

Julie's Story

Tonight the temperature reads -11c and before the sun comes up tomorrow, the weather report forecasts it will be -22c in Toronto. Imagine you don't feel safe anywhere, you don't have a home, and life is a very harsh cruel reality that you will have to experience daily. That's what our homeless sisters and brothers know as their daily existence. Let me tell you about one such sister who called our streets her home.

Some six years ago, Julie found herself spending her nights sleeping in a rather well off neighbourhood in Toronto. No she wasn't originally from the area, but it seemed safe and she had the sense that few people would bother her as she "slept" in a bus shelter on Leslie Street near St. Bonaventure Church. In fact, truth be told - people avoided contact with her because she was homeless and was a very different type of woman - she had mental health problems. On that night in January 2000, the weather was bitterly cold as she attempted to sleep with her thread-bare blanket and newspapers as her bedding on the bench in the bus shelter.

"During the 1960's and 1970's authorities all over North America opened up the doors of mental institutions and moved their inhabitants into 'the community.'

The motives were compassionate, the results unspeakably cruel. For many mentally ill people in Canadian cities today, 'the community' means a dank rooming house, a crowded hostel or a windswept street corner."

*Editorial in The Globe and Mail.
"Have we abandoned the mentally ill?"
November 17, 1997*

Somewhere in the middle of the night, a police car stopped and the police woke Julie. They offered her a ride to a city shelter. She refused and left "her" shelter until the police moved on. Then Julie returned to her familiar surroundings to try to

continue her rest. Sometime later, a second police cruiser stopped and this time the constables realized that Julie was indeed needing a safer, warmer place to be taken to; however, these constables took her to a nearby hospital because they feared that she was suffering from exposure to the winter elements. They brought her to the emergency room. She was assessed and eventually admitted to the hospital for what were the last few hours of her life. The attending physician offered a diagnosis that began with hypothermia, malnutrition, and then possible pneumonia,

to begin a litany of medical conditions that were this woman's sufferings. Julie's last hours were unlike many of the others that she had called life; they were filled with warmth, care, and the forgotten feeling of the human touch.

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Greetings from the Franciscan Friars in Canada. Thank you for welcoming us into your home. We consider you to be part of our family. Some of you may remember me as one of the former editors of Companion Magazine.

Today I am the pastor of the Franciscan Church of St. Bonaventure in Toronto and write a monthly column in the Messenger of St. Anthony. I've been asked to help with this month's edition of The Franciscan.

The first thing I would like to share with you is the important and courageous move that Friar Ed Debono has made by accepting a new position as a guide at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy. The church of St. Francis is an important gathering place for so many young people. The Franciscans make it a point to have friars available to share with them the spirit of St. Francis. You can imagine that it is a bold move for a friar to travel to another country, learn a new language and begin a whole new ministry in his senior years when others of the same age are contemplating the shores of Florida! We are very proud of Friar Ed for his gift of self.

In this issue of The Franciscan we look at a new project the Friars in Canada have begun called St. Clare Inn. This initiative to assist homeless women began with Friar Phil Kelly and Friar David Collins along with a group of dedicated men and women. Along the way Friars David Sucking, Maurice Richard, Dominic McGee have provided their leadership. Today Friar Tom Purcell is the executive director of St. Clare Inn and is making the dream a reality. It's a good news story that I am sure you'll want to hear about.


Fraternally,

Friar Rick Riccioli *OFM Conv.*

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Julie never left the hospital, never returned to her beloved bus shelter, and never saw those beautiful houses she only viewed from the exterior. She died much as she had lived most of her adult life, alone and fearful because the world she experienced was one that was harsh, uncaring, and without any meaningful human contact. She was one of our under-served sisters or brothers who are part of the vast multitude of persons who call our streets, parks, and deserted buildings their place or residence - their home - our invisible poor.

Homelessness is at epidemic proportions in our world. We may think of this problem as one that affects only peoples in Africa and Asia or what we call "a third world problem," but in fact, it has become a reality that affects countless tens of thousands of our sisters and brothers in North America. It is a problem that is not only found in our urban centres, but one that lives in the suburbs as well as in our rural countryside. Our sisters and brothers find themselves without the possibility of maintaining a roof over their heads and safe environment to call home. This reality has many origins. Some are due to shifts in economy, i.e., poverty and lack of affordable housing, others may be due to addictive behaviour, and still for others the challenge of mental health issues and domestic, physical, and sexual abuse. However, the result is the same. Too many of our sisters and brothers are without the warmth and safety of a home.

