



## Casa Alma, the Charlottesville Catholic Worker

Houses of hospitality on a sustainable urban farm

~ FALL 2013 NEWS ~

*“God is in every person’s life. God is in everyone’s life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else—God is in this person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow.” ~Pope Francis, America Press, 2013.*

### INSIDE HOSPITALITY

Visitors to Casa Alma often ask, *“How do you find guests for the hospitality houses? How do families qualify to receive housing?”*

As there are many families in Charlottesville who are living in unstable housing situations due to high rental rates and lack of adequate income, or due to domestic abuse or other family crises, Casa Alma has no difficulty ‘finding’ families who need hospitality. We field heart-wrenching calls from folks who are seeking housing for themselves or their loved ones. We receive referrals for guest families from churches and local non-profits, from social workers and volunteer advocates. Unfortunately, we are in the position more often than not of lamenting that there is “no room at the inn.”

When an opening becomes available in one of our two houses of hospitality, we seek referrals for guests who share some basic characteristics. First, prospective guests are those whose primary need is adequate and affordable housing. (In the future, we may be able to provide intensive support for folks who also struggle with addictions or mental health issues, but we do not currently have that capacity.) Prospective guests are supported by local congregations or organizations that provide the social services they need, such as budget counseling or federal assistance. Guests are typically employed, although most work low wage and/or seasonal jobs; with their limited income, they make a symbolic rental payment of their choosing, cover their own utility bills, and save funds for future housing. Finally, we ask those making guest referrals to be aware that Casa Alma seeks to be a safe and nurturing environment for children.

*Continued on next page.*

**Who we are:** Casa Alma includes resident volunteers Steve, Laura, Emily, Anna and Ella Brown; guests Larry, Patricia, Kayla, Evan, Sara, Elijah, and Maya, and an extended ecumenical community which supports the houses of hospitality and urban farm.



*Rini Templeton*

### **What we do:**

Casa Alma provides housing and community support to families and individuals in need. We sponsor times of prayer, reflection and learning, and seek to live simply and sustainably. We promote peace and justice in our local community and beyond.

### **How you can help:**

Casa Alma is an all-volunteer 501(c)3 non-profit. Our houses of hospitality and urban farm are supported by the generosity of individuals and families.

Please consider sharing your time or becoming a monthly sponsor. Current sponsors contribute \$10-\$200 per month. Contact us for details or make a tax-deductible donation online at [www.cvillecatholicworker.blogspot.com](http://www.cvillecatholicworker.blogspot.com).

*Thank you!*

*Hospitality, continued...*

The process of inviting a guest family is one of discernment. Prospective guests visit Casa Alma at least twice to receive a tour and to learn about our community and what life is like here. Where else might one find 25 volunteers working on a project just outside the bedroom window on a Saturday morning? Privacy at Casa Alma is not the same as it would be in a private rental. Here, the houses are not wired for cable connections and internet services are shared, as are the single washing machine and common clothes line.

Once invited to live at Casa Alma, guests are asked to maintain the hospitality houses as places free of violence and illegal activity, and to be aware that Casa Alma seeks to be a prayerful, welcoming place. Guests are encouraged to share in the life of the Casa Alma community through attending events, working in the gardens and caring for the animals, meeting to “check in,” and sharing occasional meals, although they are not obligated to do so.

Day to day, we try to accompany our guests along whatever road they walk. Amidst the activity of family life, employment, and administration of Casa Alma, we often have difficulty scheduling community meals or times to check in with guests. We miss opportunities to encourage guests to attend community activities, or find that we could be more responsive to a guest’s needs.

Yet, we are encouraged and challenged by Dorothy’s words, “We warn our fellow workers to keep in mind small beginnings...and let us remember, ‘Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it.’” Through this journey of providing hospitality, we rest in the knowledge that this is grace-filled work. God is present in these efforts, however imperfect they may be, and God always draws us toward a broader and deeper love for our neighbor through the practice of hospitality.

#### HOSPITALITY BY THE NUMBERS

- 14 individuals have received hospitality at Casa Alma, including: two couples, one single mother, four children, and five recent immigrants. In addition, we’ve hosted 3 short-term volunteers.
- \$730 is the cost per month to provide housing for each family.
- Guests can stay 18-24 months in the houses of hospitality.
- 11 months is the average length of stay.
- 620 sq. ft and 800 sq. ft are the sizes of our houses of hospitality.
- Typically, 3-4 people live in each house at any given time.



*Top, former guests and their family members. Below, hospitality house at 913 Nassau St. with new entrance and roof.*

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

If the walls of Casa Alma were a chorus, they'd sing the praises of the many volunteers who raised them, including Al Reynolds. A retired executive, Al has contributed his enviable construction talents to the renovation and building of Casa Alma. This is the story of what Al has given to Casa Alma and what Casa Alma has given to him.

