

## Gaudete

By Brad Reynolds, S.J.

Because Christmas is almost here  
Because dancing fits so well with music  
Because inside baby clothes are miracles.  
Gaudete

Because some people love you  
Because of chocolate  
Because pain does not last forever  
Because Santa Claus is coming.  
Gaudete

Because of laughter  
Because there really are angels  
Because your fingers fit your hands  
Because forgiveness is yours for the asking  
Because of children  
Because of parents.  
Gaudete

Because the blind see.  
And the lame walk.  
Gaudete

Because lepers are clean  
And the deaf hear.  
Gaudete

Because the dead will live again  
And there is good news for the poor.  
Gaudete

Because of Christmas  
Because of Jesus  
You rejoice.





# HOUSE NOTES

by Mary Ellen Mitchell, Lydia's House co-director

Can it be said enough that it's been a strange year? At Lydia's House we have nothing to bench mark this against, but we keep on keeping on. Through later summer and into fall we continued to operate our shelter in socially distanced "suites" with kitchenettes and private bathrooms. Meals were largely discontinued while we considered options and scoured the latest updates on the CDC website for where Covid spread was occurring and how to stop it. There were times we felt really low about the lack of community and engagement, and we kept returning to the drawing board to reimagine how to offer meaningful services.

In August a crew of volunteers joined together to build us a lovely outdoor room. Special thanks to Dennis Bishop and Dane Miller and friends for working tirelessly to get this important addition added to our yard. With the new shade and additional mosquito spray in place, we tried to start up meals outdoors. We decided to add to each Monday night a time for prayer, worship and celebration. We invited guests to join us for dinner who had achieved milestones that we might have missed in the spring. One particularly memorable night featured



In September we welcomed baby Carter to Virginia Coffey Place and were grateful to our neighborhood photographer, Juli Thompson, for new baby photos. Around this time we also celebrated the entrance of one of our aftercare families to the new Cincinnati Scholar House. The family was thrilled with their brand new apartment and the opportunity to be supported by the fabulous program while mom goes back to school

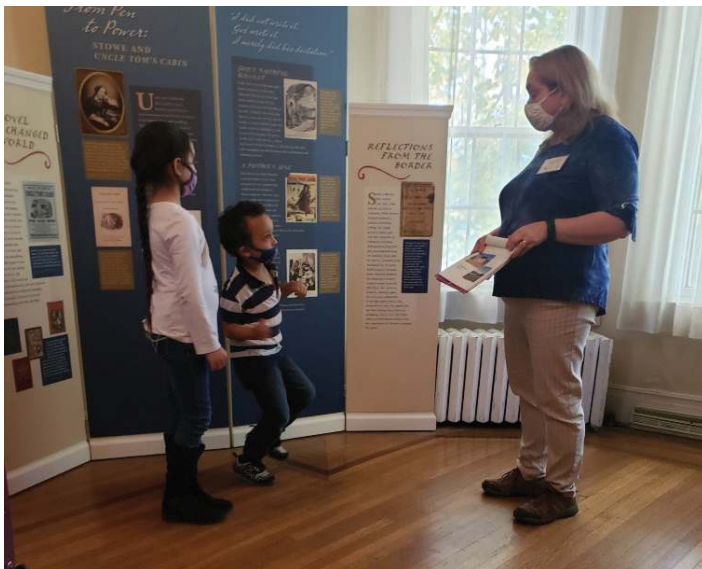


former guest Lashawnda and baby A'dore, who we blessed and prayed for. A'dore was a veritable miracle baby, born at 27 weeks with no long term health problems! Her siblings, including the star basketball player in training, are also pretty special. We were so glad to reconnect with this family.



We continued to brainstorm new ways to connect with and support families at a distance or in small groups. Our Occupational Therapist Laura rolled out a monthly calendar of Thursday family fun nights and homeschool enrichment. One family requested to do a unit on the underground railroad in their homeschool curriculum, so Honna took them to Underground Railroad/Freedom Center and Laura arranged for a private tour of The





Harriet Beecher Stowe House. Other family fun nights included outdoor story times and trips to the pool, which stayed open through September thanks to the benevolence of Norwood's new mayor.



thanks to our board president Calista Smith and Maria Krzeski for making this happen, even as our staff was leery of video reflections. Our home liturgy kits were actually very well received and our in house artist, Bethany Kurtz, did an amazing job with the prayer cards of biblical saints in the likeness of modern women of faith and courage. October also included me dislocating my knee and being temporarily out of commission after a harrowing trip in the ambulance to the ER. As always, the community rallied to keep things going and friends from Bellarmine brought meals to my family. It's good to be held by such a supportive crew!



