ANSWERING THE COIL TO MERCY

Mustard Seed Shelter guests and volunteers share experiences

By Mary Katherine Quasarano | Photography by Sarah Moore Kuschell

he Mustard Seed Shelter in Saginaw was founded more than 21 years ago as a tangible expression of the merciful love of Jesus. Mustard Seed Shelter has served as a beacon of light drawing over 1,000 homeless women and their children out of darkness to experience the mercy and love of Jesus that never ends. Mustard Seed Shelter testifies to the healing power of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Here are a few of the experiences of those touched by Mustard Seed.

cover story

MUSTARD SEED SHELTER

opened in 1995. There are four bedrooms and eight beds. Two staff members stay overnight in two additional rooms. Toddler beds and cribs are added as needed. Mustard Seed Shelter goes beyond what many shelters are able to do. As a smaller facility, they help women rebuild their lives by helping them deal with the crisis situation and the core reasons that brought them to homelessness. They assist women in accessing services to turn their lives around such as counseling, psychiatric evaluations, prescriptions, legal services, recovery meetings, life skills groups, one-on-one sessions with a master's-level social worker, medical services and more.



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AN ANONYMOUS VOCATIONAL (PHONE) CALL

In 1994, Leona Sullivan was working as the director of the diocesan Office of Christian Service when she received a call from a woman asking where she could get help. "She was 52 years old and had given up her job to care for her sister. They lived in a trailer park outside Bay City and lived on her sister's old age assistance check," Sullivan explained. When her sister died, the woman found herself without any source of income and owing \$200 each month in land fees on her trailer. She had called more than 10 places before reaching Leona's office.

"We talked for 40 minutes and at the end she thanked me and said I was the first person who had taken the time to talk with her. She now knew what she had to do," Sullivan said.

The plea for help echoed in Leona's heart. "That woman could have been me! I wondered how many other women were in a similar situation. She stayed on my heart." It was on retreat when the clarion call sounded. "I could sell my house, find a couple of other women and, if we all worked together and shared the costs, we could share the house with homeless women and children," she said

Leona asked for and received the enthusiastic blessing of the late Bishop Ken Untener, fourth bishop of the Diocese of Saginaw, to proceed.

In 1995, Mustard Seed Shelter opened its doors. Leona and several of her early collaborators began the work of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger and sheltering the homeless. Some years later, Carmen Mora, who wrote the first grants for HUD monies that provide financial support to obtain homes for chronically homeless single women and families, came forward to share in the ministry.



Twenty years ago, a young college student named Amy Bartels was studying social work and volunteering at Mustard Seed Shelter. Upon receiving her bachelor's degree in social work, she began work with abused and neglected children through Lutheran Child & Family Services and then completed lay ministry studies with the Diocese of Saginaw. She was appointed pastoral associate at Ss. Peter & Paul Parish and continued to train volunteers at Mustard Seed until her hiring in the fall of 2014

STREAMS OF MERCY THAT BECAME A MIGHTY RIVER

as the shelter's first full-time, paid director.

Today, Amy Bartels Roe readily shares that, "Leona and Carmen have been my mentors, spiritual guides and inspiration since our first meeting." Her appointment as director is an acknowledgment of the trust and confidence these Mustard Seed founders have in her dedication to the work.

When asked what brings

her to this work, her response is straightforward and immediate: "We are all called by our Lord to respond to those in need. Most of our guests don't have any family of their own. The poverty that they and others suffer from most is indifference to their plight – the kind of poverty that comes from a lack of love."

When asked to share her "Why?" story, Amy recalls after a thoughtful silence, "Yesterday was the anniversary of my brother Matt's death and his birthday is tomorrow." Matt was the middle child between Amy and her oldest brother. He died in a tragic automobile accident in 1985 when he was only 13 years young.

She explained, "In the hours after getting the news of Matt's death, it seemed that my family was surrounded by at least 30 people from our parish (St. Thomas Aquinas in Saginaw). I've never forgotten the love and support they offered during the hardest time in our lives. They made all the difference. I suppose that's part of what called me to social work and Mustard Seed. I wanted to return to others what had been given to me and my family."

