

The Least of These: As weather turns, Davidsonville parishioners open doors, hearts

First in a series

Editor's Note: Inspired by Matthew 25:40-45, which concludes "... What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me," each month in 2017 the Review will provide an in-depth look at the Catholic Church's response to those in dire need.

By Erik Zygmunt

ezygmunt@CatholicReview.org

DAVIDSONVILLE - Not having a home is the major difficulty for 59-year-old Lawrence Baranauskas, but it takes a secondary problem to darken his genial manner.

"Some people don't trust the homeless," he said, lamenting how his tell-tale backpack gets him sent out of stores and shunned on sidewalks. "I think it's because they're scared of us. They think we're going to break into their homes and steal from them or something."

"We're not about that," he said over a dinner of pulled pork and sides at Holy Family Parish's Unity Hall Dec. 6.

Baranauskas' lament doesn't apply to the Davidsonville parishioners. For seven winters, their faith community has hosted those, like Baranauskas, caught outdoors. As a participant in the Winter Relief program of Arundel House of Hope, a Glen Burnie-based organization, Holy Family joins other houses of worship across Anne Arundel County in forming one big rotating shelter for local men and women who are homeless.

"I think it's a great way to remember that our gathering for Mass, our gathering for prayers and our raising our children in the faith is meant to then be taken out to build up the Kingdom of God in the whole world," said Father Andrew Aaron, pastor. "It helps connect the teaching of our faith with the practice of our faith, which sometimes can be missing."



Edward Tharp reads John le Carre's during Holy Family Church's mobile homeless

shelter, Dec. 6. The Davidsonville parish is one of several churches in Anne Arundel County that host individuals during the winter by offering warm beds, meals, and showers. (Kevin J. Parks | CR Staff)

Holy Family's weeklong commitment, this year from Dec. 5 through Dec. 11 and made possible through the collective effort of approximately 300 parish volunteers, includes not only shelter and food to those in need, but also fellowship, a gift also for the giver.

"I think the volunteers as a group get as much if not more out of it than the guests do," observed Paul Dallavalle, who serves as onsite co-coordinator of Winter Relief at Holy Family.

For one thing, it's a reality check.

Kelly Green, a religious education instructor at the parish, volunteered at the host station, answering guests' questions and keeping their medications secure. Last year she had wandered into the hall midday, when the guests are gone - after breakfast, they are bussed to the House of Hope day center or go to jobs - and glimpsed belongings, packed into garbage bags and pieces of luggage.



Siobhan McNicholas applies makeup during her stay at Holy Family, Davidsonville. The Davidsonville parish is one of several churches in Anne Arundel County that host guests during the winter by offering warm beds, meals and showers. (Kevin J. Parks | CR Staff)

"It shocked me," she said. "They have to go everywhere with all their belongings. They can't just take their purse."

Some, such as Ed Thomas, stash their belongings in the woods when possible to avoid the stigma noted by Baranauskas.

"My wife had her purse and that was it," he said, describing a summer camped in Glen Burnie. "We would just walk out of the woods like one of us was going to the bathroom."

Thomas, 39, wears an immaculate white Terps hat and could pass for a volunteer. According to David Konschnik, Holy Family's other onsite co-coordinator, the phenomenon is common.

"Parishioners stop by and look at the guests and volunteers and can't really see a difference between them," he said. "We're similar people."

✖ "One thing I tell everybody is you're only two paychecks away from where me and my wife are," Thomas said. "Two paychecks - that's all it takes. ... We had a beautiful house on the Eastern Shore. I wasn't fired but my department basically went belly-up."

Secondary jobs weren't enough to keep the house while supporting himself, his wife and their children. His parents in Arnold, he said, "were strong supporters, but my wife had a habit. She was seeking help for it."

Thomas has been homeless for seven years. His various jobs have not made him enough money to get off the streets.

A recent bit of good news - Thomas said he has been approved for a housing voucher six years after he applied - arrived during a difficult time. His pregnant wife's whereabouts have been unknown to him since she had failed to arrive at an agreed-upon rendezvous several weeks earlier.

The couple's children, Thomas said, are safe with his parents in Arnold. He noted that panhandling is difficult for him alone, but when he and his wife are together, "we hit every single time."

At Holy Family, Barbara Zukowski and Kathy Duffy coordinate the various parish ministries - a sewing group, a women's group and a fellowship of the separated, widowed and divorced, to name a few - who cook dinner for guests.

Parishioners sign up to cook hot breakfasts; teenagers prepare the guests' bag lunches.

"You have a whole new awareness and respect for what you have and what they don't have," Zukowski said, "and you realize you had better share."

"We're supposed to see Jesus in every person we meet," Dallavalle said. "People have to confront that aspect of the Gospel and ask themselves, 'Do I believe, or don't I believe?' "

For a video report on this story, [click here](#).

Also see:

Baby follows breast cancer battle aided by St. Agnes Hospital

Catholic Review's top stories, blog posts and columns in 2016