

Rest For The Weary

*Christ House offers a healing
community for
the homeless*

by JOYCE HOLLYDAY

IT WAS BEGINNING to look, and sound, and feel a lot like Christmas in the capital city. Carols wafted through the cold night air, while tourists bundled in thick, warm clothes scurried to get a look at the national Christmas tree ablaze with lights, all within view of the White House.

Just around the corner from this public gala, invisible to carolers and spectators, five men huddled around a steam grate, trying to take the edge off the bitter cold. One had been hoarse for six months; another had a terrible cough; a third suffered third-degree burns that had become infected, received from the steam that belched out of the grate.

A van pulled up, and Dr. Janelle Goetcheus got out. She feared a malignancy as cause of the first man's hoarseness. The second had pneumonia. She put a stethoscope to his chest to check his lungs. But she was distracted for a moment by the Christmas music, the lights on the huge Christmas tree, and the flow of tourists. The poignancy and paradox of the scene overtook her, and a voice inside of her screamed, "God, there's something all wrong and mixed up here!"

Indeed there is something wrong in the capital city. Here the heating ducts of the nation's great halls of power provide scant survival for those who have no power. Here hands that rub themselves raw for warmth exist in stark contrast to hands that shape the nation and the world.

There are two cities in Washington, D.C., and the two have little connection or understanding of each other. Even for those of us who live in the middle, life on the streets is hard to comprehend. As Janelle has put it, "To be gravely ill and seriously impaired is devastating. To be gravely ill and seriously impaired and homeless is beyond the realm of imagination."

Yet she has chosen not only to imagine the life of the homeless sick, but to see and feel and share it. She has ventured into a world where there are few maps or guideposts, choosing as daily life what others would like to leave safely and comfortably to the realm of imagination.

JANELLE GOETCHEUS ARRIVED IN Washington, D.C., in 1976 to work at Columbia Road Health Services, an inner-city health clinic and ministry of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour. Every day she walked by an abandoned, trash-filled building near the clinic. A number of homeless people slept out on its front steps, and in bitterly cold weather they sometimes went inside to sleep, starting fires to keep warm.

One day Janelle and Judi Floyd, a nurse practitioner at Columbia Road Health Services and a member of Sojourners Com-



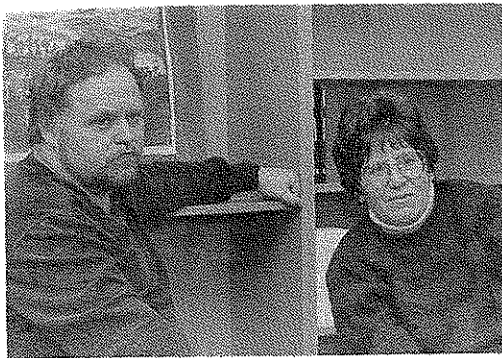
At left, "The Servant Christ" outside Christ House reflects the home's healing welcome.

munity, stopped in front of the building after work. Together they had a sense that somehow the building might be used for good and that it might affect the lives of the homeless. They stood in silence, praying that they might listen to whatever God had in mind.

Janelle soon began offering medical treatment at SOME (So Others Might Eat), a downtown soup kitchen serving 600 to 800 homeless people every day. Many of her patients came with minor ailments, only to return a week later with major health problems.

Someone who came one day with a cold would go back on the streets to face bad weather and inadequate rest, returning to SOME a week later with pneumonia. Many of her patients had peripheral vascular disease, a condition in which blood pooled in their legs and feet as a result of being on their feet so much; any break in the skin—a cut or insect bite—easily got infected and created an ulcer. Because they had no place to rest, elevate their feet, and allow the ulcers to heal, some patients who came with ulcers returned later requiring amputation of limbs.

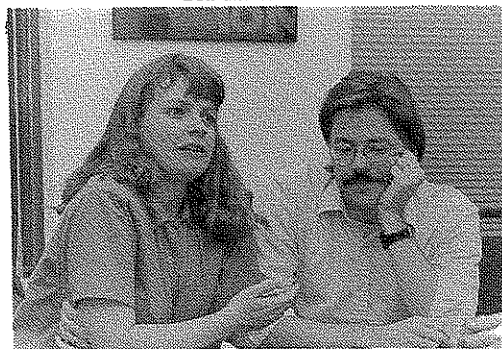
Janelle discovered that hospitals tended to discharge uninsured patients more quickly, meaning that homeless people were often back out on the streets soon after major surgery, having no home to go to in which to recuperate. And several



Allen and Janelle Goetcheus



Don and Ellen Martin



Lorrie and David Moore



Sisters Loreta Jordan and Mary Louise Norpel



Marja and David Hilfiker

patients who were receiving chemotherapy for cancer spent their days back and forth between an overnight shelter and a hospital for treatment.

