

LYDIA'S HOUSE // SUMMER 2022 + ANNUAL REPORT



By Marge Piercy

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.



LYDIA'S HOUSE offering hospitality in the Catholic Worker Tradition



WE'LL MISS YOU LAURA!

Laura Menze Green was one of our original volunteers. First taking on sewing and crafts for us, later doing book keeping and accounting, and finally joining us as staff person offering her services of occupational therapy and organizational leadership. It's hard to imagine the last decade of Lydia's House without Laura's contributions. In January of 2022 Laura made the difficult decision to leave Lydia's House employment and return to full time occupational therapy with children, in a community based practice. We asked Laura to reflect on all that she had done to make Lydia's House better and here's what she came up with:

Some Accomplishments During My Time at Lydia's House

- 1. LYDIA'S HOUSE BECOMING AN AFFORDABLE HOUSING LANDLORD:** The renovation of affordable housing units would have amounted to nothing if they sat empty or quickly fell into chaos. During the 3 years since Virginia Coffey Place has been open, I have helped 17 families with 31 children make their home in Norwood. Much of this work is not particularly glamorous – navigating tenant conflicts about laundry machines, enforcing lease rules, and cleaning stairs. That said, the highlights are showing someone their new apartment for the first time and watching them be impressed by how nice the unit is, hanging photos on the wall and seeing the blank slate become a home, and having kids excitedly give me a tour of their new home. I leave Lydia's House with leases, house rules, manuals, and form letters ready for the tenants to come and a culture of high-quality affordable housing in place.
- 2. ACCESS DATABASE:** It may seem silly for a database to make the list, but anyone who has been called upon to quickly generate data summaries knows that data is only as good as what you can access. Therefore, after 3 years of trudging through an ever-growing clunky Excel spreadsheet, I worked with a consultant to build a database to meet the needs of Lydia's House. Since that time, it has been filled with data, yielding demographics and outcomes that are easy to view, mailing lists that are kept up to date in a central place, and things such as a list of birthdays so we can offer kids birthday parties monthly.
- 3. THE JOB DESCRIPTION GRID:** To those not familiar with Lydia's House, the fact that my job description changes seasonally (with staffing changes or just organizational iterating) is baffling. However, Lydia's House, with all its fluidity, requires job descriptions to be nimble and fluid. Therefore, the creation of a large Excel spreadsheet with every staff members' duties listed makes every season shuffling so much easier. Several times a year, I am grateful for this early project.
- 4. IMPROVED ACCOUNTING PRACTICES:** During my time with Lydia's House, the annual budget grew from \$82,000 to nearly \$400,000. This numerical increase brought with it a significant increase in credit card receipts and bills to pay. By the grace of God, there has similarly been a great increase in the amount of grants processed and tracked and individual donations processed. This growth has required great attention to detail, willingness to try new systems, and a lot of time in front of the computer. Much of these improved systems were done through the helpful guidance of Julia Kyser, our accountant, to whom I am deeply grateful!
- 5. A ROBUST GUEST EDUCATION MANUAL:** Over my time with Lydia's House, I have spent countless hours learning information in order to teach parents. I often joke that for not having children, I have spent a lot of time thinking about pregnancy, potty training, child discipline, and supporting kids with sleep. All of this learning has yielded a robust manual of resources that are readily available to teach Lydia's House families. Topics have been synthesized with families in crisis in mind. I have also developed tenant training and car ownership training modules that guests regularly participate in to offer necessary education (what do those lights on the dashboard mean?) and hopefully prevent pitfalls before they happen. I am hopeful that these teaching resources will outlive my own time at Lydia's House.



6. AN ATRIUM: When we began the journey to start Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the children of Lydia's House, I had no idea what would be involved. We started with a large pile of donated materials from an Atrium that was closing and now have a beautiful space, ordered and abundant. As I stand in our Atrium space now, I see a room full of handcrafted items that I have helped make – a paper mâché topographical map of Israel, a variety of sewing works, a multitude of prayer cards. Weekly, an average of 12 kids, most of them kids who have lived at Lydia's House, neighbors and classmates at Azaela, come to encounter God and the consistent presence of loving adults.

7. ABUNDANT AFTERCARE ASSISTANCE: Through several iterations we have now landed on a way to provide aftercare financial assistance that is equitable, transparent, and dignifying. Gone are the days when we sat around a table debating each need and trying to recall what other assistance we had recently offered. In a world in which we cannot fix everything, it is a great gift to say 'yes' to needs and be able to say 'yes' often. 'Yes, we can get your Duke turned back on.' 'Yes, we can pay your rent.' 'Yes, we can give you money for food.'

