



## Casa Alma, the Charlottesville Catholic Worker

Houses of hospitality on a sustainable urban farm

~ SPRING 2014 NEWS ~

Seek joy in God and peace within yourself; seek to rest in the good, the true, and the beautiful. It will be the only resting place that will also allow you to hear and bear the darkness.

*-Richard Rohr, from the Center for Action and Contemplation, 2014.*

### BECOMING AN UNEXPECTED GUEST: REFLECTIONS ON HOSPITALITY

While walking up a downtown Toronto street, a church building with an exterior of rough-hewn granite and ornate stained glass catches my eye. Since I have two hours before I need to catch my Greyhound bus, I try the door. It seems like a beautiful place to pray for safe travel, or at least to warm up before the next leg of my journey.

To my surprise, instead of pews and an altar, I see card tables set up, and instead of hearing organ music, I hear an industrial-sized sterling silver coffee pot wheezing and bubbling by the door. The sanctuary had been converted into a day shelter for the homeless. As I stand there in my old tennis shoes with an oversized backpack, I'm approached by a skinny man in worn jeans and work boots. Clearly the self-appointed mayor of the shelter, he comes straight to me, smiles, and sticks out his calloused hand. "Hi! Welcome! I'm Michael! You're new here, right?"

*Continued, next page...*

### VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Casa Alma doesn't conceive of itself as Charlottesville's 'best place to find a spouse', but as Providence would have it, it sometimes happens that way. Take the case of Christine Hitchens and Owen Brennan. While taking a Master of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University, Christine volunteered to live and work at Casa Alma in the summer of 2011. She did all manner of work that summer: planting, crafting the mosaic behind the kitchen sink in one of the houses of hospitality, coordinating a roundtable discussion series on creation, creativity, and Christianity. Owen, a student of Economics, taught school and worked on the Peter Maurin Farm in New York. Influenced by Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness*, as was Christine, Owen was attracted to Charlottesville in part because of the presence of a Catholic Worker house here. The rest is history. Christine and Owen met at Casa Alma in 2011 and are now approaching their first wedding anniversary.

*Continued, page 3...*

### WELCOME TO NEW GUESTS

In the earliest days of spring, Lina and her 7 year-old son joined Casa Alma as our newest guest residents. Originally from Egypt, Lina has been living in the U.S. for nearly ten years. She hopes to study nursing, and looks forward to sharing her love of cooking traditional Egyptian meals with the Casa Alma community.

Feel free to extend a welcome to Lina at 913 Nassau St. the next time you are at Casa Alma.

Our community includes guests Lina, Mutusim, Larry, Patricia, and Kayla; resident volunteers Steve, Laura, Emily, Anna and Ella; and an extended ecumenical community which supports our houses of hospitality and urban farm.

*Becoming a guest, continued from page 1...*

Before I can say no, I am offered a styrofoam cup of steaming black coffee and Michael is introducing me to what he calls “our people”: Jerome in army surplus pants who sits playing cards with a middle aged woman named Bernice; a tired-looking woman named Sylvia who smiles at me anyway; and Danny with a lazy eye and gray streaks in his black beard.

“How long you been on the street? Where’d you sleep last night?” Michael asks.

“At the Toronto Catholic Worker house,” I say, then realizing this response inadvertently makes me sound like I am homeless, too. “But I’m not...I mean, I don’t...I’m just passing through,” I stammer. How to explain to them that I didn’t walk in knowing it was a shelter?

“Take off your pack, it looks heavy,” Jerome says as he shuffles the deck.

“And have a seat, Rhonda,” Sylvia adds, gesturing to the chair next to her.

I gratefully set my pack on the floor and settle into a chair.

“Have you eaten yet today?” Michael asks.

“I haven’t, but...” Then I stop myself. In that moment, I decide there is no need to explain to Michael that I am not one of them, but just seize the opportunity to accept the grace of their welcome. The six of us, and others at the shelter, share breakfast. Two hours later, some of them walk me the rest of the way to the bus station and see me off with hugs and waves.

It isn’t until later that afternoon - as the Ontario landscape rolls past me outside the bus window and I eat the bag lunch that I was given at the shelter - that I remember it is Sunday. I had stepped into that church simply looking to pray and come in from the cold. What I found in the hospitality Michael, Jerome, Bernice, Sylvia, and Danny offered – the shared toast and coffee, the conversation, the card games, the place to unburden myself of my heavy pack, the community of “our people” – was church in a way I will not forget.