As the years went by, Janelle found it harder and harder to send people back out to the shelters or on to the streets. She began to dream of a place where the homeless sick could rest and recover, a temporary home for those too sick to be on the streets but not sick enough to be in a hospital. Her resolve was strengthened when a man she had seen at the clinic one snowy afternoon was found frozen to death in a telephone booth the next day.

But there was no money for such a place, and the task of creating such a home seemed overwhelming. She eventually shared her vision with Gordon Cosby, pastor of Church of the Saviour. Gordon in turn shared it with a woman who decided to give a gift of \$2.5 million for the purchase of a building, renovation costs, and the first months of operation.

Janelle remembered her moment of prayer years before at the abandoned building. She went there again and saw a vision of a place transformed, where the homeless no longer huddled around fires but were welcomed into the warmth of Christ House.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE IN 1985, Christ House received its first guest. He was brought from SOME, where he had shown up with congestive heart failure. Hearts were warmed and encouraged all over Christ House that night as the guest was welcomed and the staff began to touch a dream that had taken years to be born.

As more staff members and beds were added, Christ House received more guests, and before long the demand for beds exceeded the availability. Christ House now has room for 34 guests, providing them round-the-clock care and an environment where healing can take place. It is the only facility of its kind in the country, offering, as Christ House nurse Sister Lenora Benda describes it, "a home for people to recover when they don't have a home."

Guests have ranged in age from 18 to 88, spending an average of a month at Christ House. Each guest receives care from a team that includes a physician, a nurse, a social worker, and a volunteer coordinator. The services of a psychiatrist are available to the many guests who suffer with mental illness in addition to their physical ailments, and a nutritionist is also on staff.

An enclosed sun porch provides warmth and a view year-round, the dining room serves meals family style, and a whirlpool eases tired and ailing limbs. Activities ranging from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to poetry workshops encourage guests to talk about their present situation and dream of a different future for themselves.

Christ House also houses the Washington office of the Health Care for the Home-

less Project, a pilot health program begun nationally in 19 cities. This makes Christ House a base for outreach to all the "homes" of the homeless—the clinics, the shelters, and the streets.

EVERY EVENING A VAN LEAVES from Christ House and heads in the direction of the White House, but it stops just short of the president's palace in the park across the street. It arrives just after a food wagon that gives out soup to the large group of homeless people who live in the park, and as it pulls up they form a line for medical care.

Kathy Henry, a physician's assistant recently arrived in Washington, makes the van run every weeknight. Tonight she is joined by Janelle. Many of the ailments they treat are related to exposure to the elements, poor nutrition, and inadequate rest, in some cases compounded by alcoholism and severe mental illness.

Vitamins are given out liberally, and medication is dispensed for sinus trouble, coughs, infections, and a myriad of foot problems. A mentally ill woman who pushes two life-size plastic dolls in a stroller asks for help in understanding instructions she was given at a clinic. Spotlights highlighting the fountain on the front lawn of the White House form a back-

'A Gift To My Soul'



"Someone may come to me with a sore throat, and that is the very least of all that they are going to have to face that day—what they

have to face in terms of living in a shelter, figuring out where they are going to eat, and dealing with basic issues about how they are going to stay alive. And all I have to offer is the time I can be with them when they come to see me.

"But I find that just being with them is a gift to my soul. I feel a deep gratitude for what they share with me. "That doesn't mean I don't ache. My inner self just aches when I come out of a shelter. But in the midst of the aching, I know that it is still good to be there. And I want to be there.

"Certainly to do this work on one's own would be very difficult. But I am with others who share the same experiences, and we can talk together about the things that have happened in a day, and pray and laugh together. That's part of what gives me joy.

"But what gives me deepest joy is the sense that I'm trying to listen to God and be obedient to what God is asking. As much as I can understand it, I believe that at this point in my life this is what I need to be doing."

—Janelle Goetcheus

drop as twilight descends on the park.

Kindness on the part of Kathy and Janelle marks every interaction. On this cold night Janelle takes the time to rub and breathe on her stethoscope to warm it up before placing it against a coughing man's chest. Kathy hands over her sweat-shirt to a man who has no coat. There are certainly risks in their work—risks of disease and of violence—but they are granted respect for their kindness and speak mostly in terms of gratitude for the gifts the work offers them.

During the coldest weather, many of the park residents will retreat to the steam grates along the city's streets. Some are already there, and Janelle and Kathy take the van to particular ones to see if the people there have any needs, in one case to check a tuberculosis skin test they had administered earlier in the week. For those who do not take to the grates, sometimes the only protection from chilling wind is huddling under cardboard, and frostbite is common.