8. PROVIDING POSITIVE MEMORIES FOR KIDS: It is a gift to be able to come alongside families during a vulnerable time and offer support. I have found that one of my greatest joys in this work is supporting kids to create positive memories during their time at Lydia's House and at Virginia Coffey Place. I long for Lydia's House to be remembered for its loving adults quick to play and listen. Highlights include swimming in Brush Creek on our trip to the farm, making slime after weekly tutoring with a child when his own classes were only virtual, reading bedtime stories outside on a blanket, and taking a child to weekly gymnastics classes.

9. MANY BINDERS AND SYSTEMS: As a great lover of order, I have often been tasked with taking a piece of Lydia's House that was clunky, inefficient, or confusing, and improving it. As I leave and look around the office, I realize that I leave in my wake a multitude of binders and systems that are in order. Gift cards are in a designated box with dividers – not in various staff desk drawers. Room inspections happen weekly with an incentive program that has all the supplies in a single binder. There is a system to regularly check-in on and celebrate staff member's professional goals. There are checklists, pivot tables, and spreadsheets aplenty. Though this particular skill set is hard to name on a resume, I have come to realize it as one of the greatest strengths I brought to Lydia's House.

10. CREATING NEW PROGRAMS: After years of working for the state of Ohio at a mental health hospital where bureaucracy was cumbersome and anything but nimble, the freedom to dream and imagine new ways of doing things at Lydia's House was a breath of fresh air. In meetings, we brainstormed, made decisions, and set in motion programs ever iterating to better meet the needs we served. It was a gift to be a part of imagining a December rent jubilee, a car program, a way to identify high need guests, and a program to offer birthday parties to all children, among many other programs. Though my role in these meetings always bent towards implementation, to have such creative and generative power is a great gift.

As I look ahead, I look forward to being a neighbor to Lydia's House and a volunteer at Atrium. I will miss watching kids grow up and parents grow in maturity. I will miss interactions with volunteers – their fresh faces being such a light to days when we sometimes feel in the trenches. (I will miss my 2-minute commute.) I look forward to connecting Lydia's House with all that I will be learning so that children in the Lydia's House circle can grow up happy and healthy. I am grateful to the Lydia's House community for having me on this journey.





WHAT WE LEARNED AND LOST IN THE PANDEMIC: A LYDIA'S HOUSE RETROSPECTIVE

By Mary Ellen Mitchell, co-director

In the past two years many people, our guests among them, were sent the mixed message that the highest and best contribution to society was isolation, unless you were an essential worker, at which point it was showing up at work despite an absence of childcare or, in many cases, living wage pay. At Lydia's House, we filtered through these conflicting messages, worked hard to stay open, juggled our own childcare, and wrote Covid safety protocols while also attempting to keep abreast of the thousands of situational outbreaks, CDC guideline changes and opinion pieces on best practices.

We knew that the guests' and former guests' experience of Covid was different from the staff experiences; we knew that running a homeless shelter was different from almost any other work during the pandemic, but in the midst of the crisis it was hard to gain clarity on what the best path forward was or why social distancing felt like trying to hold back the ocean. Considering this challenging situation from where we stand now, here are some reflections on lessons learned:

In our context, social distancing attempts cost us community and accountability with little gain

Early in the pandemic we limited capacity of the shelter and divided families into suites with kitchenettes. At first we offered hot meals delivered to rooms, but when it was clear that those were mostly being thrown away, we stopped. We reduced contact to case management on the porch and occasional interactions as staff cleaned the kitchen. While we still offered a place to sleep at our shelter we offered very little else for a long period. We call the guests that were served from March 2020 to October 2021 "pandemic guests" and, honestly, we don't know them. We did realize, after some time, that they were getting to know each other and socializing between each other while they shared the house. In retrospect, that Covid protocols weren't central to our families isn't a surprise: when faced with this crisis, it seemed to just layer over the crisis that is life for the very poor in our circle, especially those in shelter. Asking them to attempt to distance in a congregate living setting was unrealistic at best. Covid faded into a backdrop of broken relationships, pending evictions, children's behavior problems, and sadness that life isn't working, with or without a pandemic.

When vaccines were widely available and it became abundantly clear that the health risks to our in shelter families (young women with young children) was low, that they weren't social distancing anyway, and that this model was far removed from our vision of hospitality, we shut down the suites, restarted meals at the table and started requiring vaccines for adults. To this date, in the most draconian or lax of standards, we haven't had a Covid outbreak at the shelter. We have, however, spent many hours writing and re-writing Covid protocols, moving furniture and dish bins around, and asking each other "Who was LaTonya? Was she a pandemic guest? Does anyone remember what she looked like?"

