

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 11, 2010 at 11:54am

The life and death of a ministry

by Rosalie G. Riegler



Board member Clif McQueen (standing), and (from left) Zack McQueen, Konnie Konkol, Josh Medlin, and Jude Thompson relax during a Jeannine House summer retreat in 2005.

REFLECTION

The Jeannine House is closed. It's still hard for me to say those words, but I'm getting a lot of practice these days as the board ponders what to do about the fine old house at 721 East Holland Avenue in Saginaw, Mich.

For 14 years, this house served as a home for women and children in temporary need. For the last five of those years, I had been afraid it would have to close, had seen the decision lurking in the corner as the number of women coming as guests declined, as Workers came and left, as donations dwindled. Although those who remained were able to keep the house going physically -- and even to spruce it up with energy-saving window quilts and newly painted walls -- the life was leaking out. Finally the one remaining Worker said she couldn't do it anymore. I understood. I couldn't do it alone, either.

I could write about the disappointments -- our overextending by acquiring too much land for a garden

without finding people to do the digging; the "Catholic Shirkers" who were long on ideals and dreams but short on energy; the failures in building community. I could write about the difficulties in trying to live as personalists in an imperfect world. What do you do, for instance, when someone insists on smoking on the second floor of a 120-year-old house, in clear defiance of what passes for house rules? What do you do when you fail to bridge generations and build community, when endless house meetings to practice nonviolent communication don't work? What do you do when you host a program and nobody comes?

But instead of whining, in this eulogy for a Catholic Worker house of hospitality that lived and then died, I'll tell stories. And perhaps in telling them, I'll come to understand.

Endings have beginnings. The house began in 1996 as the Mustard Seed Catholic Worker, with three of us -- Sr. Leona Sullivan, the late Jeannine Coallier and myself -- welcoming women and children into the house and into our lives. Tragically, Jeannine died of cancer in 1999. A year later her sister Maureen came to the community and a year after that, Leona and Maureen moved to another house about a mile away, where they do long-term work with women and children but no longer use the Catholic Worker name.

I stayed in the century-old home on Holland Avenue and was joined by Renaye Fewless, who had recently graduated from Saginaw Valley State University. She had learned from the best -- the Los Angeles Catholic Worker -- and the two of us became what we sardonically call "the holy founders" of a new Catholic Worker, named after Jeannine in hope that we could emulate her compassion and nonviolence.



Friends joined us and there were three lively years of Catholic

Worker life. Then I left to be with grandchildren in Chicago, and later Renaye returned to her family and farm in Tustin, Mich. There she follows her calling to work with battered women and to raise her son, now 4 years old. We still volunteer on the board that makes long-term decisions, but for the last six years, it's mainly in the memories that we've been connected to the Jeannine House.

We remember our big dog, Buddha, who in his good years was a wonderful Catholic Worker. When a guest came from especially traumatic circumstances, often the only connection she could make was with Buddha. His gentleness would comfort her and healing would begin.

We remember the large garden plot, five city lots that we named the Buddha Garden. When Renaye was at the house, it was bountiful, and she'd ride the streets in a multi-paniered bike, giving away produce. Later it became a burden, and in the last years it lay fallow, good land wasted in a neighborhood with few sources of fresh food.

We remember protesting war and injustice, especially during the first days of this latest Iraq war when we held vigil around the clock. Standing silently in black with our signs and candles, we mourned the victims on both sides. People stopped by with coffee and mittens and some joined the protest, but often there were only two or three of us, lonely in the cold.

We gave kid-centered parties, including a haunted house one Halloween, where I popped out of the bathtub wearing a scary mask. We had picnics on Ojibway Island, Food Not Bombs at St. Vincent Park, and toga parties on New Year's Eve, with the babies wearing pillow cases.

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We dined as a family every night and could always count on Kathryn and Joe Muenzer to bring dinner on Tuesday. On birthdays, we'd have an ice-cream cake and a prayer circle, with everyone thanking God for a special quality the honoree had. We organized "Clarifications of Thought," with Mass and potluck and a guest speaker who was sometimes a visiting Catholic Worker.

We remember, too, traumatic times with guests, sometimes because they'd be too mentally ill for us to handle. One summer a very refined woman barricaded herself in the downstairs bedroom and refused to leave. When we finally got her out, she walked defiantly down the street. That night the police found her asleep under a bush and were able to get her the help she needed, help we couldn't give.

We lived with good mothers and not-so-good mothers, with babies born to mothers who themselves hadn't been nurtured. One holiday season Christine Genualdi, our youngest Worker, sewed baby slings for the new mothers in the house. Four-year-old Akeem asked her to make him one so his mother could carry him! We lived with single women who couldn't stay away from crack or alcohol and had to be asked to leave, and with women who were able to find new lives for themselves after a period of peace in the Jeannine House.

Jude Thompson, the last Worker at the house, says that what drew her was the integrity of the life. That's what drew me, too, the fact that for the first time in my life, my insides and outsides matched and I felt cohesive. And now it's over, for me and for this particular Worker incarnation. It failed. I failed.

We're afraid to say "failure" today, but Catholic Worker cofounder Dorothy Day used it frequently, especially in her recently published diaries. Instead, we talk of "issues" or "moving on." I moved on, and so did Renaye. Many Catholic Worker communities today are more intentional than ours was, seeking to ensure the continuity we lacked by asking people for definite commitments. We didn't even ask ourselves for long-term commitments, so I have to count that as failure.

Another failure I must own is what cofounder Peter Maurin called "insufficient indoctrination." He warned about people plunging into action without full understanding. Renaye and I didn't spend enough time educating those who joined us. We didn't talk enough about the Catholic Worker Weltanschauung, that comprehensive view of life that's so hard to explain. We didn't insist on the reading and the talking that should go into building community. We didn't seek a shared spiritual life. So Dorothy and Peter's vision wasn't passed on but rather a more self-centered anarchistic lifestyle that didn't have the depth to survive.

In a January 1954 essay, Dorothy reflected on the ways her community had failed to live Maurin's vision. She concludes, "I am not much concerned. I think that such failures are inseparable to a work of this kind, and necessary for our growth in holiness." As I grapple with the idea of failure, a book called *The Spirituality of Imperfection* reminds me over and over that one cannot come to holiness without first recognizing one's darkness and culpability. So in this essay I take responsibility for closing the house, for ending the Catholic Worker ministry in Saginaw. Perhaps someday I will grow spiritually enough to say, "Thank you, God," not only for the wonderful life that was the Jeannine House but also for its ending.

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