In a downtown park they see Rachel, a 57-year-old woman, and ask her if she needs anything. She says she thinks she's OK but tells about being raped in an alley a few nights before—she was there in a dark, hidden corner because all the downtown public restrooms close at midnight. A relative is afraid she may have contracted AIDS, but Rachel explains that the rapist looked clean-cut and told her he had just gotten out of jail and she was sure "they make them take baths in jail."

Pointing across the street, Rachel expresses her concern for all the people who have no place to sleep since the city put up a chain-link fence to keep them out of a subway station where they stayed to keep warm. She is also concerned about Robert, who she hasn't seen around in the park for awhile. Exactly a year ago on a bitterly cold night, he had tried to comfort an ailing woman in an alley, and she froze to death in his arms. Rachel guesses he is just off somewhere thinking about it. "He'll be back," she says. Janelle decides this is not the time to tell Rachel what she knows about Robert's whereabouts.

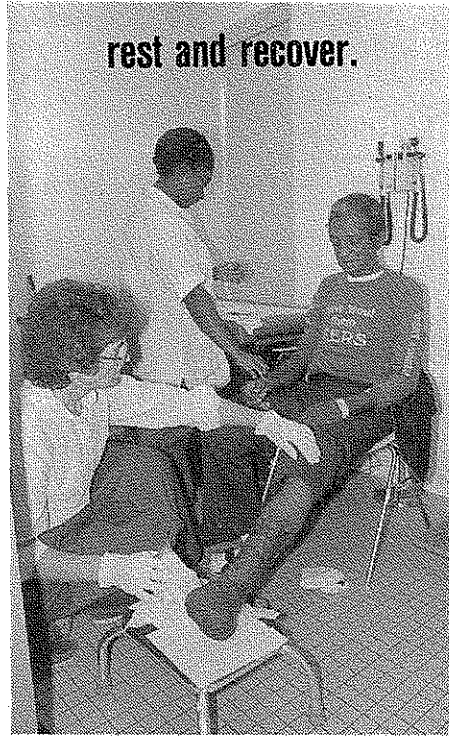
THE CAR OF RONIE DANIELS, a Benedictine sister and registered nurse, is a roving outreach center. She keeps it stocked with sweaters, soap, medical dressings, cans of juice, peanut butter crackers, and the ever-present blood pressure cuff. She also seems to have an inside line on an endless supply of sleeping bags, explaining, "I beg for them."

She visits several shelters. In each the scene is more or less the same—cots jammed against each other in rooms, along hallways, up and down stairwells. In one the bathroom is flooded; in others running water is non-existent, cold, or in one shelter scalding hot for only one hour every evening. In most, residents must be out on

JANELLE BEGAN

to dream of a place where
the homeless sick could

rest and recover.



Sister Lenora Benda changes a guest's dressing.

the street by 7 o'clock every morning, and getting a meal requires a long walk across town.

Ronie sets herself up in a makeshift examining room. An alcoholic pleads for help, saying, "I don't want to kill myself." He needs a pain reliever for sore joints, and she carefully chooses one that will not tear up the stomach lining of a patient who drinks heavily.

The next patient has tightly wrapped an elastic bandage around his thigh to cut off circulation to his leg. Ronie comments later, "It's very disturbing that they have to resort to self-inflicted ailments to stay in and get some rest."

One man appears to have been beaten, but he says the welts on his back came from scratching lice he picked up in the shelter. A street vendor comes with recurring abscesses, and Ronie fears a diagnosis of leukemia or AIDS; he says that when he gets himself together, he'll give a donation to the Health Care for the Homeless Project: "You people do good work. You have love and compassion."

An older man shuffles in, scared and broken, weary because he can't sleep with the noise and stress in the shelter and afraid to spend another night there. He puts his head in his hands and says in a childlike whisper, "I just can't take it," as Ronie gives him some medication for sei-

zures and makes a note to check if there's a bed in a quieter shelter.

A young Vietnam veteran wants a pain reliever but confesses, when asked by Ronie, that he has been drinking. "You see, I couldn't get any cough medicine, and I knew alcohol was a main ingredient of it, so I drank beer," he says with a grin. "Just playing my own doctor."

He is in a methadone treatment program to get him off his heroin addiction. "It started in Vietnam," he explained. "The only way to escape the fear of death was to get high. They gave us morphine in our backpacks in case we got shot and needed it for the pain. I started with that."

TODAY'S SUPPLY OF RONIE'S sleeping bags goes to a group of homeless people who live together under the Francis Scott Key Bridge in the wealthy Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. She discovered them shortly after she arrived in the city in mid-September. She approached them cautiously and said simply, "I'm a nurse," offering help to anyone who needed it.