As October approached we began to prepare to celebrate 40 years of Meridith. While we'd been hesitant to have any large group events, we decided to make this the exception, especially once the Shakespeare Company offered to come do a performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the Lydia's House yard. We put our outdoor room to use, catered in tacos, and brought our blankets to watch the show. Surprisingly, it was the youngest kids who were most mesmerized and stuck with the old English dialogue until the end. Many guests that we hadn't seen for ages showed up to honor Meridith and many brought gifts. It was a special night.

October also included our socially distanced Women for Women, which to date has raised \$49,000! Special



We continued to offer child enrichment opportunities through the fall including enrolling many kids in Bear Paddle swim school. While not much is available right now, swimming lessons are, and we decided swim safety was a good investment. We also partnered with Upspring to offer an afterschool (or after homeschool) program on Thursdays at Lydia's House, and carefully coordinated multiple trips to Kings Island to take all of our kids ages 4 and up. We offered Montessori religious education on Wednesday nights to kids ages 3-6, both to the aftercare program and to the neighborhood. We celebrated a few birthdays on the outdoor porch. And we moved a number of families into their own apartments,



## HOUSE NOTES (CONTINUED)



only to quickly re-fill the shelter with families. Intake demand went considerably up after the unemployment bonus and eviction moratorium ended.

We started November with a family All Saints celebration in our new nature playspace, catered by local parish farmers Robert Lockridge and Lyric and Matt Morris-Latchaw. Families in our new religious education program + families from Virginia Coffey Place joined us as Sam Eilerman played “When the Saints Go Marching In” on a keyboard and kids dressed as saints that are special to our community. We named death

penalty activist and Catholic Worker Murphy Davis as our saint of the year. Just a week before, Meridith and I gathered with old friends from around the county for Murphy’s zoom funeral, saying goodbye to this lovely and courageous mentor who had introduced us to ideas like solidarity and liberation theology.

Thanksgiving time brought more handwringing as the state of Ohio turned Covid-19 warning level “Red” on national maps. We worked tirelessly with Calista Smith and her mom Janet Harden to create a socially distanced Thanksgiving grab and go. Guests received southern style cooking, carefully and safely packaged, gift cards and additional uncooked food.

As we await Christmas, we’re grateful for the Bellarmine giving tree for providing gift cards for all of our families plus the Kohnen and Cornish-Scott families for buying books and pajamas for each individual in aftercare. We used our child enrichment grant to take aftercare children out to “Five Below” to buy gifts for their mom and siblings, so that the family could have hand-chosen surprises. We’re once again brainstorming to find ways to engage and some thoughts on the table include an ice skating event, a lantern parade and snow tubing. We’ll see what wins and if the weather cooperates. Check our blog in January to find out!

## SOLAR PANELS

Our solar panels are finally in! After a long process, including an interrupted supply chain from China, we have solar on 4502 Carter Ave (Virginia Coffey Place) and 2005 Mills Ave (The Jean Donovan House).

**Thank you so much to our Women for Women donors and Brock Coates at Solarlectric Inc.**





# ROCKING THE VOTE: LYDIA'S HOUSE EDITION



2020 was a unique year when it came to voting. From Stacey Abrams in Georgia to the Amos Project locally, many voices told us that it wasn't just our responsibility to vote, but it was our responsibility to help others vote. We considered those messages and decided to make voter turnout a top priority for our aftercare program.

Honna took the lead on our voter turnout effort. She researched every family that had lived at Lydia's House to find out if they were registered, made a chart, and assigned each family to a staff person. We called, texted, and facebook messaged. We used Meridith's 40th birthday as an occasion to bring families together for an outdoor party... and to register voters. Once registered, each potential voter was provided with a non-partisan voter guide that Honna prepared. We reached out 1 by 1 once again, offered transportation or help with gas, childcare, and even lunch if the new voter was hungry. All in all we helped turn out 17 voters from our circle.

What was surprising to learn in this journey is that apathy wasn't keeping people from voting as much as logistics. Families that move often don't know their polling place. Those without licenses fear not having IDs. Moms of young kids don't want to take kids to the polls. And those who work long days don't have time off to vote on a Tuesday. Those that had never voted feared they wouldn't know how to vote, the line would be too long, or they weren't informed enough about candidates. When we removed barrier after barrier, we were told "Thank you. I was really glad I got to vote."

Covid 19 has limited so much but what we discovered is that it didn't have to limit any of us from voting. We're grateful for the Lydia's House guests for working with us to break down barriers to voting and for those working nationally and regionally to be sure that single moms who

work long hours and have limited transportation can get to the polls.

Here on some Lydia's House perspectives on the voting process and voting in 2020

**Rosalyn, former LH guest and VC Place tenant (just after voting):** I loved voting. It was an awesome experience. The line wasn't long at all. I thought it would be long, but I got right in. It was so awesome to see so many different kinds of backgrounds of people there. It was run very efficiently. You should go vote!