Kids in crisis need to go to school

As soon as schools closed down we got to work offering alternatives. Among them: 1:1 tutoring, small group tutoring, providing internet, dropping off home school materials, offering lists of educational apps, buying workbooks, offering childcare, providing lap tops, setting up home school stations. We went all in! What we know happened, however, is that our moms, like all moms, were overwhelmed, kids hated online classes, and many of the materials we dropped off ended up in the trash. National outcomes reveal kids, especially poor kids, are behind by as much or more as the school they lost. Many of the kids in our circle were fully online or hybrid for all of the 2021 school year. They lost the social support of school, breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria, and reading at grade level.

My older kids, on the other hand, went to in person school every day at Good Shepherd Catholic Montessori. A small group of Lydia's House kids and my youngest son Jacob, were enrolled in our partner preschool, Azalea Montessori, and also attended school daily. We at Lydia's House are now helping more aftercare families apply for Ed Choice vouchers to go to private and parochial schools, hoping they can get back into stable school environments.

Isolation paired with an inability to contribute entrenches trauma and despair

When Annie was born, in 2009, we were in the great recession. I got laid off from my job at Xavier University and was offered very generous unemployment benefits. It should have been amazing but I felt demoralized applying for jobs I didn't want

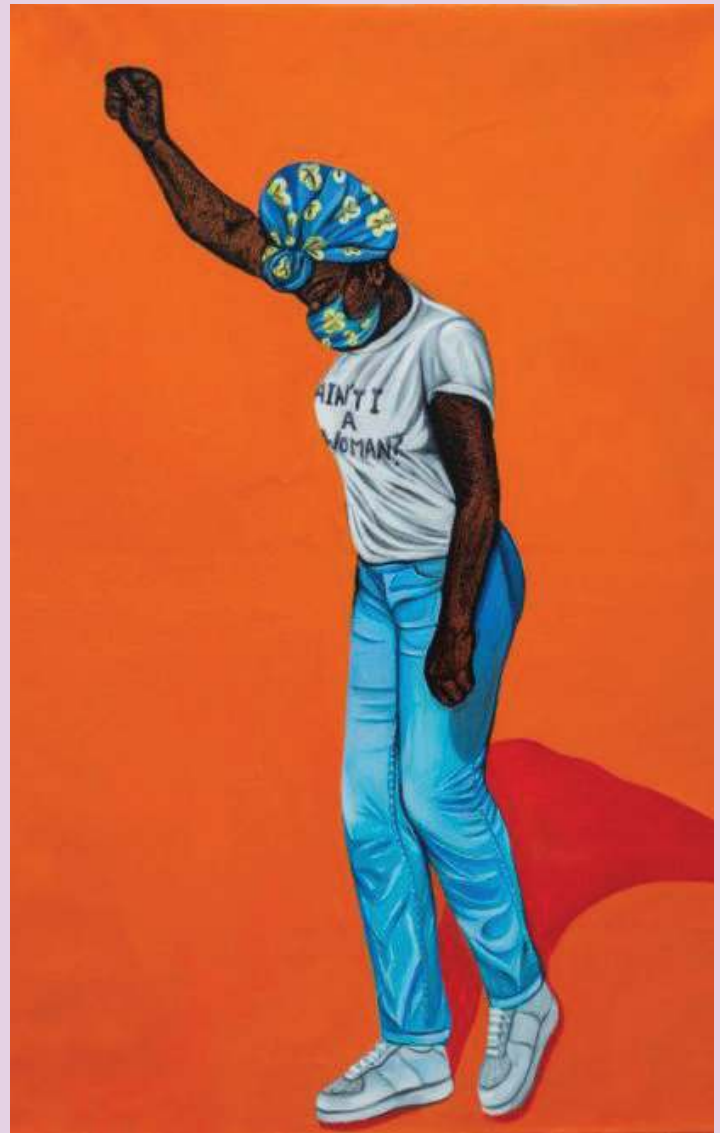
to keep benefits on, when really I wanted to go back to work. At the same time I felt obtuse for wanting to work when I could care for my child while collecting a generous amount in government assistance. Eventually, I decided to go back to work for my own mental health. The short term net loss in dollars was substantial but I didn't regret it.

The Federal Government just tried that experiment on a massive level. I know that being paid to not work seemed like the best option for many, but staying home as a "contribution" is, as a guest told us, depressing. In the bestselling book on trauma treatment and recovery, ***The Body Keeps the Score***, the author writes, "The antidote to trauma is competence." While competence can be gained outside of work by, say, taking an art class or teaching oneself to cook, self-led attempts at competence and contribution also typically lack accountability. If I decide to shut down this internet cooking class, so be it! ***Becoming more competent pairs well with either community or commitment, though ideally the three need to go together.*** If the pandemic was a collective trauma, we need to respond by re-engaging the world in ways that increase our competence in the context of community and commitment.

