

IF HOPE IS A LIGHT, THE HOUSE CHARITY IS THE OIL

The floors are plain brown and grey; the tables economic and meager. Although it resembles a school cafeteria, with its kitchen counter and guard rails for lines, the room stirs with the musky smell of weariness and rot, mashed and mixed together with the sterilizing aroma of detergents and cleaners. To the right, at the end of the room, is a small enclosed chapel, where several people sit quietly. Sitting against the window inside the chapel, is an effigy of the Crucifixion, the face of Christ looking down with a strikingly genuine sadness, as if he is reflecting on his statement in the Gospels, seeing how much it rings true today:

"You will always have the poor among you."

Nowhere is that prophesy more realized than at the Spokane City House of Charity. Located on West Pacific Avenue, it has been open since 2000, where the employees hope to bring food, warmth, comfort, and above all, hope to the homeless and destitute of the city. Although it is surrounded by a towering wall and gates, as if cutting it off from the rest of the city, it is less selective about its guests than any other charity organization.

According to the Assistant Director Mike Cain, a thin, plain-spoken man, wearing pants and a mundane purple t-shirt, the House of Charity is "a place unlike any place you have ever been before."

For example, he says the House of Charity is unique in that it will open its doors to anyone, in any condition whatsoever (whereas organizations such as the Union Gospel Mission require their guests to be sober) with only one "golden rule"; that the person is capable of being respectful to everyone in the House of Charity, the staff, and the neighborhood. In other words, drunks, alcoholics, drug addicts, convicted sex offenders, and felons are welcome, as well as the sick, hurt, handicapped and mentally ill.

However, Cain added, it does not allow anyone under the age of 18 to come in, for security and safety reasons, saying that the shelter is not "a nursing home, nor a safe, or healthy place to be." Cain stated that usually there will be 75 males and 25 females staying at the house on a regular basis. During the winter, they claim to have been filled to the brim, so much so, that the city has allowed them to turn the dayroom into a large sleeping area as well.

Cain described the many services that the House of Charity provides: a place to sleep (with 108 beds, complete with sheets, pillows, and blankets), a cafeteria, which they call the "dayroom" (Where they serve 70,000 hot lunches annually, not including breakfasts or dinners), a medical clinic and human resources to help people recover from addictions, abuse, or personal tragedies. Cain also said dryly, "I think that the greatest thing we offer is toilets, because there are few public restrooms for them to use."

He puts the percentage of the people who come to the house with alcohol and drug abuse problems at fifty percent. Although many people equate homelessness with being lazy or addicted to drugs, the Community Connections Coordinator, Jerry Schwab, sees it as much more complicated.

"The only homeless people we see are the ones sitting on the sides of the road, holding up signs and begging for money," he said. "There are more than just those. If there is anything I have learned here, it's to never judge a person by their outside clothes. I've lived next to a serial killer who acted like a normal person around us, and everyone thought he was a nice guy. We put on our best so that people don't see the inside."

Schwab and Cain both agreed that many of these people are not to blame for the root of many of their problems.

"We all are born and raised by people, who can either instill trust of other people in us, or distrust," Schwab stated. "When people instill distrust in children, it makes it very difficult for them to be accepted into society, because they have a very difficult time trusting others on basic things that we take for granted." Cain added that this can pertain to crimes such as physical and sexual abuse or drug and alcohol addictions of the parents. Split homes and bad choices of parents can lead to confused and angry children, who grow up to be like that as adults, Schwab said.

Among the posted announcements tacked on the sides of the wall were also ones concerning the memorial service for people who had died recently from the House. In the past three weeks, seven people have died from the House, ranging from natural causes to homicides. Cain said that

that number is extremely high as well as rare. However, he also said that is why the House exists; to keep the homeless safe.

"After all, being homeless is a dangerous proposition," Cain stated, telling the story of one of their homeless people named Rick Rice, a very large man, who had been murdered while sleeping on the streets.

"A bunch of guys were walking down the street from the bars, saw him sleeping on the road, and beat him to death. You can be the biggest, strongest man in the world, but that doesn't mean a thing when you are asleep."

Until now, the House of Charity is open nine months out of year and closed for three months during the summer, due to budgeting costs. However, last year the organization received a government grant which allowed them to be open year round.

According to their web site, the House of Charity is a Catholic-based organization. This has the potential to create problems with receiving federal aid. But, according to Schwab, their faith is more manifested in their actions than in words.