**Destiny, former LH guest and VC Place tenant:** Honestly I had never voted before this year and I never thought my vote could make a difference. I felt good seeing the results of the election. I would also say that the more local elections of judges and so on is important in order to change the system. We have to be the system which means voting for leaders who are willing to recognize injustice and be brave enough to move towards a better future, a fair future. Most people just aren't educated on the process or what things mean regarding the candidates and voting. It's really something they should cover maybe in high schools. I think keeping people ignorant and those in poverty out of the voting process or convincing them to vote for things that won't help them is a way that the system is just completely manipulated.

**Tyreesha, former Lydia's House guest and VC Place tenant:** It was easy to vote this year due to the support from Lydia's house with watching my baby while I voted as well as having the information for the local candidates available. I voted because we need a change. The way things are going are unacceptable. We need responsible people in leadership. My boys future is what matters the most for me. My voice may be little but my vote is bigger.





## FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

In the summer of 2021, in anticipation of returning to in person engagement, Lydia's House is excited to be rolling out a new fellowship program for women of faith who desire to live in community and share life with families experiencing homelessness. This program was previously known as the associates program and was a live in position at our shelter. The new program will offer private living space, more complex compensation and more opportunity for growth. It's the result of many conversations around how to mentor younger women into leadership, increase the length of time for this position from 12 to 24 months, and allow for more physical space and comfort for those who choose to share life with us in this way.

The program will include two positions:

- "Leadership In Community" Fellow
- "Family and Childbirth Advocacy" Fellow

Each position will include mentoring in the work of Lydia's House and in the fight against family poverty and homelessness. The first position is more focused on administration, volunteer management and macro level program leadership; the second is more focused on direct service and care for pregnant women and young mothers. Each position shares in the work of maintaining and staffing the shelter.

The positions will each have a duration of 24 months, include a living suite and a generous compensation package including:

- A monthly living stipend of \$1000
- Wellness funding for counseling, spiritual direction and retreats
- Connection to the larger Catholic Worker and Christian social justice movement through gatherings and shared experiences
- Meals with the community
- Communal prayer times and structures for accountability and growth
- Professional development funding and opportunities for learning
- Health Insurance via Ohio Medicaid
- Housing and utilities
- A program grant to create and implement new programming
- A \$6000 education grant toward past debt or toward classes at nearby Xavier University in pursuit of a master's degree. Masters classes can be taken while working for Lydia's House

Each living space can accommodate a single woman or a married couple. The positions are full time and require night and weekend work. Women of color are strongly encouraged to apply. Applications are being accepted between now and April 15, for a June start. For more information please contact [Maryellen@stlydiashouse.org](mailto:Maryellen@stlydiashouse.org)





## LOVE EMBODIED

*Honna Brown, volunteer coordinator, reflects on 2 years at Lydia's House as she prepares to leave the role*

"Wait, don't leave- please don't leave!" This might be one of the most squealed phrases from the mouths of the children of Lydia's House. However, this young friend of mine was more persistent than many others. He draped his small body over the railing, continuing to holler, "Please!" I looked back, smiled, waved and told him I would be back soon. His mother poked her head out the door and told him to come back inside with everyone else. No sooner than the words had left her mouth, he took off running after me.

"Wait, wait, wait!" He wailed as he caught up to me. I put my hands on my hips and looked down at him, "Did your mom say it was okay to leave the house?" His lips pursed together in a pout, "Well, I just *really* don't want you to leave. It makes me sad."

I crouched down next to him, "Yeah, I know, and it's okay to be sad. I will be back soon and we can play later. How does that sound?"

He shrugged, "Well, you're just like the best friend I ever had." He paused, "And I want to play with you *now*." I smiled at him, holding back a laugh. "I love you, too, Kai. Let's go back to your mom." I walked him back to the house and made sure he was securely inside before I went on my way.

It's difficult to say goodbye, especially when you love that person or place. When I moved to Ohio in 2017, I thought I would stay for a little while, maximum one year. God's plans, however, are often very different from our own. Now here I am three years later and wondering how the time seems to slip from us so quickly. It is with a heavy and grateful heart that I begin my own journey to say goodbye to this beautiful community that I have learned to call home.

Lydia's House is a special place. For some, it is a home for a short while; for many, it becomes a family that supports and loves them through challenging times, even after they leave. One thing that I have loved the most about it is that it is a place that seeks to uphold the dignity and belovedness of all people, no matter what situations they are coming from. When I look back on my time here, I am astounded by the families who have touched my life, their willingness to trust, to share their hopes for life beyond Lydia's House, to run and play silly games in the back yard, to laugh around the dinner table long after we have cleared our plates, and to share tears over their greatest disappointments.

