



Start now.
Start where you are.
Start with fear.
Start with pain.
Start with doubt.
Start with hands shaking.
Start with voice trembling but start.
Start and don't stop.
Start where you are, with what you have.
Just...start.

- IJEOMA UMEBINYUO



GROWING THE KINGDOM

I'm a resident volunteer at Lydia's House. I've been a volunteer with the community since it began four years ago, and I've lived and worked intimately with the community for the past two years. Tonight I'd like to share with you stories from our ministry, and a particularly important part of what we do: in addition to hosting and housing four women and their children each night, we've grown into a robust extended community, and we've become home for many of our former guests. If you stop by any night, in addition to our in house guests, you'll likely find many of these former guests doing laundry, sitting in our living room or eating at our table. It's in light of this growing flock, and the stability that we provide for them at 2024 Mills Avenue that I've chosen to reflect with you on the Kingdom of God. Let me start with this scripture from the Gospel of Luke:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. He told them another parable, "the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

I've been thinking of what I have learned this year about this Kingdom by being a Lydia's House residential volunteer. I am drawn to these metaphors – the mustard seed, the yeast, and the treasure hidden in the field because I love the Kingdom of Heaven hidden around us. Summer before last, several guests and college volunteers at Lydia's house were interested in learning to drive. One evening while on a driving lesson after a Dairy Queen trip, our guest Lauren wanted to show me the house of her favorite and most maternal foster mother. And so, we drove past a non-descript domicile in St Bernard. Here, like a treasure hidden in a field, was where she found a place she had called home and remembered fondly. Her short life of 22 years had been marked by double digit moves. But once, in



Our Family Home

her memory, Lauren had not just a couch or floor to sleep on, but a home. This is the kingdom of heaven – hiding in a non-descript house in St Bernard.

I BELIEVE THAT EVERY DAY
LYDIA'S HOUSE OFFERS
WOMEN AND CHILDREN
A CHANCE TO SEE THE
KINGDOM OF HEAVEN ON
MILLS AVENUE

I believe that every day Lydia's House offers women and children a chance to see the kingdom of heaven on Mills Avenue. **And I know that— like that little house in St Bernard— we've now been woven into Lauren's story and the story of many other women as not just a bed but a home.** I believe this because since leaving Lauren has brought her young sons to visit us, asked us if she could come over for dinner, and invited us to celebrate her high school graduation. She's also shared with us her custody struggles and broken relationships. Isn't this what the kingdom of Heaven is? A place to come home to celebrate success or lament disappointment.

I am also drawn to these scriptural metaphors because everything Jesus said about his Kingdom seems so strange. Maybe the kingdom of heaven doesn't make a whole lot of sense to someone like me who always lived in safe housing, gone to good schools, and has 100% job security—when not at Lydia's House, I work as a physician. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, he spoke to people whose story was forged in exile in Egypt, again in Babylon and living under Roman occupation. Exile isn't the life I've known, but I've started to notice that Israel's hope for the Kingdom of God despite exile after exile makes sense to the women who have sought refuge at Lydia's House.

One of our beloved guests, Shalaine, lived with us for nearly a year: she got a job, she convinced her best friend to move with her, and she hoped for stability with two incomes and two people to share the work of living with two toddlers. After several months, her friend decided to move out, and Shalaine bravely found a very cheap apartment in Avondale for herself and her two-year old, only to lose her job weeks later when her childcare provider closed after her home flooded. It is tempting to ask, on her behalf, where is the kingdom be in the midst of all this exile?

The day she lost her job, she came to visit us. I was surprised by her lament. She didn't present a request for money or ask "Why me?" but sat at our table and cried, "I'm just so lonely." It wasn't even the first time I had heard "I'm just so lonely" from a former guest that week. Loneliness is one of the greatest human fears, and one of the greatest burdens of being poor is the way it isolates people.

In every month that passes at Lydia's House, guests move on and new guests move in, and we are ever coming to understand what makes us more than a



Celebrating belovedness

shelter or an agency: we're a place where there's someone familiar to talk to and new friends to be made; we're a place where the deepest desire for community is met long after we've provided most basic needs of housing and food. For all our guests and former guests, Lydia's House is a great balm to loneliness. That's why we know now that our vision to be the beloved community, a glimpse of God's Kingdom, is about more than beds; what's really happening at Lydia's House is like a treasure hidden in a field— at first glimpse it's not obvious, but for those who know it's worth, its invaluable.