*Contributed by Rhonda Miska*



*At left,  
a Casa Alma  
summer liturgy.*

*Photo by  
John Clem.*

#### ABOUT CASA ALMA

We host low-income and formerly homeless families in our two houses of hospitality. We also host a community house for resident volunteers and times of prayer, reflection and learning, and are developing a sustainable urban farm. We promote peace and justice in our local community and beyond.

#### HELP US HOST OTHERS

Casa Alma is an all-volunteer non-profit. Our houses of hospitality are supported by the generosity of individuals and families.

Please consider becoming a monthly sponsor. Contact us for details or make a tax-deductible donation online at: [casa-alma.org](http://casa-alma.org). *Thank you!*

*Volunteers, continued from front page...*

Casa Alma remains an important component of their lives. When Christine finishes her day's work in the Crisis Stabilization program at the Region 10 Community Services Board, and when Owen finishes his as Shift Supervisor and In-take Coordinator at The Haven, they sometimes retire to Nassau St. In fact, they wish they lived closer to Casa Alma so they could visit more often. Owen plays guitar and leads singing at liturgies there, he and Christine both serve on the Board, and they participate in discussion sessions when time allows.



*Christine and Owen*

For all there is to do in Charlottesville, what accounts for Christine and Owen's attachment to the community of Casa Alma? They love the physical environment of Casa Alma: the animals, the urban gardens, the development of the property, the people. In short, they feel and are energized by an abundance of life all around them. Interested in living simply, they find spiritual community to help sustain them on their path. They find shared values and discussion of various ways to live them. Unlike our consumer culture, Casa Alma supports and deepens Christine and Owen's vision of the value and meaning of life.

*Contributed by Mary Sue Schriber*



"Life, with its rules, its obligations, and its freedoms, is like a sonnet: you're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself."

--Mrs. Whatsit in  
A WRINKLE IN TIME,  
Madeleine L'Engle

## IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

On a recent Friday evening, neighbors gathered outside Casa Alma along Nassau Street to share freshly-baked soft pretzels and stories thanks to our good friend Shell Stern and her "Pretzel Peddler, Story Collector" project. Together with volunteers, Shell bakes soft pretzels in her backyard earthen oven and shares them freely with neighbors while she collects stories from long-time residents and opens opportunities for new friendships to form. A New City Arts grant supports her effort, which has collected stories of pet monkeys, gypsies, floods, fairgrounds, and farms. Look for a booklet and reenactment of selected stories at the re-opening of Rives Park later this summer.

*Above left: the backyard at Casa Alma.  
Below: Shell and her earthen oven.*



## OPEN HOUSES

Visit Casa Alma **on the first Sunday of each month** from 2:00-4:00pm. Drop in for a tour, Q&A, informal conversation, and light refreshments. If you've been meaning to come by, now is the time! **Upcoming dates: 6/1, 7/6, 8/3 and 9/7.**

## ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

**New!** Following our open houses, we gather for **roundtable discussions** on the first Sunday of each month from 4:00-5:30pm.

We'll consider the Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker, which opens: "The aim of the Catholic Worker movement is to live the justice and charity of Jesus Christ...this aim requires us to begin living in a different way."

What does this 'different way' look like in terms of how we invest our time and spend our money? What does it mean in terms of how we engage in our communities and connect with people who are marginalized? We'll explore these questions and others in a roundtable format, sharing perspectives on economics, culture, lifestyle, and justice.

***All are welcome to attend!***



Goat "Marianna", photo by Our Local Commons.

## CELEBRATION!!

Mark your calendar for **Saturday, June 21** from 9:30am-12:30pm for our annual Catholic Worker community celebration and open house featuring live music, food and fellowship. Tours will be offered at 9:30, 10:30, and 11:30am. Or, just relax under the arbor and visit with friends of Casa Alma. Bring a guest and join in the fun!

This year, our celebration will coincide with the first ever Cultivate C'ville urban farm and garden tour, a city-wide event (see notice below). We expect many first-time visitors and want to be sure that we welcome them warmly.