She continues to stop by regularly to check on them. Today several of the group come out from under the bridge as they see her approach. She hands over the sleeping bags, and the recipients agree that the warmest one should go to an elderly, sick man with them. As she leaves, Ronie gives the group a tin of homemade cookies, explaining later, "They almost never get cookies."

She has tried to get some of them to get medical care, others to go through alcohol detoxification. But their deep fear of institutions and lines of people at the clinics has made such efforts difficult. Her gentle persistence has paid off, however, in the case of Bobby Boykin, who is now receiving treatment at Christ House for an arthritis-like disease that has made it impossible for him to hold a job.

Bobby later explained that he and the others under the bridge "live like a family and watch out for each other." The ones who are healthiest walk to the back doors of Georgetown restaurants to beg for food to take back to the group. He sleeps on an old mattress which he put up on the girders under the bridge so that no one will bother him.

But the community under the bridge is increasingly being bothered by other Georgetown residents who do not want their presence. The city recently constructed a tall chain-link fence around the park near the bridge to keep them out, and the police have begun arriving in the middle of the night, shining flashlights on them and running them out.

The community under the bridge stands as a sign of the moral failure of Georgetown, and Washington, D.C., and the nation to make a place for their most broken citizens. And wherever such a sign stands as a barb in the wealthy conscience, forces are

marshaled to push away, keep out, and make invisible the people whose destitution lays out the judgment. How ironic that a memorial to the creator of "the land of the free and the home of the brave" harbors those who brave society's abuse and are allowed no home.

On the way back to Christ House, Ronie talks about how good it is to be able always to return to Christ House "where people know what you are doing, listen, and care." She also talks about the "pain beyond comprehension" she sees every day. The arms, legs, and feet of the homeless take a constant beating from the elements. But even stronger is the beating that comes from constant rejection and a life lived without home, family, or security. Many people wind up on the streets due to a history of neglect or abuse that has spanned generations.

"If I had to live under these conditions, I would probably be a paranoid schizophrenic, too," she muses, "and if alcohol was available to dull the pain, I would probably use it. Sometimes a psychotic, fantasy world or a shot of relief from alcohol is simply a way of survival."

Ronie reflects on her desire to bring the light of God to the pain and desperation she sees, but adds, "Some of these people never had anyone love them; it's hard for them to believe in a God who loves them." She desperately wants the situation in the shelters and on the streets to get better: "Maybe if enough of us hold enough hands, allow enough people to cry on our shoulders, and make enough noise with the right authorities, it will change."

JUST OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR OF

Christ House is a life-size bronze sculpture called "The Servant Christ" by Jimilu Mason, a member of Church of the Saviour. The kneeling Christ holds a basin filled with water, where passersby often drop coins or flowers. The gesture of the figure is one of invitation, a reminder that Christ served his disciples by washing their feet and invited them to do the same to one another. What a comfort that statue is to the sore, bruised, calloused, and frostbitten feet that pass by it on their way into Christ House.

Those feet are served in a particularly gentle way by Don Martin, a physician who gave up a very lucrative 19-year-old private practice in Hagerstown, Maryland, to come to Christ House. Teaching an adult Sunday school class on the Sermon on the Mount with his wife, Ellen, brought them to a new understanding of their relationship to the poor.

They met Janelle at a Church of the Saviour workshop and found out that she was trying to cover three different health services in Washington. She asked if they knew any physicians who could come and help, and Don said no, but offered a day a week of his time. The commute from Hagerstown to Washington soon got very tiresome, and he told Janelle he needed to stop and think about it. Don and Janelle both felt at the time that that was the last they would see of him in Washington.

But during a retreat, Don and Ellen got a clear sense that they needed to sell their large house and their real estate properties and move into inner-city Washington. Don felt that there were enough doctors around to cover his practice in Hagerstown but

realized "there was nobody standing in line to take care of the homeless."

At first no one came forward to take over the practice, but finally they just decided they needed to set a date for leaving and trust that something would work out. The very next day a physician called, explaining that he thought that for some reason God was calling him to go to Hagerstown. Don joined the Christ House staff, and Ellen is now the director of Columbia Road Health Services.

Lorrie and David Moore found a homeless person on their doorstep one day back in Bakersfield, California, while David was still in medical school. They found it difficult to talk with someone who had no family or job or future plans and who was reluctant to talk about his recent past.

They were struggling to find a way to learn to be friends with the poor when David read an interview with Janelle in *Sojourners* (see "Services of Healing," January 1985). He carried the interview around with him until he finally lost it, but figured out a way to write to her. Before long a huge U-Haul truck pulled up in front of Christ House, and Lorrie, David, and their three young children piled out.

