

The Case for Hospitality

By Lynn Taborsak

The Annual Meeting of Dorothy Day was held at the First Congregational Church in Annie E. Orr Hall on the evening of Sept. 22. Annie Orr had been a part of the fabric of Dorothy Day for many years and until her death in 2013, she was our food safety professional. It was her job to maintain high standards for safe food handling so that we could serve the public safe, thoroughly cooked meals every day.

The annual meetings are held every year on the fourth Monday in September. They begin with a prayer and the reading of names of guests and volunteers who have died since the last annual meeting. This year, 12 names were read and added to the remembrance panel above the bread shelves on Spring Street.

Since its early days, some 32 years ago, that panel has been solemnly maintained and now lists over 221 names. It is like a sacred relic and in some cases, may be the only remembrance to those who have come each day to be fed. Some are poor, some are homeless and some are strangers passing through. As Hebrews Chapter 13 tells us, "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels."

Last year Dorothy Day provided 32,386 hot meals, 15,057 second helpings and handed out 19,307 bag lunches with no paid staff and no taxpayer funding. The kitchen is open 363 days a year, closing only for Thanksgiving and Christmas when local churches provide the meal.

There are more than 300 kitchen volunteers from religious groups, civic organizations and businesses in the greater Danbury area. The 16-bed shelter, which is behind the kitchen, has six coordinators and 35 overnight volunteers. This year the shelter provided 5,015 bed nights for homeless men and women seeking refuge from the street.

The rules at Dorothy Day are very simple. All people are welcome, if sober and polite. Guests receive a bag lunch when they leave, but there are no take-out meals. Once guests leave the kitchen, they cannot return.

With no paid staff, the soup kitchen and shelter open each day to serve people in need and have been doing this successfully for more than 30 years. It is an amazing community effort that should be commended, not condemned.

There is an effort to close Dorothy Day by local residents. They maintain that we are responsible for criminal activity that occurs in the vicinity of the kitchen, even when the kitchen and shelter are closed.

As a long-time volunteer, I have spent many nights doing laundry and observing drug transactions and prostitution on the street outside the kitchen while our 16 guests wheeze, snore and cough through the night in safety inside our shelter.

I know that drug deals take place outside night after night. I know that a steamy pleasure market flourishes when the shelter locks its door at 9:30 p.m. The shelter guests, however, aren't the cause of this criminal activity.

In lieu of blaming each other for the problems on Spring Street, one possible solution would be to create a Neighborhood Watch. It is easy to do and highly effective.

Residents of another local urban neighborhood formed the Blind Brook Association and dramatically changed community conditions when they joined together to reduce crime. Everyone living, working and volunteering on Spring Street should participate. Dorothy Day would be glad to join in this effort.

Dorothy Day has been serving the poor for more than 30 years. Our mission is to help people in need, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked and to shelter the poor. We want Spring Street to have a better future. We have to work together to solve neighborhood problems.