"Our main mission is to keep people alive," he explained. He described their actions in relation to spreading the gospel as a ministry of "presence", acting out the teachings of Jesus instead of preaching it. Schwab said that the chapels are voluntary for people to go to and are not required, such as it is with other faith-based organizations.

"We're not evangelistic," he added. "We do not want to discriminate against anyone here."

When asked about their own personal faith and how it led them to work at the House, both Schwab and Cain were reluctant to say much and showed discomfort when they did speak.

"I tell people that I was dragged here kicking and screaming," Cain said dryly. "I was from one of those families that looked normal, but it was all about success. I started out volunteering as a junior in high school. Sometimes I am not sure why I am here." When asked whether God had called him to work there, he paused for a bit before continuing.

"I felt I was called to be here by the Lord. I love the people I work with. I always gravitated towards the underdog; drawn toward people who were suffering."

Schwab, on the other hand, felt more secure and sure of his purpose. "We feel pulled here. This is where I need to be. It isn't about accomplishment working here. We're trying to put into practice what Jesus said."

Both of them, however, expressed a sense of despair due to the nature of their work, which runs contrary to most jobs.

"The harder we work," Cain said, "the more it seems we get pushed back. We've worked hard to provide good service, but it seems that more and more people keep coming in."

But, Schwab stated, sometimes it is the people who work at the House that are in need of healing and help. And it is those they seek to help that end up filling the empty places in their soul.

"It filled me up when I fixed people," he said. "When I did that, I fixed myself. I have people send letters to the House, telling us how much we helped them and how thankful they are. To gain the trust of someone who has never trusted anyone else before in their life is an experience I'll never forget. There's no lack of deep stuff here at the House."

TJ Martinell

CHARITY IS MORE THAN A MEAL, IT'S SURVIVAL

"Sorry Mary, we're closed right now, you know that," said Michael Cain, the assistant director for the House of Charity, as he unlocks the front gate to let a visitor slip inside. "Come back at dinner time," he says to Mary, as the gate swings shut. She hangs her head, turns, and slowly wanders back down the sidewalk. Drifting along in a world of confusion and solitude, a place of ill repute and misfortune, where there seems to be no other answer, a door opens and gradually sheds a new light on the homeless people of Spokane, the people like Mary.

The House of Charity, a homeless shelter in downtown Spokane, is that beacon of hope that so many homeless people rely on. It takes in the cold and freezing individuals during the

harsh winter and the exhausted during the scorching summer. The House of Charity is a place of refuge that allows people to, at least momentarily, be off the streets and away from the dangerous lifestyle of homelessness, according to Cain.

"We are the standard of homeless shelters. We'll take in almost anybody in almost any condition," said Cain. "We only require that they be respectful of our staff, each other, this building and the community. We serve three meals a day and sleep up to 108 men a night." Cain considers the House of Charity very different from other shelters due to its offered services of public toilets, showers and its free medical clinic – an adjunct of Sacred Heart Hospital, which is the only free clinic in Spokane. Roughly 75 percent of the people that come to the House of Charity are males and 40 percent of all the homeless regulars are veterans. About 50 percent of all clientele at the House of Charity are substance abusers, said Cain.

Although it may be the only helping hand that some may ever grasp, the House of Charity must turn away a few folks as well. Anyone under 18 and people with children are referred elsewhere due to the fact that House of Charity does take in almost anybody, including sex offenders and substance abusers. It's not a logical environment for children according to Cain.

With a deficit of inner-city housing, the homeless population is ever increasing – a major dilemma projected to the poorest neighborhood in the state of Washington.

"We see about 500 people circulate through here a day," said Cain. "We're basically full every night of the year."

"You can feel the tension and level of suffering in this place," said Jerry Schwab, community connections coordinator for the House of Charity. "Here we don't disguise your state and try to hide it – we show the truth. We're not a rehabilitative or therapeutic place, but we offer referrals to places that are."

The House of Charity is not evangelistic and does not try to convert people or get them to have a religious or spiritual revelation.

"Though we offer a chapel service, we don't change or fix people, we stand beside them," Schwab said. "Our mission is to keep people alive. Healthcare, food and clothing is what we do 99 percent of the time. We make sure people are adequately nourished."

Being at the House of Charity is in part a calling for Cain. It strongly reflects an aspect of his faith that he himself cannot quite describe. For Schwab, however, being at the House of Charity is a no-brainer.

