

Christ House Serves the Community

When smoke started rising from the hood of his car as he drove through Alexandria on Route 1, Gerald was startled and then desperate, moving the car and trailer to the side of the road amid questions from his wife and screams from their three young children. Gerald and his family were on their way to Florida, where he was due to report to a new job in six days. They had left Maine the day before, packing most of their worldly possessions in an old trailer and closing out their small bank account.

When a counselor at Catholic Charities' Christ House got word of Gerald's plight from a traffic officer, she got the car towed to a local garage, provided lodging for the family, and gave Gerald a bus ticket to Florida so that he could report



Photo by W. C. Spaeth

Volunteers help prepare and serve the evening meal for the hungry at Christ House. Annually, Christ House serves more than 18,000 meals. In addition, its food pantry provides nonperishable food items to needy individuals and families.

to work. He returned a week and a half later to get his car (now repaired), trailer, and family, saying, "I could not have kept the job offer or arranged to get the family to our new location without the help of the Christ House staff. They were a godsend."

Gerald's family is just one of many who have received assistance from Christ House since its inception in 1973. The site of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington's soup kitchen, food pantry, hypothermia shelter, and

Emergency Assistance program, Christ House, located at 131 S. West Street in Alexandria, represents the agency's commitment to the Gospel passage "I was hungry and you gave me food; ... I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35-36).

Ted Ostrom, former program director at Christ House and now a deacon at St. Michael Church in Annandale, remembers Gerald and says, "Christ House has always served the community and welcomed individuals and families from all backgrounds and nationalities." He also recalls the generous volunteers



Photo by Jeanne Spaeth

Cassandra Lee, a case worker for Emergency Assistance at Christ House, helps a client who is asking for aid to pay the rent for her apartment.

from different parishes who help serve the evening meal for the hungry at Christ House.

Ana Gutierrez, kitchen manager at Christ House, says that Catholic Charities relies heavily on the generous service of parishes, service organizations, and other groups to keep the meal program running and serving 50 to 65 guests every evening. Ana adds, "Without the volunteers, the evening meal would not be possible. They are the ones who provide the food and serve it to our dinner guests."

Ana says, "We are helping individuals who are very needy." Some are the working poor, some are homeless, and some are struggling with problems such as alcoholism or drug addictions.

In addition to the soup

kitchen, Christ House offers an Emergency Assistance program that provides non-perishable food to hungry individuals and families through a food pantry and offers free clothing through a thrift shop.

Ruth Guillen, a case worker at Christ House, says that the Emergency Assistance program also offers financial assistance to those in desperate situations so that they can pay for "rent, utility bills, and prescription medicine."

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Emergency Assistance program is offering help to hurricane evacuees in the form of food, clothing, and funds for lodging, transportation, and other needs.

The hypothermia unit at Christ House provides shel-

Photo by Jeanne Spaeth



Christ House is located at 131 S. West Street in Alexandria.

ter during cold winter months. Once renovation work is completed at Christ House, Catholic Charities' Executive Director Stephen Luteran says, "A year-round shelter will be active once again, providing emergency shelter and helping clients to find employment and regain their independence. We work 'to serve the most vulnerable of God's people'

Reaching Out at Thanksgiving and Christmas

Photo by Jeanne Spaeth



Bishop Paul S. Loverde greets guests who have come to Christ House for a holiday dinner.

At Thanksgiving and Christmas, the daily meal for the hungry at Christ House is transformed into a special turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Staff and volunteers arrive early in the day to begin preparations for the meal, and they

are often encouraged in their work by a visit from Bishop Paul S. Loverde, who routinely comes to talk to workers and diners and lend a hand.

Usually about 100 guests are served at each holiday meal. In addition, through the Emergency Assistance program, more than 200 needy families are given food baskets with turkeys on each holiday.

At Christmas, dinner guests are given gifts such as hats, gloves, mufflers, socks, and toiletries. Toys and gift cards are given out to needy families in the area.