On the day Shalaine came back and cried at our table, we knew it was her birthday later that week, so we made homemade cake and ice cream, we had a meal, we sang, we sat and talked while her son played in the toy room. And as she was held and loved in the only place on earth that celebrated her 23rd year, I saw the Kingdom of Heaven—



Anne prepares a custom cake

a place to come home to celebrate your birthday even when nothing else seems to be working. Our house finds its place in this Kingdom when we offer the poorest women in our city a listening ear, a trip for ice cream, an invitation to worship with us, a place to celebrate holidays and the constant affirmation in small and large ways that each one is God's beloved child.

Last week, Renee moved into stable housing. During her five months with us she stabilized from a mental health crisis, returned to Church, saved for and bought a car, and got a job that paid a living wage. And she was a delight to live with. When Renee started apartment searching in late July, we knew she had a lot of options. But ultimately she ended up moving into the apartment complex across the street from us. She told us she chose that apartment because she still wanted to be at dinner and give back to the house

by helping other women write resumes and find jobs. And even though she never lived with Shalaine, they too have become friends. As we helped Renee make her short move across the street carrying her belongings in our arms, I thought and hoped that God is pleased to dwell with us. It is in times like these that our tiny mustard seed of four years ago is growing into a tree, allowing us to welcome back all these courageous women for a shady rest. It is the big tree in our backyard, that maybe one day their children will remember swinging in.



A guest comes back for a Halloween themed birthday

Like yeast hidden in three measures of flour, our former guests are working hard to use the time they had with us to lighten the many burdens they carry. One of our earliest guests, Liza, has ridden several ups and downs since she lived with us. Recently, she asked for help from the jubilee funds that we offer to former guests when they are having a hard time. And guess what? She used it just like yeast to leaven her loaf, and she's back to work at a job that she enjoys, living in an apartment, participating actively in her son's life, and she's paying back the money she borrowed. That money can be used again and again to improve the lives of women who fight each day to make ends meet.

I hope that each of you see Lydia's House like I do: a shady tree that gives rest, a treasure you'd miss if you weren't looking closely, a place where a little leaven leads to great transformation, a place where children play and lonely women laugh, and God is pleased to join us and our many sisters for dinner, for porch sitting, for sorrow sharing, and of course for celebrating each other's belovedness.



Former guests and current guests share a meal.



A SNAPSHOT OF OUR GUESTS' ACHIEVEMENTS

From May 16 2014 – December 30, 2016 Lydia's House provided supportive shelter for 30 unique women and children for more than 30 days. Of the adults in this group:



78%

got or maintained employment while living at Lydia's House; of those 60% maintained employment for 6 months or more



83%

moved into permanent housing from Lydia's House; of those, 100% maintained that housing for 6 months or more



61%

stabilized their health, got a deferred medical procedure or had reliable access to pre-natal and post-partum care



66%

stay in relationship with Lydia's House and regularly attend holiday meals, worship services or weekly dinners

We're very pleased that, starting in January, our co-founder Meridith Owensby was able to leave her job at the Cincinnati Association for the Blind in order to work full time for Lydia's House. With Meridith's special charism for care and support of our guests we're providing more employment guidance, more support to stabilize and health, more housing case management and more aftercare. We strive to see every woman and family at Lydia's House have the financial resources they need, achieve health stability, move into permanent affordable housing and build a stronger support network to see them through challenging times ahead.



ADVOCATING TO END FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

Since November of last year, Lydia's House has woken up to the need to be more than supportive shelter for the four families we house on any given night. We've begun to educate ourselves on the issues that make families homeless and keep families homeless. We've committed to joining with others in our region to be a voice that fights for poor families. We've hosted US Rep. Brad Wenstrup's aide, County Commissioner Denise Driehaus and local Rep. Brigid Kelley. We've joined AHA (the Affordable Housing Advocates), met with county planning professionals and attended the Women's March on Washington and two local affordable housing rallies. We're focusing efforts on advocating to end family homelessness.

Did you know?