David and Marja Hilfiker and their three children came from Minnesota, where Marja was teaching German and David worked as a physician at a local community clinic. Marja remembers one day standing in their Swiss-chalet-type house

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'Like Living With Family'

"AT ONE TIME I was living on the street, staying in abandoned houses. It was cold—real cold—sometimes 15 degrees. And I stayed balled up in the corner, because I didn't like the shelter.

"When I was at the shelter, I knew it wasn't me. It was so dirty, and people were going through stabbing people. When I was sleeping someone threw a bottle at my eye, and it got swollen. I was too scared to go to sleep, so I drank myself to sleep. The only way I could stay in that place was to stay drunk. I had no job and no money.

"I didn't have anyone I could talk to. And then Dr. Goetcheus came and wanted to help me. And she saved my life. If I hadn't come here [to Christ House] with her, I probably would have died in that shelter.

"I had a swollen liver, a broken wrist, and heart trouble. They took good care of me here. They gave me the attention nobody ever gave me in my life.

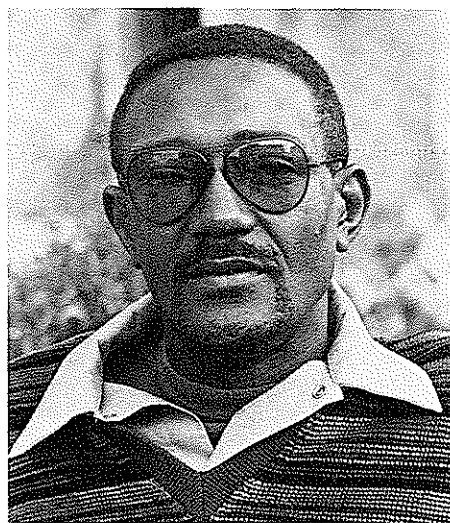
"I was here two to three weeks, and then

I got a room in a rooming house. I tried to work two jobs, because my day job didn't pay enough for a place to live. I thought I had it made. But just when you think you can do it yourself, you really can't.

"One night I went back to the shelter to drink with some friends. I ended up quitting both jobs. Dr. Goetcheus saw me again, and she was shocked at how I looked. She was so disappointed, I felt like crying. I had lost weight, and I was down there fighting, and my eyes were black and swollen up. It really hurts when somebody cares about you and they see you that way. I went to get my clothes and just started crying.

"I was kind of ashamed to come back up here, but Dr. Goetcheus told me don't feel like that. She said, 'Christ House is always open for you, Sylvester.'

"I've seen people come in here like they lost their last hope; and I've seen people walk out with a smile on their face. It's not all in the medicine, it's the way they [the



staff] treat you, and make you feel like part of society. I've never been to a place like this before in my life. They give you so much medical attention, and so much of their attention. And sometimes I wonder how, because they have families, too.

"I was kind of hot-headed, and I denied I was an alcoholic. But I finally said I think

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overlooking Lake Superior and saying to herself, "After one has two daughters and a son, and a cross-country ski trail starting at one's door, what more can one ask for?" But she soon began to feel that there was more.

David's practice included several remote areas and a reservation for Native Americans, and the work grew very demanding. He felt a need for a break, and the family lived for a year in Marja's hometown in Finland. Uncertain what to do next, they knew only that they wanted to work with the poor in a setting where their work, church, and community would all be one, where they had sisters and brothers with which to share their work and faith. David has joined the team of Christ House physicians, and Marja teaches literacy in the neighborhood and at Christ House.

Allen Goetcheus, a United Methodist pastor, serves as president of Christ House. He and Janelle moved from Indiana with their three now-teen-age children to Washington, D.C., after visiting and seeing how desperate the medical situation was for the poor, despite plans to accept what they considered an ideal invitation by the Methodist Mission Board to go to Indonesia.

Three Sisters of Notre Dame complete the Christ House permanent residential community. Mary Louise Norpel and Marcella Jordan both serve as social workers. Loreta Jordan, the volunteer coordinator, has received widespread acclaim for the dance contests, roof top cookouts, talent shows, and Halloween parties she has organized at Christ House; she will be sorely missed as she moves on to minister to women in need.

Mary Louise came from a ministry in Mexico, where she worked with Guatemalan refugees. Prompted by the others to mention her accomplishments, among which is a doctorate in religious studies, she ends the list with, "And Janelle is my doctor," to which Janelle replies with a laugh, "And she is my social worker."