Our culture of distraction on screens is toxic

Before the pandemic, Lydia's House had a strict "no screens in common spaces" rule. It required constant enforcement, but was central to our vision of community. In March of 2020, we gave that up and put free Wi-Fi in the shelter. When I went to the Lydia's House kitchen a few times during the shutdown, I encountered adults looking at phones while they never acknowledged my presence. Considering we weren't supposed to even be within 6 feet of each other, I guess that was fair. Adults and children in our circle resorted to schooling and, sometimes, working online. Trends that were already problematic for our guests re: a lack of human contact or meaningful engagement became even more entrenched. For families that lack social support or supportive community in the best of times, the pandemic practice of experiencing the world through screens was especially concerning and, likely, harmful.

My own observations and experience from this dark time is that there's only so much internet scrolling and Netflix watching to do before we truly feel awful; there's research to say that time spent on social media negatively impacts self-esteem and mood. New revelations re: Facebook show that the platform prioritizes discord and polarization as a way to keep our attention. If competence is the antidote to trauma, I would posit screens are the incubator. When distracted scrolling is how we might default, I want to highly endorse work or education or basically anything involving real humans instead. While I wish



our Lydia's House families had more life giving ways to engage real human contact, especially through work, what I don't wish is that we all had more time to sit at home and stare at our phones.

Sporadic cash payments and delayed government programs were confusing and led to temporary, unsustainable change

Debating how much to pay people to stay home and then debating when to remove cash payments so as to incentivize the same people to go back to fast food work or hotel maid jobs is the intellectual labor of those in media, think tanks and in government. The distance from the Fed or the *Wall Street Journal* to the lives of very poor, single parents is far. On the ground, a lot of our moms just stood confused, not knowing when and if stimulus checks would come, why food stamps fluctuated rapidly, or how long monthly child payments would come. It was a sometimes fun/sometimes awful mystery each month.

Meanwhile, many government agencies went silent: our local Section 8 office stopped processing

vouchers for a long period of time in 2020, it took hours to get through to unemployment hotlines, and rental assistance dollars meant to prevent eviction or stabilize rents took months to receive. In one case, a Lydia's House landlord partner agreed to take rental assistance in lieu of rent for a former guest (who missed payments while sick with Covid), and ended up waiting 7 months and sending over a dozen emails before receiving \$900 in payment from a government pass through agency. Fortunately, this landlord is patient and financially able to weather nonpayment, but many other landlords are not as patient, financially stable, or supported. By the summer of 2020 Lydia's House created our own internal assistance fund, with few strings attached, and managed to keep all but one family in our circle stably housed; similar families who lacked relationship circles with quick access to cash did not fare as well in preventing eviction. While we've often lobbied the government to be more generous to single moms in poverty, we saw in the pandemic the limits of government response and the necessity of smaller circles of relationship to make quick and agile decisions.

Food stamps are better than food pantries; being able to buy, grow or procure your own food in the context of community and responsibility is better than either of these

During the pandemic five Norwood churches or non-profits offered food pantries. Norwood is three square miles big. The government supply of canned and shelf stable food (condensed soup anyone?) was so abundant it got dropped off unsolicited at our guests' doors. When I did apartment inspections, I found said food still in boxes, in the corner, months later. As the nation geared up to fight an invisible war by (kind of) staying home, the op-ed writers again battled on how to keep us from starving. Eventually food stamps increased, so much that families of 5 were receiving \$785 a month. I was in favor of the increase because it was the simplest response, though it also didn't stop nearly constant food distributions from happening all over our city. The impulse here to support neighbors was a good one and perhaps single people on fixed

incomes did need this, but families receiving large food stamp benefits didn't. As we open the gates to reengage society, more than canned food, families in our circle need opportunities to contribute in the context of community and commitment. Our hope is that local churches will redirect this energy toward knowing families and responding from a place of relationship. We've been meeting with church leaders to rethink a place based response to poverty in our city.

In Conclusion

The pandemic has been demoralizing. I'm tired and want to forget a lot of the last two years! However, we would be remiss if we failed to reflect on what's happened so far, take stock of our regrets and failures, and learn how to be better together. At Lydia's House we'll continue adult vaccine mandates because we want to do our best not to spread Covid in our shelter, but we're back to mandatory shared meals, no screens in shared spaces, shared chores, children in school or daycare every day (if it's open) and a requirement for adults to be enrolled in education or training if not working. This may sound like a high bar for a house of hospitality, but this time has taught us that good hospitality asks something of all of us: we have to show up for one another, be vulnerable to seeing each other's humanity, work to become more competent in the ways we contribute, and give opportunities to our children. We frame our model of hospitality in this way because the narrow path to abundant life is filled with responsibility, ever doing more with and for each other, and growing better at the tasks God calls us to. While a temporary reprieve may seem like a needed respite, indefinite reprieve from our commitments to one another is a recipe for depression, boredom and discontent.