- While nationally rates of homelessness fell from 2005-2012, family homelessness rose 13.49%
- From 2000-2013 Federal Housing dollars decreased 13.9%.
- Hamilton County's "Strategies to End Homelessness" reported that in 2013 there were 2185 unduplicated calls by homeless families to the Homeless Central Access Point (CAP) hotline. Of these calls, 70% received no services. 2013 was not unusual and it is common for guests of Lydia's House to report that they called the Central Access Point many times and were denied shelter. WCPO and The Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless report that family homelessness in our area is on the rise.
- In 2013, 29% of the homeless population in Hamilton County shelters were children. By 2016 that number had risen.
- The average homeless family served by the Strategies to End Homelessness family shelter system was a 30 year old woman with 2 children under age 6. This maps closely to what we've seen at Lydia's House.

Hamilton County Faces a Crisis of Affordability

- The Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless and the Community Building Institute of Xavier University reports that our region is 40,000 units short of affordable housing for the poorest families
- Only 25% of poor families in our region have access to subsidized affordable housing



- Greater Cincinnati Affordable Housing Advocates reports and "Housing Policy in the United States" confirms that the bulk of federal housing dollars are being spent to subsidize home ownership and to alleviate homelessness for the disabled and elderly.
- HOPE VI housing policy has reduced the number of government owned units that are available for the very poor. In Cincinnati alone we've lost 2,375 units since 1997, a number that closely matches the number of families calling to the Homeless CAP line.

Hamilton County Faces a Crisis of Extreme Poverty

- 47% of children in our region live below the poverty level; 2/3 of these children live in female headed households
- Even if working, for a single mother with 2 children to be free of government assistance she must make \$50,000 or more annually

WE'RE ASKING OUR LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES TO:

- direct more funding to emergency shelters to add capacity until a longer term solution is found
- use CDBG, Low Income Housing Tax Credits and CMHA site based funding to build family subsidized housing
- create an affordable housing trust fund to ensure long term local funding for affordable housing
- create permanent supportive housing for moms who need permanent support to care for their children



WHY INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY?

By Meridith Owensby

There's a late evening moment that I love, when I'm in the kitchen alone finishing the last of the dishes or sweeping the tile floor. The sun rays slant into our western window, illuminating the compost bucket and spotlighting the dancing dust. All is peaceful for a moment, and the rooms that have held such bustle all day long (evident in the kid-sized footprints imminently erased by the mop) are still and quiet. My heart swells in the stillness, full of gratitude for the day and work that was.

None of these children belong to me, and few of the members of the large group I just shared dinner with knew one another a year ago. We all live together at Lydia's House. We're a mix of voluntary community members and women emerging from homelessness, and we share this space and this time, night after night, week after week.

With the exception of a few years in an apartment of my own, I have lived in intentional community since 2003. The experience has shaped me permanently, changing my career trajectory, my friendships, my understanding of the world, and, most importantly, my Christian faith. It's in community that I most frequently glimpse the face of Christ. If you're considering community living, be aware that the following are likely ramifications of the choice:

Your prayer life will deepen.

Prayer in our community comes in many ways. For me, most poignantly, it's the start of every day with a group prayer using the book "Common Prayer." We also pray together on Wednesdays at our leadership meeting and Thursdays at a time designated to share our lives, using a form of the Ignatian Examen. We pray at dinner, using a prayer box where requests are held and revisited until they're answered. We pray and share praises at a monthly worship service. Lately we've been experimenting with a

daily evening prayer.

While prayer initially came about as a response to the hard situations faced with women in crisis, prayer slowly became the way to stay with this hard work, to hold up the good and the bad, and to stop and see what God is showing us. When a situation feels unresolvable and hopeless, prayer is the first place I go. As our community matures, we've come to understand why Paul asks us to pray ceaselessly!

Your priorities will change.

This summer we had a recent college grad visit Lydia's House. On the weekly shopping trip, while pulling out, we were hit by another car. The damage to our vehicle amounted to an insignificant dent, so after checking on the other driver we went on our way.

"You aren't easily upset, are you?" our visitor asked. "You don't seem to get worked up about much!"

When you live a life that involves premature births at mid-night, relapses, traumas recounted at breakfast, and daily reminders of injustice, there are many daily annoyances that pale in comparison.

You'll develop your own Cloud of Witnesses.