"I guess I'm gravitated to the underdog," said Schwab. "This just makes sense to me. Gaining people's trust is a victory for me."

Though the House of Charity is a place of repose, where the homeless can feel loved and wanted; it also endures its hardships. Often times the regular, familiar faces stop coming through the door – victims to the slums and neglected streets. Friendships are made at the House of Charity and when they're lost among the whirlwind of life's tragedies, it can make staff and clients alike feel despair.

"It's frustrating to be happy with your job when you don't see much effectiveness," said Cain. "I can't help but feel hopeless at times." When a person that the staff had been connected to passes away, emotions are stirred, as was evident through the solemn expression on Cain's face when relating his thoughts on his friendships with regular patrons. "Some of the smartest people I know have walked through these doors," said Cain, glancing toward the entrance and then down to his feet.

At the House of Charity, feelings run high and a hot meal is never more than a few hours away. Reasoning isn't needed and understanding lifts the burdens from those who struggle to survive for another day. For some, the cloak of invisibility is lifted for a meal or for a night – but the ever-long nightmare of not knowing what tomorrow has in store, where the light is faint, is enough to make them feel like ghosts of the streets for a lifetime.

CAN HOPE FIND ITS WAY AMONG THE HOPELESS?

By some point in a person's life, they draw conclusions on what hope is and what it means to them. For some it floats and for some it never even breaks through the surface to see the light. Both views materialize at the House of Charity in Spokane, a shelter for the homeless.

The House of Charity is located in the poorest neighborhood in the state, poorer than some of the very desolate areas of King County where the population is much higher than that of Spokane County. Any given day as many as 500 people may come in and out of the shelter doors.

"The clients we serve here did not get here on their own," says a choked-up Margie Taylor, general case manager at the House of Charity.

A majority of the people in the homeless community suffer from different mental illnesses, from schizophrenia, to bipolar to addiction. According to a report put together by the Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of Southern Florida, studies have shown that one out of three individuals who are homeless in the United States suffer from a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia or manic depression. These people can also have an alcohol or drug abuse problem. Research findings also suggest that homelessness is associated with an earlier age of onset of mental illness, co-occurring personality disorders, alcohol or substance abuse disorders, physical illness, and a history of childhood disturbances. On the issue of mental illness, Jerry Schwab, communication connections coordinator for the House of Charity, says, "There is a lot of brokenness."

Michael Cane, the Assistant Director of the House of Charity, says that the Director would estimate that 99 percent of the people coming into and using the services available at the shelter suffer from some form of mental illness. Cane goes on to say that they are, "overcome with the helplessness of it."

The House of Charity opens its doors for the most hopeless and helpless of the homeless. While places like the Union Gospel Mission require passing a breathalyzer to gain entry for the night, the House of Charities, at the other end of the spectrum, will take in someone who is under the influence. Their only requirement for their guests is that they must be respectful to everyone and everything under the roof of the shelter. The mission of the House of Charity is to keep people alive.

According to a study released in 2007 by The National Alliance to End Homelessness, Washington State is among the states with the most homeless. Another cause of homelessness is the increased levels of poverty and the decreasing number of affordable housing. This is a problem in Spokane County. With the closure of the Otis Hotel and no alternative housing, many of these people have moved into the streets. Some, however have moved, at least for now, into motels. The Trade Winds Motel, Michael Cane found out from an impromptu survey, for example has 49 people occupying rooms long term; there are only 59 rooms at the motel.

In 2005, the legislature passed the Washington State Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act. The act is a 10 year plan to reduce homelessness by at least 50 percent within the next 10 years. The City of Spokane and Spokane County adopted its Regional 10 Year Plan to Address Homelessness in 2005.

Also to help combat the homeless epidemic about \$100,000 in federal HOME funds will be available in the spring of 2008. The money is coming from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOME Investment Partnerships Program. The intentions are to create rental housing that is affordable to those who are at or below 50 percent of the Spokane area's median family income.

This funding does come with restrictions however, the funding is to acquire, repair or construct rental properties within the city limits for low-income residents. Rental restrictions also will be obligatory; they include renting to low-income tenants for at least 15 years for projects involving properties that have been acquired or renovated and 20 years for newly constructed developments. The upside is low-cost deferred loans with the potential for debt forgiveness

The bottom line for some of their clients is, says Taylor, "They have nowhere else to go for help." The House of Charity provides a place to get out of the cold, a hot shower, a hot meal, and an opportunity for the people society does not always see or want to see, to be treated like they should, like people.