Along with the guests, I have also come to know the wonderful group of volunteers and donors who constantly surround us with their support and encouragement. It has been a great honor to coordinate your meal drop-offs, house duty schedules, and one-off maintenance tasks. You all have a great gift of listening, seeing how your strengths can fill in the gaps of life here, and a special understanding of how service deepens your faith and understanding of God.



Even with saying goodbye, I trust that we all will hold steady in our commitment to the work that needs to be done in our communities and nation. The important work of seeking equity for all is work that we must constantly pursue, especially in these difficult times where things are so uncertain. We must continue to engage with the decisions and policies in our local and federal government. We must continue to advocate for the necessity of affordable housing in our city and widening services for families who are struggling. In Christ we are asked to remember the holiness of our humanity, and I think the first step toward that is holding the struggle of our neighbors as equal to our own. It is my prayer that with each passing day, Christ reveals more clearly to each of us what that means in our own lives.

We are love embodied; the spirit of Christ resurrected lives and works through us. That is a hopeful reality, isn't it? Thank you to each guest, volunteer, and staff member for making the last two years warm, beautiful, spontaneous, and many days, hilarious. I am a different person today because of you all and I am excited to see where life carries me in the years to come. I know that the lessons and stories I have from this place will be a strong foundation for whatever opportunities and challenges cross my path. Blessings to all of us as we move forward in hope.



# DEDICATION OF THE NATURE PLAYSCAPE

*The Lydia's House nature playscape was completed in early October after a long journey of planning, fundraising and construction. It will primarily be used as the playground for Azalea Montessori School and as a "back yard" for Virginia Coffey Place affordable housing.*

*The following is the text of the blessing service from our gathering on October 22, 2020*

## **Dedication of the Lydia's House Nature Playscape led by Rev. Phyllis Spiegel of St. Anne's Episcopal Church**

We gather here surrounded by the beauty and sounds of nature to dedicate this playground, dreamed into being. We pray that this will be a sacred place of play and wonderment, of joy and freedom, of strength-building and challenge. For such opportunities make for great disciples.

We hear is scripture: "One day children were brought to Jesus in the hope that he would lay hands on them and pray over them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus intervened: 'Let the children alone, don't prevent them from coming to me. God's kingdom is made up of people like these.'" Mathew 19:14

People free to be joyful, playful, and who know how to grow strong to achieve new skills, are who God calls on to change the world. Every child should have a safe place to play, and so we recognize this as holy ground, a witness to God's peaceable dream.

We are going to use Holy Water today to bless this joyful new play space.

**Blessing of the Water:** Since the beginning of time, Creator of All, your Spirit has moved through the waters of creation, move now through this water so that everything it touches may be dedicated to your glory; a reminder that your blessings are as impossible to count as the water droplets we cast in your name. Bless this water ✠, moving through it, as you move through us. Amen.

You each have a branch and, as we pray, you will be invited to dip it in the Holy Water. Together we will pray our blessings onto this new playground.

### **Those who dreamed**

*(If you were part of the visioning team):*

God, we give you thanks for giving us dreams to see what can be but is not yet. Thank you for all who dreamed this playground into being. May this space foster the dreams of our children, present and yet to come.

Please cast water saying: "Thank you God for blessing our dreams."







### **Those who will play**

*(If you will be playing on this playground)*

God, thank you for the chance to play and the incredibly good ideas of creating laughter and joy; we pray both may be present here. Bless this to be a safe space, where hard days can be thought through, where the circle of friendship is always open, and bodies of all shapes, sizes, and abilities may find fun things to do.

Please throw the blessed water saying: "Thank you God for our new playground!"

### **Those who supervise**

God, we ask your blessing upon this space and those who gather here. When accidents happen, we ask that your angels tend the injured, guide the caregivers, and comfort all present. Bless the teachers, parents and caregivers as they lend watchful eyes and ears, may the joy of the children be a blessing in their lives and bring levity to their souls.

Please cast water saying: "Bless those in our care."



### **Blessing of all:**

May you each know yourself to be a beautiful and loved child of God. As these droplets of blessed water sprinkle on you, may they remind you that you are blessed with joy, hope, and love.

### **Final benediction:**

Loving God open our minds to receive the lessons you would have us receive, both on and off the playground. Help us to grow stronger in knowledge of your goodness and grow ever kinder in our play with one another. Amen.

I invite you all to throw water saying: "Thanks be to God!!!!"







# FINDING THE GOOD SHEPHERD AT LYDIA'S HOUSE

by Laura Menze, Lydia's House Occupational Therapist

A year ago on a staff retreat, we spoke of our longing to introduce more robust spiritual practices into the life of Lydia's House. We brainstormed and let the ideas simmer in our collective consciousness. In our time of waiting and curiosity, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) rose to the surface as a good fit for our community. Mary Ellen Mitchell's children were part of this formation program and she was excited to introduce this to the children of Lydia's House.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a Montessori based religious formation program. As its name suggests, it is rooted in the parable of the good shepherd, a parable that reveals the personal love and protective presence of Christ. Though traditionally done in a church setting, this model has been used in orphanages and cross-culturally as well. In the words of the founder Sofia Cavalletti, CGS answers the child's plea of "Help me come closer to God by myself." The teacher is Christ – both children and adults place themselves in a stance of listening.