In my early 20's I felt hungry for role models, for people who were living lives for Christ that could inspire my own walk. Now I never lack for inspiration, and know so many women and men whose lives show me how faith and works go hand in hand. From the preacher/anti-death penalty activist to the formerly homeless mother who now works for criminal justice reform, I'm surrounded by this high quality crew of faithful disciples. I can call them up when I need advice or prayer, and just about any problem our community has they've already lived through. Dorothy Day said about intentional community that she



longed to create a place where it's easier to be good. We've seen that happen and we've also seen community as a magnet for those that already are.

Scripture will come to life.

One summer's evening our community waited for a former member's return. She'd taken all the money she'd saved and moved out, telling us we had too many rules and she needed more freedom. Now she was returning, thinner and with empty pockets.

You can probably imagine the scene, where we run to her and embrace and welcome her back into the fold. I can tell you all this happened and our hearts rejoiced at the return of the prodigal daughter.

I can also tell you two months later she left again, in almost exactly the same way.

The next time I heard the corresponding parable I thought, "Did the son stay home after the fattened calf feast? If not, what was the next round like?" We keep going back to the Gospels, keep turning over the stories, and keep realizing that we find no easy answers.

You'll hunger for justice.

Almost daily we get calls from pregnant



THE STORY OF MY LIFE

By a former Lydia's House guest

My name is Olivia and I'm 22 years old. When I was 17 I graduated high school and I left my home town of Milwaukee, WI. I came to Cincinnati to visit my aunt. She insisted that I apply for a job here in Cincinnati and offered for me to stay with her. I applied for Walgreens and I got a call back the SAME day: I was so excited I accepted the job and decided to stay. I lived with my aunt and her family for six months. By then I was ready to be on my own. I turned 18 three days before moving into my own apartment. By this time I was what I thought to be an adult: I had my own car, my new apartment and two jobs. For me it was awesome and a dream come true. I had the tools to make it work and I knew that I had earned it. I enrolled in school and started MY LIFE. I enjoyed working and going to school but I always felt something was missing. By this time my aunt and her family had relocated and I was all alone.

I went to work at Amazon in Hebron, KY where I met a guy whom I thought was everything: sweet and patient and seemed to be just great. He and I were very compatible in so many areas and I felt so safe and secure with him. We spoke about children but never planned on having any; especially not so soon. I was only 20. On December 13 I went to the hospital because I had horrible symptoms that couldn't wait for a doctor's appointment. It was then I found out I was 3 weeks pregnant. I was confused but happy; hurt but also ready. I called my boyfriend and told him and he was so excited. We met, had lunch and honestly that was the last good day we had. He started to distance himself. I couldn't help but keep calling him because I was pregnant and didn't want to be alone, but he didn't respond.

By May I was 6 months pregnant and I

was working 7 days a week. I found out my boyfriend went back to a previous relationship and was expecting another child. He was gone and I was ok with that. He hadn't contributed to anything for our daughter and had only went to one doctor's appointment with me. I was done with it but when I went into labor I called him. I was scared and alone which I didn't want to be. I gave birth alone to a beautiful baby girl: 5.7lbs and 19 inches. She was rushed to NICU due to her having jaundice and respiratory issues. She couldn't breathe on her own, though she ended up being ok.

Since becoming a mother, I've only wanted the best for my child. From early in my pregnancy my main priority was to provide a stable environment for my child. I've worked so hard, harder than I had ever worked before on myself, my attitude, my appearance and before she was born I tried to alter my activities to kid friendly things. I made every effort but somewhere between a fine line of floating and treading in high waters I drowned. Shortly into my baby's life, I found myself homeless. It was just me and my daughter struggling everyday: sleeping on someone's couch where only God knows what happened on there. Can you imagine being a new and young inexperienced parent and looking your child in her eyes and feeling like you've failed her when you worked so hard to prevent it? Once I was homeless I kept thinking to myself "I can't believe I'm on the couch with my 6 month old baby." During this time, my daughter got sick. She had pneumonia and a virus called RSV and spent two nights in the hospital and 2 rounds of antibiotics. When faced with sleeping in my car I called the shelter hotline and was told there was nothing that could be done. Days went by and days went by and still no openings. I spent hours



in a storage garage because we had no-where else to go. I sat at the library till closing time because it was cold outside and that was the best way to utilize power and heat and the internet to apply for assistance, jobs, childcare and look for more resources to get out of my situation. I couldn't believe it and still to this day don't.