***Could you help staff our welcoming table?***  
***Could you help provide refreshments?*** If so, please contact Laura at 202-2221 or [cvillecw@gmail.com](mailto:cvillecw@gmail.com). *Thank you!*



Our community is bursting with love for local food! This summer, meet the urban farmers and gardeners growing food right here in our city! Explore urban homesteads, community gardens, school gardens, and neighborhood farms that are raising everything from fruits and vegetables to dairy goats and honey bees! Learn how these projects got their start and how they're cultivating both food and community in Charlottesville neighborhoods.

***Leave inspired. Stay connected.***  
***Support your urban food system.***

WHEN: Saturday, June 21st, with tours offered at 9:30, 10:30, and 11:30am.

WHERE: Visit **[www.cultivatecville.com](http://www.cultivatecville.com)** for tour site info and a map!

## ABOUT THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT

The aim of the Catholic Worker movement  
is to live in accordance with the  
justice and charity of Jesus Christ.

This aim requires us to begin living in a different way.  
We recall the words of our founders, Dorothy Day who said,  
"God meant things to be much easier than we have made  
them," and Peter Maurin who wanted to build a society  
"where it is easier for people to be good."



*Catholic worker masthead by Ade Bethune*



Dorothy Day's reflection on "Abiding Joy" from her column *On Pilgrimage*,  
September 1974.

"This morning I was feeling the need of words of joy in the face of the world situation, and the political situation in this country. (I must give up reading newspapers in order to avoid any bitterness when I witness the destitution in our cities, the lack of housing, the humiliation of the poverty stricken, and on the other hand, the arrogance of some men of wealth. "Woe to ye rich!")

...St. Thomas said once he learned more by prayer than he did by study, and it is only prayer that will give us a full life of joy, a word which Bernanos and C.S. Lewis alike took as meaning more than happiness.

A deep, abiding joy can only be ours if we emphasize the "primacy of the spiritual," a phrase which Peter Maurin loved. We must grow in faith, in our spiritual capacity to "do all things in Him who strengthens us," even change the social order so that wars will cease and it will be easier to be good, to keep our sanity, be whole men, holy men, and truly love one another."

[www.dorothyday.catholicworker.org/articles/543.html](http://www.dorothyday.catholicworker.org/articles/543.html)

### EASY ESSAYS

*Peter Maurin (1877-1949) articulated the values and vision of the Catholic Worker movement through his "Easy Essays", online at: [easyessays.org](http://easyessays.org).*

#### **Personal Sacrifice**

1. God wants us to be our brother's keeper.
2. To feed the hungry,  
to clothe the naked,  
to shelter the homeless,  
to instruct the ignorant,  
at a personal sacrifice  
is what God wants us to do.

#### **St. John Chrysostom**

"urged his parishioners to make a guest chamber in their own houses, a place set apart for Christ—a place within which to welcome 'the maimed, the beggars, and the homeless.'

Recognizing that some Christians would hesitate to take strangers into their homes or guest rooms, Chrysostom suggested that they could at least make a place in their household for a local poor person who was known to them"  
(Making Room by Christine Pohl, p.45).

## GIVING THANKS

We deeply appreciate all those who support Casa Alma with prayers, encouragement, financial gifts, and their presence at our service days and community events. Special thanks this season to: Amber, Heidi, John, Bill, Mary Sue, Shell, James, Emerson, Al, Miranda, Sue and Bill, Janet, Owen and Christine, Sarah, Guy, Rhys, Doug, Peter, David and our extended community.

Groups who have shared their time and energy with Casa Alma. They include: Madison House, Alpha Phi Omega Service Fraternity, Cavs Care, and Tandem Friends School. Many thanks to all! *Pictured at right: Madison house volunteers.*

We appreciate the invitation to present Casa Alma to Mount Olivet Church, Blue Ridge School, and Building Goodness Foundation and the warm welcome each community extended to us.

## WISH LIST

- Prayers, that Casa Alma may be a place of nourishment and transformation.
- Small and medium garden gloves for volunteers.
- Volunteers to help with our community celebration on June 21 (details p. 4).
- Summertime garden help-mornings or evenings.
- Garden rakes, shovels, and weeding tools.



## NEW WEBSITE

[casa-alma.org](http://casa-alma.org)

While you're there, ensure that you're receiving notices from Casa Alma through our **new e-mail lists:**

Community Events: invitations for shared suppers, times of learning, prayer and service.

E-newsletter: if you prefer to read our spring and fall news online.

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