For this article with links to supporting references check it out online at <https://stlydiashouse.org/what-we-learned-and-lost-in-the-pandemic-alydias-house-retrospective/>

Art credit: Daryl Myntia Daniel



WELCOME AARON

Aaron Grant is the new Property Manager for Lydia's House. Aaron has been working in the nonprofit sector for 15 years, and has worked in construction and home repairs for more than two decades. Highlights include working with a local community group in Morocco to install running water at their vocational center for people with disabilities. Lowlights include framing a house in the middle of a Maine winter. Aaron earned a BA in History at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New

Hampshire, and after serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer for two years, completed his MA in Public Service at Marquette University in Milwaukee as a Trinity Fellow with a focus in affordable housing. Aaron has provided emergency home repair and home maintenance services for low-income families since moving to Cincinnati in 2011, and is excited to help provide safe, quality housing for Lydia's House guests.



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Lydia's House 2021 Year in Review

149 Individuals Served

Emergency Shelter at Lydia's House



22 Families were provided Emergency Shelter for stays between 6 and 30 days

77% Continued into Transitional Housing or Safe Stable Housing

Each Family Received:

- On-Site Staff Support
- 24/7 Shelter Access
- Nutritious Meals
- Private rooms
- Case Management Services , including Applying to Housing and Benefits Navigation
- Support in Receiving COVID Vaccine (Required as of 9/1/21) (11 Individuals)



Women Served:

- Average Age = 24 Years
- Average ACE* Score = 4.3
- 41% Experienced Domestic Violence in the Past Year
- 27% Spent time in Foster Care as Children
- 59% Had a Mental Health Diagnosis
- 95% African American; 5% Caucasian
- Shelter guests named an average of 1.3 people in their social support network **

Transitional Housing Program



12 Families Continued onto Lydia's House On-Site Transitional housing is offered for those that stay in s

Average Total Length of Stay: 80 D
83% Moved into Stable Housing



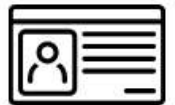
75%
Received
Needed
Mental Health
or Medical
Care



67%
Obtained and/or
Maintained
Employment



67%
Obtained
Government
Benefits



58%
Obtained
Necessary
Documentation



Referred to
Support
Services

83% Cited Improvements in Coping Skills



"I learned to be more patient and how to love myself more... The storm doesn't last forever... I see things more positively"



53% Cited Improvements in Interpersonal Skills

"I'm more open and able to interact with others... I learned how to say no to people"

*ACE = Adverse Childhood Events, A tool used to assess traumatic events individuals experienced in childhood, which are correlated with negative health outcomes, Score 0-10

**As measured by the Sarason Social Support Questionnaire - Short Form

Transitional Housing Program
shelter longer than 30 days

ays

5



42%
received
Legal
Assistance



33%
Received
Assistance in
Enrolling
Children in a
New School or
Daycare



3 Guests
Supported in
Pregnancy

67% Cited Improvements in Life Skills and Parenting

"I now know to to budget, catch the bus, and
set/keep a routine... I've learned how to talk to my
baby more - what to do, what not to do."

n

people... I

"

experienced during childhood, higher scores

Lydia's House Aftercare Program 48 Families Served



- 7 Parties Offered to Aftercare Families (Easter, Back to School, Amusement Park Outing, Thanksgiving, Breakfast with Santa, Christmas Giveaway, After Christmas Pizza Party)
- Vaccine education and onsite vaccine clinic offered; 4 adults vaccinated at the clinic
- 8 Families Attended Camp
- \$50,000 Spent on Aftercare Families
 - \$21,000 Provided in Financial Assistance, such as Rent, Utilities, and Bills
 - 53 Children Provided Funding to Strengthen Family Bonds, including Birthday Parties, Vacations or Family Outings
 - 21 Families Provided Annual Memberships to Local Attractions, such as the Zoo or Norwood Pool
- 15 Families Provided Legal Assistance, including Trained Tax Preparation
- 19 Families Provided Case Management
- 17 Families Provided Occupational Therapy Services
- 5 Individuals Participated in Car Program to Have Affordable, Reliable Transportation with a 0% Interest Lydia's House Loan