A COVID prompted closing of the Lydia's House living room and dining room meant that we had the space to craft a room for children to meet God. (We trust that when these rooms are reopened another plan will



*Sofia Cavalletti, CGS*

emerge, even if that means moving the materials each week.) It seemed turning this space into a classroom was fitting, especially since many of our children weren't getting formal schooling, and COVID spread among 3-6 year olds is very low. Once we made this decision, Mary Ellen and I worked quickly and diligently to set up stations and shelves of different works that children can select to do independently. There are creative works in which they can respond freely to what has been experienced in Atrium. There are practical life works, such as polishing metal or washing a baby doll, that aim to increase concentration and self-mastery. There are also works that are explicitly related to the story of Jesus, such as a map of where Jesus lived and stories with peg dolls depicting

the annunciation, birth of Jesus, or last supper.

In September we began offering weekly atrium times for children of Lydia's House. Mary Ellen Mitchell, board member Jill Stoxen, and I have welcomed an average of 10 children weekly to participate in Atrium. Some children live in the Lydia's House shelter, others live at Virginia Coffey Place or participate in the Lydia's House aftercare program. Other children live in the Norwood and are connected with the Lydia's House community.

In training courses and literature, there are stories told of children's artwork being prophetic and powerful interpretations of parables and children peaceably savoring silence. We have laughed that we do not yet have any anecdotes that will make the next edition of the textbook, but we have seen very clearly the "Montessori magic" of children settling into predictable routines and meeting God. Parents report their children repeatedly asking when Atrium is and singing the songs at home. A participant child sang to her mom "Be still and know that I am God" as she sensed her mother's anxiety on the day of the election. A child with high energy arrived to Atrium, crawled into an adult's lap, and asked, "Can we read Bible now?"







Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Program, or Atrium, cannot be started swiftly, for it takes a high amount of training (90 hours) and preparation of space with handcrafted intricate materials. We are deeply grateful to those that have supported us in the starting of this program.

- Dan Teller of Good Shepherd Montessori school – Offering a scholarship so Mary Ellen Mitchell, Jill Stoxen, and I could take the



formation course, as well as answering our countless start-up questions and helping with material matkin

- St. Timothy Episcopal Church – Gifting us many beautifully crafted items from their Atrium that's no longer in use
- Sandi Gaines – Making us quilted (and washable!) work mats for children to use while completing floor works
- Bethany Kurtz (Lydia's House Associate) and her family- Painting peg dolls and building dioramas
- Jake Boehne – Painting an African American good shepherd folk art icon for use on our altar table
- Josh Shanklin – Offering Montessori consultation as we were daunted by the practicalities of setting up the space



If you would like to learn more, check out these resources.

- The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children (Sofia Cavalletti)
- The United States Association of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd



## 1801 MILLS AVE: The newest addition to affordable housing in Norwood

As of publication Lydia's House has just closed on 1801 Mills Ave, across the street from Virginia Coffey Place. The building has long been held by community minded folk and we're grateful to Lisa Wharton and Larry Bourgeois for selling it to us, allowing us to continue their mission of building community in Norwood and beyond. Our plans for the building include a renovation (of course) with the intention of putting two 2 bedroom apartments online for former Lydia's House families, and adding another school room to our montessori partnership, ideally offering full time care to children 18-36 months. Thank you to our Women for Women donors, The Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio, Dan & Kathy Aerni and many individuals who helped make this purchase a reality.

# WHAT MARY NEEDED

*In 2020 Lydia's House offered a socially distanced Women for Women event with prayer and liturgy materials sent to each participants house and reflections recorded on Facebook Live. Below is the reflection by Lydia's House co director Meridith Owensby on Mary, the mother of Jesus.*

Tonight I'm here with you to spend time reflecting on the life of Mary, mother of Jesus, as described in the Gospels.

I'd like to start, however, with a Mary that is inspired by the book of Revelation. This is one of my favorite t-shirts to wear to yoga because I love the fierceness of this Mary. She needs nothing from anyone. She is powerful and victorious and is not going to let any dragon or snake swallow her newborn.

I should note that this Mary is not the Mary of the Gospels. It's also not an accurate representation of what her life looked like, or what the lives of most women look like. Perhaps we spend a small portion of our lives stomping devil snakes, but the vast majority of our living hours go into caring for ourselves and others, or earning a living to do so. And the God of the Gospels knows that, and provides community accordingly.