Still, being around the staff, it feels like they don't and can't do enough. "We are in an era of compassion fatigue," says Schwab. Yet the House of Charity provides for some, the one thing they need most, just a chance, a friend and a sliver of hope.

Catherine Sherwin

"MINISTRY OF PRESENCE"

With his curly mop of hair, Vandyke beard and geared up smile, Jerry Schwab might be mistaken for a youth pastor. His lively gestures underscore an animated style of speech that brings to mind a spirited sermon. Rather than preaching, however, Schwab has chosen a path that relies not on words, but on cultivating close bonds with those souls who live in society's blind spot.

Schwab has served as community connections coordinator with the House of Charity since 2006. The House of Charity, on Pacific and Browne in downtown Spokane, is at the heart of one of the poorest urban neighborhoods in Washington State. It acts as a non-profit care facility for the homeless, serving meals and offering medical services to all who need them while providing overnight shelter for men who often have no other place to go.

There he interacts with addicts, the mentally ill and the socially abandoned, following the example of another, more hallowed ally of the disenfranchised.

But while Jesus may provide the basis for his actions, Schwab isn't one to baptize listeners in discussions of his faith. He says his beliefs act as a source from which he can draw insight in order to support and nurture healing in those who are hurting. He points out that many he works with have been injured by organized religion, making them hesitant to chat about God.

In any case, Schwab says they don't often use words, viewing them as oft times inadequate to genuinely help people. He sees the House of Charity as a "ministry of presence," missionary work that doesn't impose a philosophy or belief on others but instead "learns what the richness of their culture is" to foster mutual understanding and growth.

Spokane's homeless make up a sub-culture that Schwab estimates has around 6,500 members but it isn't a group most of us recognize readily. The majority of people, Schwab contends, seem to lump the homeless into one group of huddled masses standing on street-corners with their hands out.

"A lot of people walk across the street when they see homeless people or avert their eyes," he says. "But when you sit down with someone, like any other stereotype, and they tell you the richness of their lives, their dreams, their hopes and their experiences, they become real and it's pretty powerful."

Schwab's work enables him to share his experience with others in the Spokane community through Urban Plunge, a monthly program that invites small groups to spend the night at the House of Charity to interact with the homeless, often leading to a profound change in perspective.

"I love having people stay at the House of Charity," Schwab says. Many tell him afterwards that it transformed their life. In 32 years as a therapist he's worked with patients who never experience significant change, even after long stretches of intensive counseling. While hosting Urban Plunges, however, he's seen people change dramatically in a matter of hours.

Bearing witness to this transformation is part of what makes his job fulfilling. "If you spend just 18 hours with someone and they change their life it's like, oh yeah, I'll do more of that."

The program not only benefits those who participate as visitors, but gives the homeless a chance to have their voices heard. "Healing involves telling your story," Schwab says, "and many here never get a chance to tell their story."

Schwab says that visitors can listen with a compassionate ear the homeless are given a means to shed some of the pain and frustration that could otherwise reveal itself in harmful ways or lead to self-medication through drugs and alcohol.

While Schwab may be walking the walk, it can sometimes seem more like an uphill climb on hands and knees. In the past month alone, seven members of Spokane's homeless community have died for reasons ranging from violent homicide to natural causes. The grief over their loss is compounded by a litany of hardships facing the staff at the House of Charity.

The continuous scramble for limited funds, Spokane's lack of adequate low-income housing and the "compassion fatigue" that at times threatens to overwhelm social workers all merge to create a work environment that few would envy. However, Schwab contends that this is the only place he can see himself, smiling ironically before saying, "I found my home here."

With the passionate zeal Schwab brings to his work, he could easily have found work preaching the gospel to scores of well-heeled worshippers. His devout faith and fiery mannerisms would have fit the job description perfectly; although any work without the challenges of his current position probably wouldn't satisfy him.

"This is real; this is what was being talked about in the Bible," he says. "This is the Bible at work. Talking about something versus experiencing it is hugely different. You can hear a good sermon, and I love good sermons, but sometimes it's shallow, because words are limited."

Schwab laughs before saying, "I like the deep stuff and there's no lack of deep stuff here." "We're in deep."

Ryan Lancaster