Virginia Coffey Place Supportive Housing



11 Families Housed,
including 21 kids

- \$2,400 Provided in Rental Assistance to Tenants

Expanding Local Affordable Housing

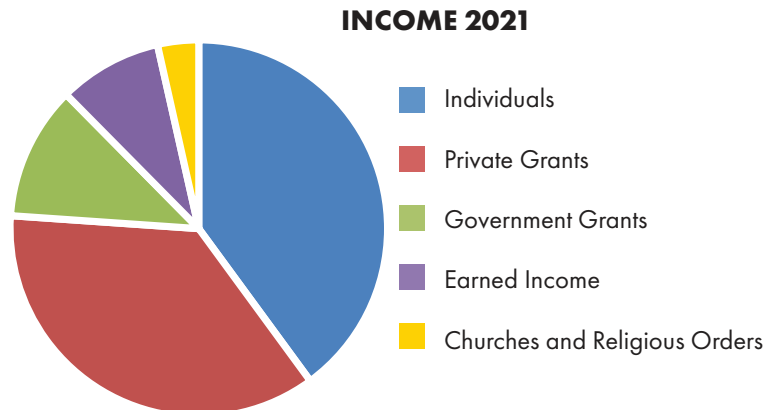
- 2 Apartments and 1 house in Landlord Partnership Program
- 1801 Mills Ave to open April 2022 with 4 units of affordable housing



2021 ANNUAL REPORT

INCOME 2021

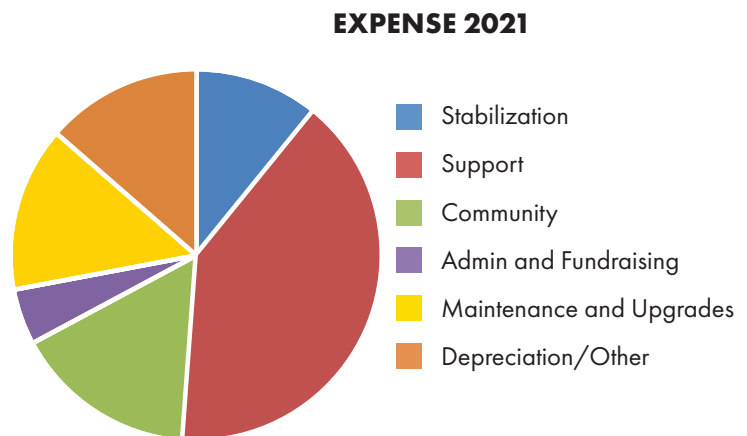
Individuals	304,822
Private Grants	275,930
Government Grants	87,736
Earned Income	67,805
Churches and Religious Orders	26,888
TOTAL*	763,181



*Total income includes capital campaign fundraising for 1801 Mills Ave. The expenses for this project are not listed below, but rather are booked as an asset in our accounting.

EXPENSE 2021

Stabilization <i>(includes utilities, food, bus passes, insurance, personal care spending)</i>	43,227
Support <i>(includes expenses related to guest support personnel)</i>	160,487
Community <i>(includes worship, outings, support for other ministries, newsletter, aftercare)</i>	63,687
Admin and Fundraising <i>(includes office expenses and supplies, software and hardware, accounting professional expenses, admin professional expenses)</i>	19,372
Maintenance and Upgrades <i>(includes yards, furniture, building maintenance and maintenance staffing)</i>	57,254
Depreciation/other	54,061
TOTAL	398,088





1801 MILLS UPDATE

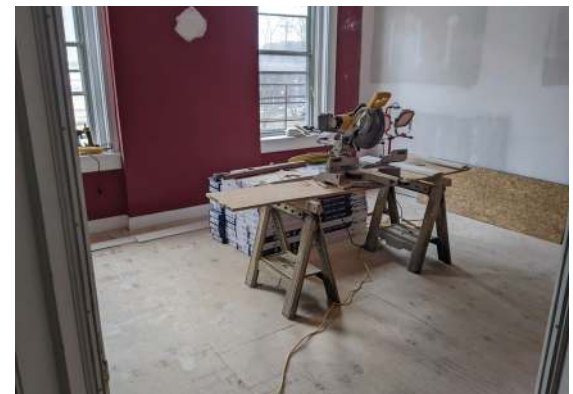
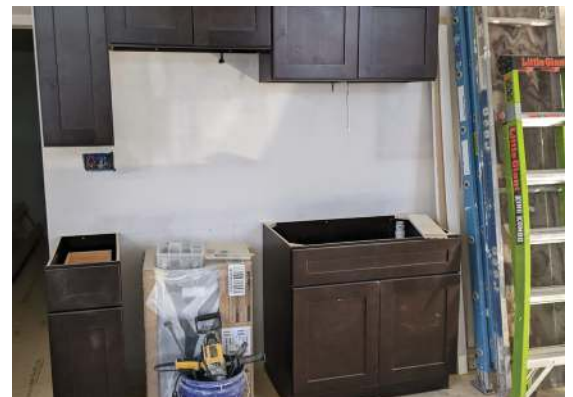
In the fall of 2020 we bought 1801 Mills Avenue. Though we were well into the pandemic, and many unknowns surrounded us, we bought it as both a sign of hope for our future and a continued acknowledgment that securing housing for our families is very difficult. It was the last moment before real estate prices in our neighborhood skyrocketed. Over the next months we rung our hands as labor and material prices also went through the roof. After much agonizing we decided to go through with the renovation, knowing that God had always provided for our needs and trusting this would not be an exception. We will open the building in May of this year!