This is true from the very moment we meet Mary in the Gospel of Luke, the first chapter. The angel appears to her and greets her as highly favored. There's some back and forth between Mary and the angel about the logistics of Jesus' genesis, then the angel ends with,

"And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

This small angelic nudge is all Mary needs to hurry off to Elizabeth's house. As soon as the angel is gone, Mary gets ready and races off to the hill country to see her cousin. Elizabeth's unborn baby does a backflip as soon as Mary enters the scene.

The mention of Elizabeth's pregnancy by the angel strikes me as such a loving provision of God. Mary needed Elizabeth. She needed to share her joy with someone she loved, who loved her. Not only that, but she needed a woman who had been there, or as close to "there" as there could be. Elizabeth was also miraculously pregnant, so who better to discuss a miraculous pregnancy with? Elizabeth's greeting as soon as she hears Mary's voice went like this:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the



fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

It's Elizabeth's greeting, hailing Mary as the mother of the Lord, that prompts the Magnificat. It's two women meeting, exalting, exclaiming over their shared wonder that unleashes Mary's proud praise of God's work. Elizabeth was the audience for the Magnificat, as Elizabeth was the one who could best receive that joy and best imagine the world-shaking babies who were on their way. Yes, Mary needed Elizabeth.

So, we've established that from the initial announcement of Jesus, God ensured that Mary would not be alone on this journey. And the truth was that, as helpful and as loving as Elizabeth could be, she wasn't the only person Mary needed. After all, she was about to have her own newborn to contend with. No, Mary needed another in her corner, a person who would be there to provide day to day support. Mary needed Joseph.

It strikes me that Jesus could've existed without Joseph. The angel could've appeared to Mary before her engagement, moving up the timeline and preventing the drama that comes from being promised in marriage to a man and turning up pregnant with a divine child. God and Mary would have been sufficient, correct?

But we know that is not how the story unfolds. Joseph was already in Mary's life and had already pledged to care for her as his wife. We can assume that they planned to have children and to raise them together. God didn't want Mary to have to parent alone, to have to provide for all of Jesus' needs without assistance. No, Joseph was important to the story. He was needed to provide care and assistance to this infant (and later, the temple preaching adolescent). All parents need people who are not biologically related to their children to help with their care. Mary needed Joseph.

At some point, however, Joseph is no longer mentioned in the scriptures. We can assume that he died before Jesus did, due to the mentions of Jesus' "mother and brothers" looking for him, and the fact that Joseph wasn't named



as present at the crucifixion. Mary was a widow at the foot of the cross, as her child was suffering unto death.

It's at the foot of the cross where Jesus addresses another of Mary's needs. In His anguish, Jesus sees his sorrowful mother, and what does He do for her? In the Gospel of John, at least, he makes another provision. In chapter 19 the scripture says:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

We can assume this beloved disciple was the author himself, John. And Mary needed John. No one should be alone in that depth of sorrow, reeling with grief while trying to figure out their next steps as a widow with a son who was executed by the state. It is a touching moment, this provision of Jesus, seeing the two sorrowing figures and giving them to one another.

It strikes me that, in this directive, Jesus didn't stipulate who was to care for whom. We can imagine that, since John had a house to take Mary back to, he was caring for her in concrete ways. However, Mary was also able to be present to John in his sorrow, in his imagining of what life would hold after Jesus' death. It was a tie of kinship that Jesus joined them with, with all the responsibilities and comfort therein. Mary needed John. Perhaps John needed Mary, too.

I'd like to draw your attention now to our prayer card with Mary's image on it (see the cover of this newsletter). This rendering of Mary is more tender than the initial fierce Mary, and she shares some of the same facial features as our modern-day prophet of the week, Lateefah Simon. Lateefah is an advocate for civil rights, racial justice, and juvenile justice. She was the youngest person ever to receive a MacArthur genius grant, and she's currently the president of the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit board, as public transportation is a particular passion of hers as a legally blind woman dependent on it.

If you had met Lateefah as a teenager, however, you might not have guessed that a bright future lay before her. She drifted in and out of high school and got into legal trouble early. She became a teenage single mother. Her story mirrors those of many of our Lydia's House guests.

However, something happened to Lateefah in those teenage years that permanently altered her trajectory. She got a job with the Center for Young Women's Development as a street outreach worker, helping other young women who were caught up in the criminal justice system. At age 19 she became the executive director. She saw her work was making a difference, and she enrolled in college at age 25 to study public policy. She went on to work under then-attorney general Kamala Harris. Together they created the Back on Track

program, which aimed to reduce recidivism rates among young adults. Initially, individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 had recidivism rates of 70% or more. The program brought them down to less than 10% through a combination of providing opportunities and supports and having accountability through the courts.

