

MANNA *in the wilderness*

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The Newsletter of the Las Vegas Catholic Worker

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Together We Find the Courage to Continue

by Julia Occhiogrosso

She greets me with a smile and embrace, her broad shoulders and stout frame conveying her steady strength. Her youthful cheer seems out of sync with the contours of grief encircling her eyes. “Buenos dias!” she exclaims as she helps unload the food boxes I am delivering. “Buenos dias,” I reply.

I first met Maria and her young son when we started our garden and invited families in the neighborhood to help. It was precious to watch her tender interactions with him as she helped him plant tiny seeds in the soil. They shared a reciprocal bond of love that I’ve observed consistently among her and her family over the last five years.

One day, two years ago, when I arrived to find her smile displaced by tears, my heart ached for her sorrow. She shared that her husband who was working, sorting through trash at the recycling yard, suffered a heart attack and fell to his death.

That afternoon our words were replaced by the silence of tears cradled in an embrace. These grief-filled embraces became a ritual sharing for a number of months until Maria’s smile began to return. She became my assistant helping me communicate with the other families in her apartment complex and introducing me to families she thought also needed some help.

Since the pandemic, we call the families before we arrive. We arrange to put the boxes on the sidewalk as the adults respectfully keep their distance and come to retrieve the food after we move away. This last month I called, but Maria did not answer. I stopped by and knocked, Maria’s adult daughter answered. She told me that Maria was in bed. I asked if she was sick and the daughter informed me, no, but just that night before, Maria’s father and brother died from COVID-19. Her daughter said Maria was too sad to get out of bed and had asked her daughter to bring the food boxes to her grandmother.

I do not know much about Maria’s life before her family moved into the tiny rooms in a run-down apartment complex a few blocks from the Catholic Worker house. As I have gotten to know her I have been moved by her perseverance and grace in facing the particular toils and hardships borne out of poverty.

Thank you for supporting our work which allows me the privilege of accompanying and learning from people like Maria.

Your financial support sustains our projects.



ARTWORK
BY CHRISTA
OCCHIOGROSSO

Donation Information

Checks: Please make checks payable to “Las Vegas Catholic Worker” and send to:
Las Vegas Catholic Worker
500 W. Van Buren Ave.
Las Vegas, NV 89106-3039

PayPal Giving Fund: <http://lvcw.org/giving>
Pay Pal will add 1% to donations made until Dec. 31, 2020 (with no fees).

Credit Card Donations: <http://lvcw.org/donate>

Encampment Raided, 26 Huts Destroyed

by Julia Occhiogrosso

In 1989, Franciscan Fr. Louis Vitale and I along with two other volunteers were arrested for sitting in front of a bulldozer set on demolishing an organized homeless encampment by the railroad tracks behind the former Salvation Army.

Las Vegas and North Las Vegas city governments commissioned their Homeless Response team, the Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT), Metro Police, and North Las Vegas Police to remove a homeless encampment on the cold, pre-dawn morning of November 30, 2020. Among twenty-six donated, tiny huts, formerly houseless people had finally found a reprieve from the harsh exposure of sleeping out on the streets. Rousing residents from sleep, the police threatened arrest for trespass, allowing just five minutes to vacate. Forced onto the street, the residents watched as their possessions, tents, and huts were bulldozed.

It's heart-wrenching when natural disasters like fires force people to evacuate their homes and watch powerlessly as everything that is precious to them is destroyed. When our elected officials, whose job is to foster and care for the common good, employed a strategy that disregarded the dignity and well-being of their most marginalized citizens, they were responsible for causing human tragedy equivalent to, or perhaps worse than the



On Nov. 30th at 6 a.m., in 40° weather, homeless residents were given five minutes to get out or be arrested for trespassing. Everything was demolished, including 26 huts built by volunteers. Two huts were funded by the Las Vegas Catholic Worker.



Before: Huts erected at the encampment on City of North Las Vegas land featured a locking door, a window in the rear and insulated walls. All were destroyed.

destructive forces of nature.

While natural disasters are random and unpredictable, razing the encampment was deliberate and insensitive. Policymakers had the power and opportunity to choose alternative means to prevent this devastating loss yet they intentionally caused it.

During COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recommended maintaining encampments (unless residents are moved to motels or apartments) while providing toilets and hand-washing stations (which the City of North Las Vegas initially did). It is clear that governmental bodies are still stuck using tired strategies that are costly and ineffective. Innovation is lacking because they continue to misidentify the cause. The problem is not public defecation, trash, or even homeless encampments. These are only symptoms.

The real issue is many years of failing to invest in affordable low-income housing and permanent housing for the chronically homeless.

City officials are not the only entities to hold accountable for this failure. As a homeless advocate I recognize that efforts to call for permanent housing have been fragmented and executed in fits and starts, usually in response to a catalytic event like the recent destruction of this encampment.

With the eviction moratorium fast approaching its end, the numbers of homeless are sure to increase. It is way past the time for serious conversations focused on real and humane solutions to the housing crisis. Instead of the polarized conversations that define today's political discourse and result in nothing but stalemates as the poor continue to suffer, we need a forum of participants and stakeholders ready to listen and learn from each other, motivated by an authentic desire for resolutions.

Government officials need to welcome the insight of those who work closely with those on the streets. Homeless advocates have to acknowledge the complexities of the issues and be willing to hear the challenges that officials have in finding public support and funds for housing. Homeless or formerly homeless persons should also be part of these conversations.

These conversations must be motivated

by compassion for the poor and for each other as we navigate the painful terrain of homelessness in search of answers.

As I sat in front of that bulldozer over thirty years ago, I noticed a bible sticking out from the rubble in front of me. Fr. Louis handed it to me and we read aloud from Matthew 25, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, a stranger and welcome you in...?"



Las Vegas Catholic Worker community member Robert Majors along with volunteers from Food Not Bombs helped build all 26 Conestoga Huts for the homeless that were destroyed. The huts were built for about \$600 each.

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

The Catholic Church has been a leading proponent of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which 122 states, including the Vatican, voted to adopt at the United Nations in July 2017. On Oct. 24, 2020, the treaty reached the required ratification by 50 states. On Jan. 22, 2021, the treaty will enter into force, cementing a categorical ban on nuclear weapons, 75-years after their first use.

CLOSED

Dec. 26, 2020 - Jan. 2, 2021

PLEASE JOIN US COVID-19 Procedures:

Call or e-mail to schedule your volunteer morning. Please do not just show up. Do wear a mask.
To Schedule: (702) 647-0728 or mail@lvcw.org

Thurs.-Sat., 6:00 a.m.

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.

Thurs.-Sat., 7:00 a.m.

"To-go" Meals served to 150-200 poor & homeless people.

Wednesday, 11:30 a.m.:

50 lunches taken to the homeless.

Third Sat. of the month:

Deliver food boxes to homes in need.

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