ALL OF THE PERMANENT residents live on the third and fourth floors of Christ House. Janelle says they prayed and struggled over whether to live there or open up the space for more beds for homeless guests. But she has concluded that living with their families in Christ House is "one of the most significant things" they've done. "We didn't want to be just doctors," she explains. "We wanted to be with people in deeper ways. There's a different spirit here in this home, because it is our home, too, and we want it to be a good home for the guests." She adds, "I think the children are our best pastoral counselors."

Indeed the children, with a way that only children seem to have, have drawn out some of the most broken and withdrawn guests who have passed through Christ House. The sight of 8-year-old Kai Hilfiker arriving on the sun porch with a box of checkers has lifted many a spirit.

Lorrie tells the story of a man who had been doused with gasoline and set on fire by some teen-agers while he was sleeping on the streets. He came to Christ House bitter and angry after eight months in the hospital. All the medical attention in the world didn't do as much for him as the opportunity to buy 5-year-old Megan Moore

her favorite ice cream.

The adjustment to city living has not been easy for several of the community members. Lorrie and David worry sometimes that the children suffer from not having wide open spaces in which to play, but they also admit that the children consider the long hall between their apartments a big playroom, and the play and laughter are constant. Marja remembers hearing Kai tell a friend, "We live in this really big house, and I have four brothers," naming the boys in the other families. She believes the children have experienced a lot in the community that they could not have experienced anywhere else.

The work is not easy, and the fourth-floor chapel in Christ House gets a lot of use in the early morning hours as individuals go there to pray. They also depend on regular times of fellowship together—evening prayer, a Sunday night potluck meal and worship, a Friday afternoon "attitude adjustment hour" with co-workers over tea, quarterly retreats to the country, and the informal sharing of stories and hopes that happens all the time.

They see unspeakable tragedy every day, but they carry off their work with a remarkable sense of grace—and a well-honed sense of humor. They seem ready to laugh for hours together as they talk about the short-circuit in the fire alarm that sent them all—with children and guests in wheelchairs and on crutches—pouring out the doors several times in the first week. "It was good practice," they all agree.

Their commitment and exuberance have attracted people from all over the city to the life of Christ House. Members of local

I'll go into a program. I stayed 33 days, and it did me a lot of good. I don't drink anymore.

"I worked hard for that [program] certificate. I wanted to get it for Dr. Goetcheus, Sister Lenora, and Sister Mary Louise. I wanted it for myself, but I wanted it for them, too. I got that certificate for all of us.

"NOW I'VE BEEN living at Samaritan Inn [affiliated with Christ House] for two months. I work as a porter and gardener, a job I got through Jubilee Jobs. I'm trying to save money, while I try to make sure I keep my sobriety. Since I've been here, I got a tutor and now I can read. Through the help of Christ House, I may soon be getting my GED [high school equivalency diploma].

"Living in Samaritan Inn is like living at home with my family. Everyone is kind. We need more places like this that give a man an opportunity to come in and see what living's all about again. If you've been on the street a long time, you forget.

"I feel good, at home, safe—around a lot of people who care about each other. You have this fear in your heart sometimes, when you've been around people who are so nice and then you have to go out and face all those devils. But they tell you here that there's a way to get around it.

"I used to have a lot of self-pity. I guess I thought the world owed me something. I worried about where I'd sleep tonight, where I'd eat today, where I'd change clothes or take a shower. I used to pray to God, will he help me do this, and help me do that.

"Now I pray to thank God for the blessings he gave me. I thank God for good health and for Christ House and Samaritan Inn, for Lori [Samaritan Inn counselor] and Sister Lenora and Dr. Goetcheus. They're the main people in my life now—they and my 14-year-old son. They're in my prayers every night now.

"I know I'm still a spring chicken, and just because I have a certificate doesn't

mean I won't have a relapse. But I think as long as I stay in contact with people like these, I'll make it.

"Dr. Goetcheus and Sister Lenora saw it in me; they said, hey, this man is worth something. And they didn't give up on me.

"I think people look at me now as a man more than when I was on the street drunk. I know my son has a lot more respect for me now. Good things are happening in my life; if I lose now, I lose a lot.

"I just wish that there were more places like Samaritan Inn and Christ House; then we wouldn't need the shelters or have so many homeless out there on the street.

"They say there's a place in the world for everybody; I guess this was the place to change my life. Maybe God sent Dr. Goetcheus and Sister Lenora to me.

"Before I didn't know too many good people. I know a lot of good people now. These people will always be in my life. One way or another, these people will always be in my life."