Finally one day I was told to call Lydia's House and I did. I called them and I went to interview the next day. I had a stable safe place to go with my daughter and I was so happy and cried a long while because I had never felt so low and hurt yet happy at the same time. I worked every resource and outlet I was given and after almost 2 months I was given enough resources to obtain housing, employment, clothing for me and my daughter and I even learned how to file taxes and cook. Today I have a healthy baby girl whom is just a ball of joy. I don't know where I would or could be without her. I'm living in my own apartment. I'm returning to school this summer and working at night. A Lydia's House guest is helping me by babysitting and I still visit Lydia's House almost every day. I am happy that complete strangers were loving enough to open their doors to my daughter and me.

(WHY INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY? CONTINUED)

women, women sleeping in cars with their toddlers, women who confirm that the shelter system is full again... the list goes on and breaks our hearts. Our friends and community members who've experienced homelessness share with us stories of childhood trauma and neglect while in the "system." They've fallen through a tattered safety net.

We watch our guests struggle to find

and keep living wage jobs, get exploited by unscrupulous landlords and employers, and flounder in managing both the challenges of daily life and the bureaucracy that claims to help. We get angry a lot – not because of what we see on TV or read online, but because of what's happening to those we share table and worship with. It challenges us to advocate for a better way.

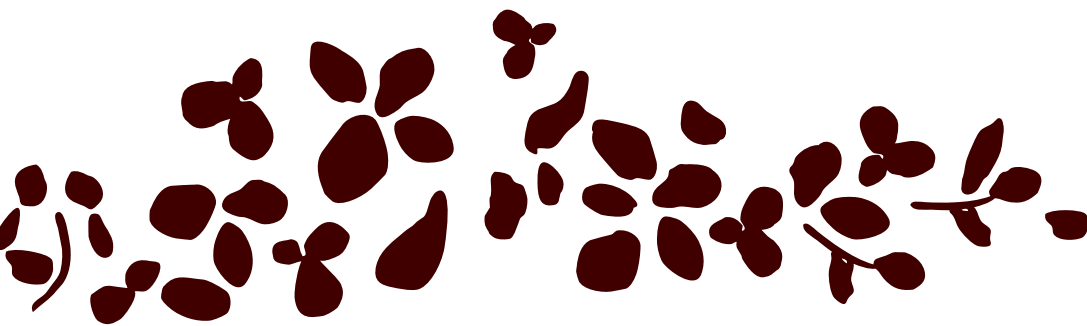
I'm sharing the highs and lows of community and my own Christian walk in hopes that others might be interested in sharing life as a Lydia's House live in volunteer. If you'd like to try out community, or you're longing to return to it, we'd love to hear from you. Visit our website at www.stlydiashouse.org or send me an email at info@stlydiashouse.org

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LYDIA'S HOUSE

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 13: Yard Work and Beautification Day with friends from St. Anne's Episcopal Church.

May 14: Mother's Day Service and celebration of mothers. Join us for a catered meal and a time of affirmation of the mothers and those that care-give in our community. 5pm. 2024 Mills Avenue. RSVP to Maryellen@stlydiashouse.org.

On May 14 The Mitchell- Eilerman family will also be speaking at all 3 masses at Bellarmine Chapel, updating the community on the good works of Lydia's House and collecting funds for our general operating.

May 19-21: Ohio River Valley Catholic Worker and Intentional Christian Community Campout. It's a good time! Join us. For more info email meridith@stlydiashouse.org.

June 25: 10am. Mary Ellen will be sharing about Lydia's House and preaching at Vineyard Central Church in West Norwood.

June 18, July 23, August 13: Monthly Worship, 5pm. Potluck to follow.

July 13-16: The Wild Goose Festival. Join us as we travel to Hot Springs NC to hear the Good News, camp together and be strengthened in fellowship with progressive Christians throughout the nation. Mary Ellen, Anne and Meridith will be speaking at the festival on the topic of "Celebrating Well: How Lydia's House uses liturgy, banners and bells to create the beloved community."

September 16: 6-9 pm. Save the Date for our 5th Annual Women for Women Celebration at the home of Maria Krzeski.