Stephen Luteran, executive director of Catholic Charities, says, "During the holidays, we especially want to help those in our community who are struggling just to obtain the basic necessities of life. We are thankful that we can share our bounty with individuals who oftentimes have no idea where their next meal will be coming from."

and ‘to implement the Church’s mission of social justice in the Diocese of Arlington in ways that strengthen individuals, families, and communities,’ as articulated in our mission statement.”

Cassandra Lee, who has been a case worker at Christ House for 20 years, hopes that its services “have given some clients the edge they needed to get back on their feet.” When funding was available, she recalls that she and other counselors provided case management, helping individuals to find jobs and, as they moved from the shelter, helping them with rent and making home visits.

Like Ana, Cassandra views volunteers as very important. She praises dedicated helpers like Gary Andrew, a retiree who manages the food pantry, oversees deliveries of food, and serves as an overall handyman. Cassandra says, “He’s wonderful. I can’t say enough about how very generous and hard-working he is. He’s completely altruistic—an amazing person.” She also praises Charles Davis, better known as “Mr. Davis,” a retiree who volunteers to serve as kitchen manager on Sunday and Monday and who is “just great and so dependable.” He is “our angel—we can call him anytime if we need extra help.”

Frances Burke, who worked 40 years at Catholic Charities, with 30 years at Christ House before retiring in 2003, says, “It was an

The Story of Henry and the Chapel

Fr. Gerry Creedon, a former executive director of Catholic Charities, celebrates Mass in the beautiful, wood-decorated chapel at Christ House. The chapel was built by a homeless man who came to Christ House for help and ended up being employed there as handyman and kitchen manager.



Photo by Raymond Plisner

Homeless, unemployed, and battling a drinking problem, Henry came to Christ House for food and shelter on a cold winter’s night. A lonely man who had stopped communicating with family and relatives, Henry started to show his appreciation for Christ House hospitality by helping out with odd jobs. He also managed to control his alcohol problem.

“The Christ House staff noticed his skills,” recalls Eliana Turina, associate director of community services for Catholic Charities. “He was good with his hands. So the staff hired him as a part-time employee at first and then as a full-time worker. He worked as kitchen manager and overall handyman, and his salary

included living quarters at Christ House.”

Father Jack O’Hara, former executive director of Catholic Charities and now parochial vicar at St. Charles Borromeo in Arlington, recalls how Henry suggested converting a small room at Christ House into a chapel. He refurbished the room, adding beautiful woodwork. The late Bishop John R. Keating celebrated the first Mass there.

“Henry made the room into a lovely chapel by using his own hands,” says O’Hara. “He was a skilled carpenter and very humble, like St. Joseph.”

Henry worked several years at Christ House before returning to the mid-West.

honor to work at Christ House.” She recalls many clients and says that there was a climate of mutual respect: “They were street people, but if you treated them with respect, they would treat you with the same respect.” She recalls that once, when a mentally disturbed dinner guest appeared to be threatening her,

several of the regular clients came quickly forward and said, “Wait a minute. Don’t you bother that lady.”

More information about Christ House and the Emergency Assistance program is available by calling 703-549-8644 or 703-548-4227 or accessing the Web site at www.cdda.net.

Supporters Contribute Time, Talent, and Treasure

Dedicated volunteers from parishes and service organizations come to Christ House to help prepare and serve the evening meal. Some parishes, such as St. John the Beloved in McLean, St. Philip in Falls Church, and Blessed Sacrament in Alexandria, have been assisting for more than 20 years.

Schools such as Bishop O’Connell in Arlington have held annual food drives to supply the Christ House food pantry with nonperishables. Elementary schools like St. Thomas More in Arlington have helped at Christmas by providing decorated shoe boxes filled with toiletry gifts



Students from Bishop O’Connell High School in Arlington deliver food items to Christ House.

for the needy.

Generous individuals and organizations give monetary donations each year to support the evening meal, hypothermia unit, and Emergency Assistance program. This program especially needs

contributions because the agency’s monthly allocation is often depleted by mid-month.

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