—Sylvester Dean

churches cook meals, and volunteers such as Shirley Jones, a grandmother who works as much as 50 hours some weeks serving food and helping people who come off the streets for showers and clean clothes, contribute to the life-giving spirit of the house. In addition, beyond the walls of Christ House, a well-organized network coordinated by the Catholic archdiocese of Washington includes more than 200 medical specialists who donate as much as a day a week to offer free medical care for patients referred from Christ House and the clinics.

The volunteers are invaluable to the work. So are the donations that continue to come in. One generous financial gift brought Christ House into existence. Now it is a daily act of faith for the community to trust that the money will come in to meet the costs of ongoing medical care.

CHRIST HOUSE EXISTS TO provide a place for recovery. But beyond that there's the hope that guests will leave with a new sense of dignity and hope, be able to work and afford their own homes, or be placed in a permanent caring facility such as a nursing home if they cannot. Affiliated with Christ House are Samaritan Inns, small group homes that provide an intermediate step for those who no longer need the medical treatment at Christ House but are not yet ready to make it completely on their own. And Jubilee Jobs, another ministry of the Church of the Saviour, helps some guests find employment.

There are not many "success stories" in the usual sense. One who can be pointed to is Vernon Peters, whose artwork graces the walls of Christ House. Vernon lived for years on the streets and had never held a paintbrush. When a volunteer came to Christ House to run a painting class, she discovered that Vernon had unusual talent. He eventually moved from Christ House on to a Samaritan Inn and finally into his own apartment. Recently he was given the national honor of being chosen with several other artists to "copy the masters," make replicas of famous paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

But stories more often go like Robert's. Robert's gift of music blossomed while at Christ House, and he often entertained with his gospel piano playing. He was on his way to self-sufficiency when his alcoholism took control of him again, and he recently inadvertently violated his parole while drunk. He is now in prison. This was the news that Janelle found too difficult to share with Rachel in the park.

Barbara Ryan, the Christ House nutritionist, talks about how important it is to remember what a gift all the lives that have passed through Christ House are, whether "successes" or not. And all the members of the Christ House community have learned to redefine "success." They have learned that years of deprivation

don't get transformed overnight.

The forces that work against long-term success are insurmountable for some. Janelle lays out the obstacles that society has thrown in the way: deeply entrenched racism, overcrowded institutions for the mentally ill that discharge patients prematurely, a severe lack of affordable housing. According to Janelle, one shelter contains 200 men who work full time but cannot afford a place to live on their minimum-wage salaries.

She sees many patients with severe health problems but none that officially put them on the "disabled" list for Social Security benefits, leaving them unable to work and unable to receive public assistance. She explains that even those who are declared totally disabled receive a check for \$229 a month, "and even the awfulest rooms you'll find are at least \$50 a week.

"My sense is that every time someone tries to pull themselves up they get knocked down again," she says. "And after you've been knocked down so many times, you just don't get up. There ought to be some psychiatric diagnosis for a person who has been battered through all that poverty brings year after year from the time they were infants—the lack of education, the lack of support, the lack of opportunities—so that finally the spirit is just taken out of them and all that's left is despair."

Most men come to Christ House fearful and withdrawn, hoarding food from the dining room as they did when they were on the streets and didn't know when their next meal might be, sleeping most of the day and pulling the covers up over their heads. But slowly the experience of being cared for and loved in a way that some of them have never experienced brings about a change.

Says Gary Sherwood, a part-time church custodian who had surgery to replace part of his crushed jaw with a bone from his hip, "They treat everybody like family here." Another guest was overheard saying after several weeks at Christ House, "I know the opposite of poverty. It's not riches. It's community."

About half of all Christ House patients have serious alcohol problems. Alcoholism is one of the most difficult conditions to deal with, because relapse is part of the illness; some guests return to Christ House again and again. Janelle says that one of the biggest challenges before the Christ House community is to find a way to enable that kind of community to continue for people when they leave, to be a family of support for people who have no family. It's clear that that is already happening for some.

With few overt successes to point to, it's natural to wonder what keeps the community members going. For Don Martin it is the injustice: "God never intended for human beings to live like homeless, poor

people live. An authentic response to the gospel demands that what we are doing be done." For others it is the belief that no one should be just an unknown face in a shelter.

Janelle tells of having seen a man having a diabetic insulin reaction at a shelter. In the past she would have treated him and sent him back out on the street. But she brought him to Christ House where the staff could care for him and keep a watch on his blood sugar. That same night she and the man ate and worshiped together. "It is a great blessing," she says, "and I'm continually grateful just for this place."

But she feels that more is required still. She cautiously offers the term "major societal revolution," the kind of revolution based on love that turns the priorities of the nation upside down and exalts the poorest of its citizens.

