for every half hour of every day. So institutional and uninviting – not at all the atmosphere we want to have in our community home. But we were quite attracted to its large yard, more bedrooms (we will add residents) and more living spaces that are ripe for creative uses. My new office is actually on the first floor instead of in the attic – my feeble knees are exceedingly grateful!

We have already begun to make our new place look more homey and inviting and less institutional. We immediately removed the white schedule board and fired the security lady in the ADP keypad! It will never be Ontario Road (and it should not be), but it is already beginning to look and feel like home. At our first community meeting in the new house, the resident who struggled most with moving shared: “I was very resistant to the move. I had lived here before when it was a treatment program. I thought we could never make it like a home – like we did on Ontario. But as we moved and took things down and set things up, I saw that this was no longer a program, but a home.” We have even started a garden – although in its infant stages it looks like a very big man is buried in our front yard!

During the exhaustion and emotional upheaval of our move, I was reminded of the nature and heart of our little community – something deeper and more attractive than the physical beauty of the space. It is more intangible at the level of soul/spirit. It travels with us wherever we move. We have sensed it often – especially when people visit.

Just last night one of our board members (for three years) described the experience every time he comes to the community. He says he comes home from a long day at work – exhausted, frustrated, mind moving in so many directions, but with each step toward Cornerstone, he says that he begins to feel more centered, grateful and at peace. It happened at the old house and it happened again last night at the new house.

One dear friend of a resident, who has been in the treatment and recovery world for some years, came to our community dinner a few months ago. We did nothing out of the ordinary for him. We laughed, told stories, listened to stories and then had our after dinner candle ritual where we share a reading from someone in the community and pass a candle to each person at the table to share a thanksgiving, a prayer or just a moment of silence. The next day our visitor told his friend that he never felt more welcome anywhere in his life.

Another visitor to our community dinner was a man who still chooses to remain on the street. He is the son of one of the men who died at Joseph's House some years ago. His father was part of the inspiration for Tommy Zarembka to start Cornerstone. I have been chatting with this younger man on and off for the last four years after his case worker from another organization brought him to interview with me about coming to Cornerstone. Over these years, he shares the same litany with me: "Nobody out here cares about you. I have no real friends. They are only my friends on the first of the month when I get my disability check." I have listened a lot – tried to persuade a bit – but mostly just tried to be someone who does care and will be present with no strings attached. He has come very close to deciding to enter treatment and then come to Cornerstone, but the pull of the drink is too much. I have been inviting him to our Thursday community dinners for all those years. He says he will come but never shows up – until one night a few months ago.

I sat and listened to him before dinner. Then we sat down at the table. The dinner was marvelous (not unusual for Thursday nights) and our guest ate a lot! He had obviously imbibed during the day, but everyone included him in the conversation and the merrymaking. During our little candle ritual people shared from deeply – heartfelt prayers, expressions of gratitude – nearly everyone expressing gratitude for our guest. By the time the candle got to him, he was crying. He quietly gave thanks for people in the world who truly love. Afterward he hugged nearly everyone and finally me and said that he felt very loved and accepted here. He is still not ready to leave the street and the alcohol to come to us, but I when I see him on the street, I listen, hug him, tell him he is loved and invite him to another community dinner. We continue to hope and pray that someday he will come and stay.

Somewhere in all that is an hint of our soul – the soul that journeyed with us to Arkansas and would have gone with us even if we had moved clear down to Bill and Hillary's old state!

We are so grateful to all of you who support us in your prayers, your volunteering and your financial gifts. It gives us the opportunity to share our soul with these delightful and loved ones we are gifted with. We covet your thoughts and prayers and financial gifts to help us adjust to our new space and make it home. We have started a wish list. At the top of it is a nice pool table which we now have room for in our basement. Pool seems to provide one of the greatest opportunities to bond with our residents as we discovered at our first annual Cornerstone pool tournament a few months ago. Let us know if you know how we could fulfill this wish.

I also wanted to invite you to our Fourth Anniversary Celebration and Open House on Saturday, May 15 from 1:00 – 4:00 PM. We will have some barbeque, music, lots of fun, a tree planting, one of those bouncy things for the kids and Tommy and a wonderful time enjoying our new digs and maybe sharing a bit of our soul. Hope you can come. I am sure some kind of dish or desert would be accepted with glee! If you think about it you can let us know your intentions (call 202-595-7001 or email tcopps2000@hotmail.com). Or just show up at 4800 Arkansas Avenue NW – where 13th Street, Arkansas and Decatur all merge together.

Peace and love,

Tom Copps