"To bury the dead" and "Pray for the living and the dead" are the corporal and spiritual streams of mercy that were extended to Amy and her family 31 years ago, and the merciful acts flow today as a mighty river, making a difference in the lives of countless women and children at Mustard Seed Shelter. A parish family mercifully tended to the deep wounds of one of their own, and in grateful return, a daughter has been about the work of tending to the deep wounds of the women and children of Mustard Seed Shelter.

THE GENERATIONAL REACH OF MERCY - TANGELA



One of the very first women Amy worked with was named Julie. Julie came to Mustard Seed alone. Her children had been left in the care of family members, and on weekends volunteers would coordinate visits

between Julie and her son and daughter. While the average stay at Mustard Seed is three to four months, Julie was a guest for almost two years. In that time, the pieces of Julie's life were put together. She and her children, Tangela and Ricky, received the Sacraments (with Amy serving as Tangela's godmother) and she found solid footing again.

Tangela recalls with gratitude the 12 years she enjoyed after being reunited with her mother, Julie. "My mom was my best friend and she worked hard for my brother and me. She was a good mom and Mustard Seed helped her get on a good path." Julie passed away nine years ago.

Last year, Tangela found herself pregnant and homeless and she turned to the Mustard Seed Shelter. "I was happy to talk to my godmother (Amy) and Carmen and Leona again. It felt so good. They were there when I needed them and let me talk about anything and helped me with everything." Tangela became a guest of Mustard Seed, some 14 years after her mother, Julie. "They helped me grow up and see that I couldn't do the things I was doing. They opened my eyes to what motherhood is. They are amazing people and they care." Tangela stayed for a month. With determination and drive reminiscent of her mother, Tangela became a mother to a beautiful daughter and now lives independently.



Kia (Kie-yuh) Lissa was born in Detroit and became a child of the streets by the time she was 7 years old. Her path to Saginaw was winding and, by the time she arrived at the Mustard Seed Shelter, she had experienced incarceration and detox. She states that her only motivation for living was her beautiful daughter Hayleigh.

On a visit to Kia's apartment, Amy was greeted with the words, "I've got a second interview!" when the door opened. "There were 25 people (who interviewed) and I got called back. I know it was the handshake!" Amy's pride and enthusiasm

" The water that grows the Mustard Seed is love. "

is palpable and with a broad smile she responds, "What time is your interview? I'll come by and watch Hayleigh for you!"

Support for former guests does not end when they move out of Mustard Seed. Amy offers, "Our job is not to place any limits on mercy. There are no conditions. We don't just connect our guests to resources – we connect them to spiritual resources."

When asked to share what Mustard Seed has meant for her life, Kia's face lights up. "I love Mustard Seed. It gave me a new mom (Amy) and grandma (Tina Jones, Mustard Seed's office manager). I have a family. It gave my life structure and structure is a good thing! I miss my Mustard Seed family and sometimes I want to go back to the little tree I grew from. The water that grows the Mustard Seed is love."

'LOVE MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.' - TAMMY

Nine years ago, a woman named Tammy and her two little ones became guests at Mustard Seed Shelter. "This wasn't the first shelter I had been to, but out of all the places I went, this was the one that made all the difference. I prayed my way here," Tammy explained.

It's hard to believe this confident, polished and professional manager at Horizons Conference Center in Saginaw, would have ever used words such as broken, homeless and alone to describe her situation.

The owners of Horizons Conference Center actively encourage their staff to be "the touch" of mercy by becoming involved in community service. At a staff meeting to discuss where their energy and efforts should be directed, Tammy felt a tremendous movement in her heart to step forward. "How about the Mustard Seed Shelter?" "We've never heard of it. What is it?"

"It's a shelter for homeless women and children that helps them rebuild their lives."

"How did you hear of it, Tammy?" Taking a deep breath, Tammy shared, "I lived there. They changed my life."