EVERY THURSDAY EVENING the entire Christ House family—guests, staff, volunteers, and friends—gather for a fellowship meal. The meal was chosen as a context for worship because of the welcome that Jesus extended to all to gather at the table, as he also washed their feet.

Before the meal baskets of bread are passed and offered to all, and the worthiness of each person as a child of God is proclaimed. After the meal the cup of blessing is shared. A local gospel choir sings out the verses to "Jesus Is the Center of My Joy," and the dining room rocks with clapping and joy.

This week's scripture is Hosea 11:8—"How could I give you up, O Ephraim?" Allen explains to all that Ephraim was one of the 12 tribes of Israel, the one considered least in the eyes of the people. But God was faithful to the people of the tribe of Ephraim and never gave up on them, no matter how much they wandered or made mistakes. "And so is God faithful to us," he proclaims.

And so are the members of the Christ House community faithful to those whom God brings to them. No one is ever given up on, and perhaps that is the greatest gift of all.

In her typically humble way, Janelle says of Christ House, "It's something so simple—a place for people to rest and eat. All we're doing is providing the basics—some love and warmth and caring. It's not something that's so complicated."

Those who wander hostile streets, those who wander from the ways of life, those who wander in the fearful imaginations of their own minds—all are welcomed at Christ House. It is a place to live and, for some, a place to die. For bruised and weary feet, it is a place to come and rest and know the healing power of the water of life. □

Donations to Christ House may be sent to 1717 Columbia Road NW, Washington, DC 20010.

TO GORDON

I liked him.
I liked him right away.
We prayed together last night before we went to bed.

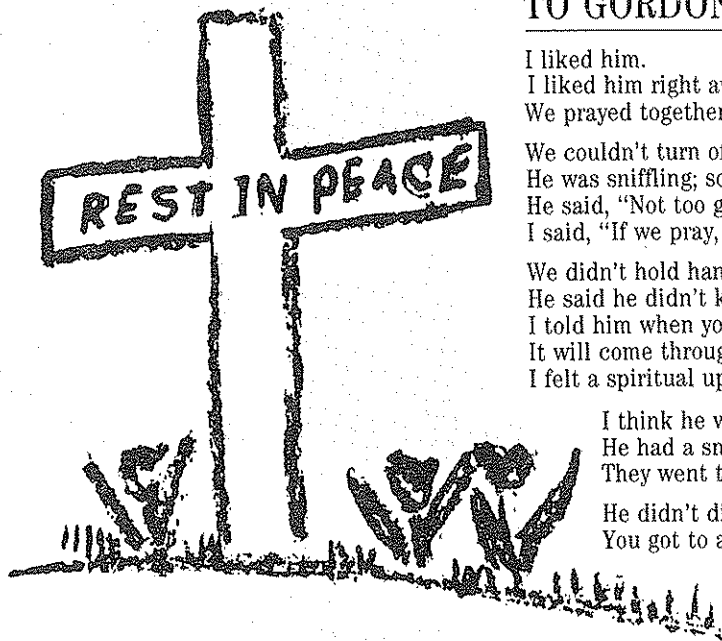
We couldn't turn off the air conditioner.
He was sniffling; so I asked him, "Are you alright?"
He said, "Not too good."
I said, "If we pray, maybe you'll be better."

We didn't hold hands or anything.
He said he didn't know how to pray.
I told him when you talk from the heart,
It will come through no matter what you feel.
I felt a spiritual uplifting.

I think he was ready;
He had a smile on his face.
They went to get the doctor; at 6:05 he died.

He didn't die alone;
You got to acknowledge: he exists in your heart.

—Charles Glover



Illustrations by Vernon Peters

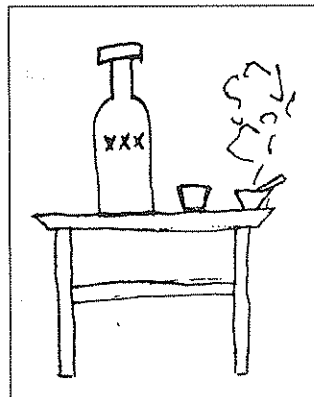
I'M ONLY HUMAN

I'm human;
So I feel and I am told.
Due to my alcoholism
I must do this trying task
That is:
Take a fearless moral inventory of myself.

Do you know
It would be much easier for me to do yours
and you to do mine.
Unfortunately, this is not suggested.

So here goes—
Just me and my faults

—Bob Gallagher



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The poems and illustrations are by former guests at Christ House. Bob Gallagher now lives at the Samaritan Inn, a transitional home operated by the Church of the Saviour, and works in food services. Charles Glover is married and living in California. Vernon Peters lives in Sarah's Circle, an apartment building for senior citizens also operated by the Church of the Saviour. He is still actively painting.