Though she has an impressive accomplishment list and has received many honors, Lateefah's adult life has still known profound struggle. She married a fellow activist, and they had a child in 2012. Her husband, sadly, died of leukemia two years later. Lateefah was again a single mother with a young daughter.

What did Lateefah need as a teenager? What did she need as a 35-year-old widowed mother? The same things that she has spent much of her life advocating for, for all people. In her words:

*We must fight to ensure that all working families have what they need to thrive: good pay, good benefits, and quality childcare and schools. This is basic.*

It's not only systems, however, that receive Lateefah's attention. She also believes young people should frequently be reminded of their inherent worth. In 2017, when Lateefah was asked what advice she had for community college students, she responded:

*To be really bold. To take up space. And to rewrite in your mind how powerful you can be.*

So let us now recite a song from a bold, powerful young mother who knew how to take up the space that was rightfully hers:

*My soul proclaims your greatness, O God;  
my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior,  
for you have looked with favor on your lowly servant.*

*From this day all generations will call me blessed;  
you, the Almighty, have done great things for me,  
and holy is your Name.*

*You have mercy on those who fear you  
from generation to generation.*

*You, O God, have shown strength with your arm,  
and scattered the proud in their conceit,*

*Casting down the mighty from their thrones  
and lifting up the lowly.*

*You have filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.*

*You have come to the help of your servant Israel,  
for you have remembered your promise of mercy,*

*The promise made to our forebears,  
to Abraham, Sarah and their children forever.*

*Glory to the holy and undivided Trinity, one God,  
as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.  
Amen.*



# THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCOMPANIED BIRTH IN THE WORK OF ANTIRACISM

By Bethany Kurtz and Meridith Owensby, Lydia's House Doulas

## **Bethany's Perspective:**

In early February 2020 I was honored to take a doula class. It's my hope to be trained as a nurse, and the doula training fit well with my previous work caring for infants at an orphanage, my current work as the maternal care advocate at Lydia's House and my imagined future.

After completing my training, I had my first client, Tiana. Tiana was a young first time expectant mom who was living at the shelter. In the weeks leading up to her birth, she and I spent hours sitting with each other discussing the birth. We talked about how we could make the birth of her baby girl go as smoothly as possible. Of course, implicit in these plans is that her mom would be there as her partner, and I would be there as her doula.

In March the country went into complete lock down and our plans changed drastically. Our scheduled hospital visit to check out the maternity ward was canceled; no one could accompany her to the ultrasound appointments. There were so many disappointments, but we remained excited for the birth of this little one. If all this wasn't enough, we then got the news that only one visitor was allowed in the hospital room for the birth. We made countless calls to the hospital, to the doctors trying to negotiate with them. We told them I was a doula, and that accompanied birth was a human right, but I was denied entry to the delivery room.

The day arrived and I was able to bring Tiana to the hospital, but not to enter. On the 20 minute drive to I tried

to impart my last limited knowledge on Tiana, and her mother: "Know that pain is gain. It's bringing your little one closer to you!" I taught Tiana's mom how to coach her daughter through her contractions with breathing exercises, hoping that things would go as well as could be expected.

The hour's in-between dropping them off at the hospital and the birth were tough. It was hard to be a doula on the phone, trying to figure out the emotions of both Tiana and her mom, give some needed advice to help her through the contractions. It was challenging, but at 3:04 pm on Thursday, June 18, Marlee was born.

The hours after the birth were tough too. Marlee was taken straight to the NICU, so Tiana had only a couple precious moments with her daughter. After hours of labor Tiana was exhausted and wasn't even able to cuddle with her baby. Of course those were some of the hardest moments and I could only listen and support her on the phone.

Finally Marlee was brought back to her momma and they could spend some quality time together. But about a day later they noticed somethings weren't quite right with this new baby. Again she was taken away. This time she was taken to Children's Hospital. Tiana was again without her baby and was alone. This was extremely hard for this new, little family. As a doula I felt so limited to not physically be present to this suffering. I felt convinced that live presence was needed, angry that birth accompaniment and advocacy was not permitted, and worried for both mom and baby. There have been many losses in the





Covid-19 pandemic, accompanied birth by a doula being just one. Fortunately for baby Marlee and her mom they both are doing great now, but I know that's not always the case, especially for women and children of color.

### **Meridith's perspective:**

The first time I accompanied a birth was in 2014, our first year of Lydia's House. The mom was only 18, African American, and scared. I'll call her Nicey. We went together to her final scheduled prenatal appointment, stopping for a hearty lunch at Parkside Tavern beforehand. Nicey was having preliminary contractions, but nothing regular or sustained, and we both figured we'd spend about 20 minutes in the office like usual before heading home.