The typical face of the homeless person does not live up to what may be the stereotype; we might think: male, single, alcoholic and/or drug addict. The reality confronting us today is that the face of the homeless is now coloured more dramatically by the ever growing number of youth and families. Among the vast number of the new homeless, there is a portion that not only find themselves homeless, but also suffering from a mental illness or possible multiple illnesses. Statistics tell us that about 33 percent of single men who are homeless suffer with mental health issues while some 75 percent of single homeless women suffer the same affliction. A stable environment is important for all human growth and interaction; for those suffering with mental illness issues, it is essential for health. Without this basic need being met, those enduring mental illness and homelessness are incapable of regaining health, wholeness, and holiness within our society. 

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St. Clare Inn



St. Clare Inn.

Where's the St. Clare Inn? What is this little semi-detached? How did it come to be an Inn and why St. Clare? All of these are great questions and hopefully as you read you'll discover the answers and the truth that underlies the reality and the dream.

The first article of this newsletter outlines the need in our country to provide places where homeless people may find a safe refuge, a stable environment. The St. Clare Inn, East York – Toronto, Ontario is such a place. It has been developed by the Friars and a group of dedicated lay women and men, the Friends of St. Francis, to provide transitional housing for women who have been homeless and have mental health issues.

The place is a rented semi-detached building, some 19' by 39' - a two story edifice that provides a safe environment for three women. It's rented because we had a difficult time finding a place we could afford. Yes, it's small too. However, we see this as a humble beginning much like Francis of Assisi and his dream.


Why are we calling this house an Inn? Well, the nature of an Inn is a respite where travelers on the journey of life might find suitable housing for a necessary time. As an Inn, we provide a clean comfortable space for each woman calling this place her transitional home while sharing the common living space with the other women on a similar journey. It's not viewed as a boarding house. It is a place where the women break bread together each evening by preparing and eating dinner together.

During these meals, the ladies are able to share their daily adventures and struggles. We believe that the Inn provides an environment where each woman will continue to develop her own independent skills while growing not only in her appreciation for the need of interdependent life skills but also an integration of these skills into her life.

And you may ask, why St. Clare Inn? St. Clare of Assisi was not only a follower of St. Francis of Assisi, but was, and is, the female counter part of Francis as founder of the Franciscan movement. She was a follower, a friend, and a confidant of the little poor man of Assisi.

Clare embraced the life of the brothers of Francis, and engendered this life in such a way that women throughout history might live the ideals of the gospel after the pattern of Francis. In doing so, she offered her own witness and vision to this way of life. Clare welcomed each new sister who wished to follow Jesus in this lifestyle as an equal member of the sisterhood she was joining. This was revolutionary for the understanding of life and the role of women within the medieval world. Clare referred to each sister as *lady*. It was a title of reverence and respect for the women she encountered and with whom she shared the Franciscan life.

We see Clare's model of love and reverence for our sisters as key to life at the Inn. Each woman who calls the Inn her home is a gift from God, and thus deserves the respect and dignity that is given to her by God.

We are committed to caring for these ladies and women, our sisters, and calling each to value her gift of life while respecting the gift of life of the other ladies they encounter at the Inn. 



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Dear Friend,

It is the time of year when we most think of those less fortunate that are “out in the cold” and without shelter, companionship and care.

The Friends of Saint Francis have raised enough funds to rent a home, which we have now secured in downtown Toronto. It is called the St. Clare Inn, and it is a place of hope, renewal, and peace. Residents will be full participants in the upkeep of the home as a first important step to re-building their lives.

As we have moved forward we have had to address some practical matters: renovations to create a home-like environment, furnishings, paying for heat and hydro and food. Importantly, we also needed to hire an on-site manager who can provide the care and compassion on a one-on-one basis for the ladies living at the Inn.

Our immediate goal now is to raise an additional \$50,000 to keep the doors to the St. Clare Inn open. Your gift could literally bring a woman with monumental life struggles to her feet again, and into the caring hands at the St. Clare Inn. This edition of the The Franciscan is in support of The Friends of St. Francis and the St. Clare Inn project. We are grateful for your generosity.

On behalf of the Franciscan Friars and the Friends of St. Francis, we wish you peace and all good things.

Thank you for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Bill Etzkorn, MD." The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr Bill Etzkorn, MD
Chair, Friends of Saint Francis

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Friar Tom". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Friar Tom Purcell, OFM Conv.
Executive Director, St. Clare Inn



Dr Bill Etzkorn assembling a bed at the Inn



She
freely stretched out her hand to the poor
and satisfied the needs of many
out of the abundance of
her house.

Taken from The Legend of St. Clare by Thomas of Celano

Visit the Conventual Franciscan website at: www.franciscans.org