We'd like to thank the following donors and volunteers:

Dan and Kathy Aerni
Dennis and Georgia Bishop
Steve and Amy Whitlatch
Dane and Mary Miller
Kevin Koffel
The Bellarmine Chapel
Youth Group
The Board of Trustees of
Lydia's House
Over the Rhine Community
Housing
Hamilton County Community
Development
Christ Church Cathedral
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati
First Financial Bank
The Ohio Finance Fund

The Carol Ann and Ralph
Haile Foundation
Franciscan Friars
Women for Women event
donors and Robert and Maria
Krzieski
Bellarmine Chapel
The Kohnen Family
Wright Patterson Sunshine
Fund
The Greater Cincinnati
Foundation
Christ the Savior/Holy Spirit
Orthodox Church
People's Bank
New City Church



AWKWARD SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS: A RECOMMENDATION

by Meridith Owensby

I've been thinking about Jesus lately, about how lame and awkward his many shared meals must have been. How excited was Zacchaeus' family to host the whole roaming band after Jesus announced they were coming to dinner? What did they discuss since their previous encounter had been tree-related? Not exactly the finest meet-cute.

Or how about the jostling for position, to sit literally or figuratively on Jesus' right? How embarrassing to have James and John's mom show up (their MOM!) and ask for their promotion. You know everyone laughed at them while simultaneously thinking that they themselves were worthy for the promotion.

Or having a meal interrupted by the woman with the jar of perfume? How do you keep a conversation going? Who wants to eat with that cloying scent everywhere? And then Jesus mentioned that no one had washed his feet, and you feel embarrassed for the host. What a disaster.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of awkwardness is the traveling band of disciples. It's a bad mix for a dinner party, zealots and the tax collectors they'd like to kill, brothers and fishermen, and married men who have other things on their minds.

U.A. Fanthorpe has a poem describing this motley crew, speaking of them from Jesus' point of view. From *Getting It Across*:

*Pete, with his headband stuffed with fishhooks,
His gift for rushing in where angels wouldn't,
Tom, for whom metaphor is anathema,
And James and John, who want the room at the top—
These numskulls are my medium. I called them.*

*I am tattooing God on their makeshift lives.
My Keystone Cops of disciples, always,
Running absurdly away, or lying ineptly,
Cutting off ears and falling into the water,
These Sancho Panzas must tread my Quixote life.*

Fanthorpe concludes by calling them "The dear, the human, the dense." The pratfalling numskulls, none of them particularly refined or adept at conversation. The few instances of meals shared sound awkward enough; how many more included glaring or painful silences or, God forbid, political disputes?

At Lydia's House, we share meals together three nights a week. For families coming from situations of homelessness, this regulation is the cause of much protesting. Toddlers whine about being confined to high chairs. Kids proclaim they do not like the food. Sometimes the adults join them in this protest. Everything is too bland, or we have run out of cheese, or there are too many vegetables, or the preference is for spaghetti instead of soup.

These meals, more often than not, are awkward. Conversation lurches when it happens at all. Frequent reminders are necessary to keep people off of their phones for the duration of the 20-minute

dinner.

Yet, in the face of all verbal and nonverbal protests, I am unwavering in placing meals at the center of our shared life. Community building does not happen passively despite what we may want to believe about ourselves or others. There is a fair amount of awkwardness necessary. Many stilted conversations happen, and we try and fail to build relationships before we arrive at knowledge of one another, to say nothing of affinity.

The table is honestly one of the few places where it is easy to let one another know we see them, hear their preferences, and, within reason, remember them. There was one meal years ago where two community members were present, Stacey and Gloria. Stacey had cooked dinner that night, and Gloria brought her toddler to the table at the sound of the nightly bell.

Gloria poured water into each glass from the table pitcher, and she gestured to one of the water glasses on the table. "That one is yours," she told Stacey. "I made sure it didn't have any ice since I know you don't like ice."