Her willingness to be vulnerable in that moment led to Horizons' owners sponsoring the first fundraising event in Mustard Seed history. An upscale barbecue was hosted in the back yard of the shelter; high-top tables and white linen tablecloths were brought in and hot dogs and lemonade were served. More than 100 people attended the event and stepped forward to donate money, home furnishings and other items to serve guest needs. The response was so generous that Horizons Conference Center staff and



friends agreed to fund a permanent storage unit to hold the donations.

Tammy and her sons are thriving in a new life she could never have imagined – and yet one she has worked and hoped and prayed for fervently. She said through happy tears, "The pieces of my life came together there. I was able to build my life, and it was the love I found there that made all the difference."

"ALWAYS GO ABOVE AND BEYOND!" - SHELLY

Shelly, a current guest resident, began taking medication for severe depression when she was a teenager. "I thought I was stupid the whole time I was growing up, and my first year in college I was diagnosed with severe ADHD."

She graduated from college and served as a parks & recreation director for more than 15 years. When her mother became ill, Shelly quit her day job and took on the allconsuming responsibility of caring for her mom. Shortly thereafter, her mother died. For the first time in her adult life, Shelly had no health care, and thus no access to the medications that were essential to providing her with balance.

Off medication, her downward spiral accelerated. She landed in jail for shoplifting, a compulsive behavior she said she was incapable of fighting when she was without medication. While in jail, she was evicted from the home she had been renting and was in fear for the safety of her beloved dogs. Shelly began suffering panic attacks and was placed on suicide watch. Upon being freed from jail, Shelly found she had lost all of her possessions. Most devastatingly, she discovered that her dogs had been given to new homes.

The once full-time director found herself living out of her car. After a stop at another shelter, she came to Mustard Seed. Through tears, she said, "I got my life back at Mustard Seed. They helped me get a duplicate birth certificate, social security card and driver's license. I had no proof of who I was before coming here."

At the time of this interview, Shelly shared that she had just gotten back on all of her medication a week earlier. "I'm a good worker – I like to work. I went from feeling worthless to where I could finally look in the mirror, recognize myself

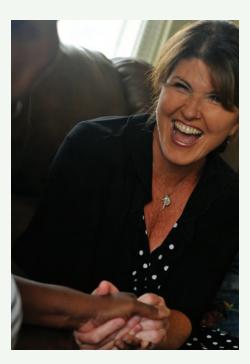


and not say, 'Who is that crazy lady?' The volunteers and staff at Mustard Seed always go above and beyond. When I worked as a supervisor, I always encouraged my staff to go above and beyond." Safe within Mustard Seed Shelter, Shelly has a good chance to do just that ... for herself.

WE WERE INVITED TO GIVE COMFORT, SO WE CAME. - VOLUNTEERS

An impromptu lunch is held at Mustard Seed, and Lonne Brown, Mary Kay Wiechelman and Barb Kozara have come for fellowship. All three are volunteers at Mustard Seed, with service ranging from three to eight years. Each accepted the invitation to be a part of the Mustard Seed family. Lonne and Barb are lav ministers and Mustard Seed is where their ministry is lived out. Mary Kay, whose eyes radiate joy, smiles and said, "I've been here a total of three Christmases!" Christmas celebrations at Mustard Seed are "Pull out all the stops!" family affairs – and the holiday is celebrated with staff, volunteers, residents (both current and past) and honored guests.

This past Thanksgiving, Amy extended an invitation to another volunteer who was unable to come for lunch. Former



WNEM TV-5 news anchor Katie O'Mara was asked if she'd be willing to pray with guests. She accepted the invitation and she's returned regularly to pray with the women of Mustard Seed. "The women and their walks have blessed me over and over. I tell them that all the time. There's no doubt when we pray together the Holy Spirit is present. You can feel Jesus in the room. It's so powerful and beautiful. Every time I walk away, I feel so inspired by my friends there!"

There are countless stories that could be told about the merciful work of past and present volunteers. Mustard Seed Shelter continues to thrive, in no small part, because of the willing donations of time, talent and treasure. Every volunteer shared that, whatever their gift, it returns tenfold. God cannot be outdone in generosity. **†**