When we got to the doctor's office, the doctor checked Nicey's dilation. She then did something that had not happened in previous checks: she swept Nicey's membranes, a brief but painful procedure designed to induce labor. "I didn't want you to get tense beforehand," the doctor explained to Nicey afterward, reminding Nicey that she had said she was ready to have her baby. Nicey, wide eyed in pain, gave no reply, as her contractions had immediately intensified.

"You're going straight to labor and delivery," the doctor told her, "I hope your bag is with you."

Nicey's labor progressed over the next few hours. The pain got so bad mid-afternoon that she vomited, causing the duty nurse to scold her. "That's why you don't eat when you're in labor," she said, irritably. "If you hadn't eaten you wouldn't have thrown up."

"I didn't know I was going to be in labor when I ate," Nicey replied, aggravated by the critique. "I wasn't even IN labor at lunch."

When the media began highlighting how the health concerns and pain of black mothers are often overlooked, I was not surprised. The accompaniment work I had done had shown me many examples, some small, some larger, where the voices of black laboring moms were either ignored or silenced. Almost always, the existing power

dynamic meant that neither the mom nor I spoke up, fearful that being labeled difficult in the midst of labor would only make care worse.

And honestly, once the baby arrived, the thought of filling out a comment card was not foremost in our minds. The baby was here and both mom and baby healthy; wasn't that the ultimately important outcome? Who wanted to reflect on disappointments or omissions when breastfeeding was the new skill to be learned?

The statistics, however, remind us that not every outcome is a good one. Black mothers are three times more likely to die of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth than white mothers. Though the causes are not simple or singular, much of the evidence points to the effects of structural racism as the reason for this inequality.

The doula training Bethany and I attended in February was quick to name the maternal mortality inequalities for black women, and we were provided with some resources to share with our clients. We've continued researching and learning in the months between, and have added some resources to our doula toolkit.

Currently, I'm planning (and hoping!) to be present as a doula for one of our former Lydia's House guests, an African American first time mom who is excited to meet her baby boy this December. At a recent prenatal meeting she and I were able to discuss an Anti-Racist Prenatal and Postnatal Care Preference guide ([loomhq.com/protect-black-birth](https://loomhq.com/protect-black-birth)), designed to help patients have conversations with their doctors about the issues that cause increased mortality. We're bringing the guide with us, empowered to ask questions about the symptoms of preeclampsia and assert the right to be asked about any examinations or procedures prior to receiving them.

Back in December of 2014, Nicey had trouble at the end of her labor. She was exhausted by the hours of pain and protested she could push no more. A vacuum extractor was attached to the baby's head to draw her out, and she emerged, covered in green meconium, wailing in the light. "She's...beautiful?" I said haltingly, confused by the baby's appearance but convinced that I needed to say something positive.

Six years later, I'd do things differently. Now I'll name what is present, even if what's present is a mess. There's a need for more truth, not less. It's literally a matter of life and death.

Further Reading:

*Protecting Your Birth: A Guide for Black Mothers* (New York Times Article)

*Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths* (CDC Report)

*The Secret to Saving the Lives of Black Mothers and Babies* (Politico Article)



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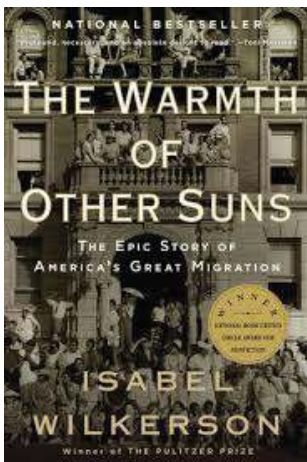
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## WHAT WE'RE READING: *THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS* BY ISABEL WILKERSON

by Honna Brown



One positive fruit of limited life at Lydia's House (due to the pandemic) is that we have been able to set aside some time for shared reading. Together as a staff we have been reading Isabel Wilkerson's book *The Warmth of Other Suns*. The book follows three main characters on their journey during a time in American history known as The Great Migration, which is one of the most underreported stories of the 20th century. The book, based on more than a thousand interviews, retells the story of each character and why he or she decided to flee the only life and place she or he had ever known. The book spans a whopping six decades in America history and three different geographical locations that enslaved Africans of the south fled to in hopes of gaining greater access to freedom and opportunity. Not sparing any details, Wilkerson describes the violent oppression of the American South and what enslaved African families had to endure under the leadership of white sharecroppers and plantation owners. She sets the stage to allow readers to enter into conversations about current racial disparity with a greater historical context, allowing us to see the igniting points for systems of oppression that have been with us throughout the development of our nation. Yet, amidst the descriptions of struggle, Wilkerson also manages to capture the strength of each character and the community surrounding them. She distills their moments of joy and captures the small moments of their lives, which ultimately reveals their breathtaking courage and humanity. We highly recommend this book. If you read it, please let us know what you think!