After the dinner blessing prayer, Stacey excused herself to the kitchen and brought back an individual serving of the dinner dish. She placed it in front of Gloria.

"What's this?" Gloria asked, slightly suspicious. "Why do I have something different than everybody else?"

"I made yours without peas," replied Stacey. "I know you don't like them."

I know you. I heard you. I had a choice, and I thought about what you'd like best and chose accordingly. Outside of the table, what other times do we get to so easily affirm our knowledge of one another and our affection for one another as our knowledge grows? How will we possibly love our neighbors if we don't even know them?

Of course, one could argue that an anti-pea preference is hardly comprehensive knowledge of another person. Yet it constantly surprises me how little knowledge of another person it takes to make a meaningful difference.

Jesus also showed this to be the case. Telling the





woman at the well she had had five husbands caused her to proclaim, "He knew everything I'd ever done!" Telling Nathaniel he'd been sitting under a fig tree before they met caused Nathaniel to affirm, "You are the Son of God!" People long to be known, and it takes very little knowledge to set them glowing.

Last Christmas, we had a breakfast with Santa early in December for our former shelter guests. It was chaotic, with the kids too anxious to eat much as they watched the door for Santa's arrival.

I sat at a table and chatted with a mom about her new apartment in the neighborhood, her first since leaving the shelter, and how she and her son were getting ready for the holiday. "The place is great," she told me, "but I don't have a Christmas tree. I don't know if we're going to get one either. They are pretty expensive this year."

The following week a woman at church approached Mary Ellen. Did we know anyone who needed a Christmas tree? They had one they were no longer using, and it was in good shape. She would be happy to deliver it if we knew of anyone.

It is rare that a need and an offer so perfectly align in my work, so we happily put the two women in contact. I heard the arrival of the tree one evening, with the women warmly exchanging Christmas well-wishes at the dropoff.

When I spoke to that mom later in the month, she was voluble in her gratitude. "I just mentioned the tree in passing, and you remembered," she said. "It's a huge tree. It almost touches the ceiling. I had to get my boyfriend to put the star on top because he was the only one tall enough. I can't believe you remembered. It means so much to me."

What do we lack? What do we like? What has our journey been? I know that answering these questions does not give us a complete picture of a person. But knowing a few of the answers is the only place I know to start.

When one of our new employees or guests complains that the meals are socially difficult or it's hard to make friends, I tell them a story about myself, about a lame and awkward event I continuously attended.

When I first moved to Cincinnati, I went looking for a church. I asked a coworker who was a lifelong resident of the area, and she mentioned a church known for its work in the community. It sounded

like a fine place to start, so I began attending every Sunday.

After each service, I made it a point to go to coffee hour, an ordeal that was uniquely painful to my introvert self. I would vow to stay for the time it took to drink an entire cup of coffee. When I finished my coffee, I was free to slink out the door.

The church proved to be a socially tricky place to make headway. A single person on the membership committee, Jean, went out of her way to speak to me each time she saw me, but otherwise, the crowd was pretty aloof. Even attending a membership class failed to bring about relational fruit, so I decided to try somewhere else.

Imagine my surprise a few weeks later when Jean called me up. She had noticed my absence from church and wondered if we could get coffee together. I was not particularly excited to explain why I had stopped coming, but since she had made the effort to reach out, it felt churlish not to accept.

We met, appropriately enough, at a coffee shop one Saturday afternoon. After exchanging pleasantries, we turned to the reason for the meeting, and I explained what I had found hard about the church community she represented.

To my surprise, Jean did not disagree with me. She listened thoughtfully and even acknowledged similar places she found hard. And then, the conversation drifted in other directions. We chatted for almost two hours and made plans to do so again.

Those awkward coffee hours, that squirm-inducing reason for a coffee date, resulted in my first real Cincinnati friend. Twelve years later, we are still going strong. I called her up when a friend of mine needed a place to stay for a few weeks after her house burned down. Jean invited me to her thesis defense when she completed her Ph.D. We have seen one another through personal triumphs and personal collapse, and it is because we both repeatedly showed up in an awkward social space.

This is the hope to keep in mind: not that you will learn to like everyone or even feel at ease, but that you might, with persistence, get one new person out of it. You don't have to like everyone in the community, or even a majority, but try coming away with one new person from this time. This doesn't happen by chance! Only prolonged proximity provides the space for relationships to emerge.

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LYDIA'S HOUSE



We hope you'll join us

OPEN HOUSE AND BLESSING

1801 Mills Avenue

**May 15, 2022
3pm**

Tour our newly completed units
and pray for the families that will inhabit them!

A dessert reception will follow
at the café across the street.

RSVP to ebony@stlydiashouse.org