Al first met Laura Brown when she served as Peace and Justice minister at Incarnation, when Casa Alma was only a quiet grace note in her soul. Al later met Steve when the two of them worked in the parish office at Incarnation. Al came to know and love the Brown family and to learn of their wish to build a straw bale house and to teach the art of living simply.

The notion of living simply struck a chord in Al. Living in a now-empty nest, he and his wife, Tif, were interested in living simply and sharing their home with those in need of a home. He mentioned this to Laura, and their friendship became, providentially, a source of information and a lesson in the simple living he sought.

When the property that has since become Casa Alma was purchased, a daunting amount of construction work was needed, from the main house to the hospitality houses to a storage shed. Al picked up his tool kit and shouldered a major role in renovation and construction work, from electrical to plumbing to raising roof beams to seeking out materials at the lowest cost possible. As the Browns taught Al something about the art of living simply, Al taught the Browns something about the arts of construction. Together they show what can be done when "two or more are gathered in My name."

Why does Al give so much of himself and his time to Casa Alma? Pointing out that he isn't a student of Dorothy Day, he says his friendship with the Browns is at the root of his efforts. In short, Al loves them and is happy to help. Moreover, Al is inspired, encouraged, and renewed by what he sees at Casa Alma. It puts him, he says, in contact with others he'd never bump into otherwise, especially young people. He's amazed at the numbers of UVA and other students and youth organizations who turn out to work for a better world by working for the viability of simple living. At the end of a day of climbing ladders and hammering nails, Al falls into bed with a song in his heart.

*~Contributed by MarySue Schriber*



*Al Reynolds at Casa Alma*



## CHRISTIAN PEACEMAKING

A new chapter of Pax Christi has opened in Charlottesville! Join members of the Casa Alma community as we work with Pax Christi to create a world that reflects the Peace of Christ. Pax Christi rejects war, preparations for war, and every form of violence and domination. It advocates primacy of conscience, economic and social justice, and respect for creation.

To learn more or sign up for the Pax Christi mailing list contact:  
[paxchristicharlottesville@gmail.com](mailto:paxchristicharlottesville@gmail.com).

"If you are not yet able to love yourself, you will not be able to love your enemy. But when you are able to love yourself, you can love anyone. When you do this, you will see that your so called enemy is not more or less than a human being who is suffering."

**-Thich Nhat Hanh**

## UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Since our founding in 2009, home renovation projects have been a consistent activity at Casa Alma as we work to make the hospitality houses and community house safe, warm and welcoming. For the past ten months, dedicated Casa Alma volunteers have been laboring together to expand the community house at 911 Nassau Street, pictured below. Foundation to roof, the new addition is a great blessing to the Casa Alma community, providing an expanded living room for community gatherings and a third bedroom. In future months, a wheelchair-accessible entrance and bathroom will be added as well.



Our inaugural event in the new space, an All Saints Day mass and pot-luck supper, drew a standing-room only crowd of 50. We anticipate hosting a new series of suppers, roundtable discussions and times of prayer this spring. If you'd like to receive notice about these Casa Alma community events, be sure you're on our email list!

In the meantime, we'll continue hosting our **open houses on the first Sunday of each month** from 2:00-4:00pm. Please bring family and friends for a visit, especially if you haven't seen Casa Alma in awhile. **Upcoming open houses include: 12/1, 1/5, and 2/2.**

Many thanks to these exceptional volunteers for all their work on the community house: Al, Doug, Mike, Nate, Glenn, David, Rhys, Jason, Phil, Johnnie, Liam, Nick, J.T., Richard, Bill, Denis, Martha, John, Joey, Amber, Jimmy, Aaron, Bill, Jen, James, and Adam.



## BUILDING GOODNESS PARTNERSHIP

Individual volunteers have been the core of Casa Alma's transformation from three neglected homes to the welcoming hospitality houses and community residence of today. These efforts received an incredible boost this fall with our new partnership with the Building Goodness Foundation. "We bring together volunteers from every part of the construction industry to design and build structures for communities in need. Together with our partners, we use donations of time, money, materials, and expertise to build clinics, schools, community centers, and specialized housing for those who need them most—both in our own community and around the world" (BGF website).

The Building Goodness Foundation brought a group of skilled volunteers to Casa Alma nearly every Saturday from late August through October. These dedicated folks worked through late summer heat and cool rainy days alike to replace the roof and entrances on the hospitality house at 913 Nassau St. The results are wonderful—the house has a tight roof, stable entrances, and a more welcoming appearance. To BGF staff and volunteers, especially Curtis Hoffman, Site Coordinator, we are most grateful and hope to continue this partnership.

To learn more about the Building Goodness Foundation or to volunteer for a local or international project, visit: [www.buildinggoodness.org](http://www.buildinggoodness.org)

## 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."



AN ADVENT THOUGHT

From The Catholic Worker newspaper, February 1943:

We are called, we have a vocation, we have a talent. It is up to us to develop that. Mine for instance, is journalism writing, and it is only because of the paper, the CATHOLIC WORKER, that houses of hospitality and farming communes, or even the suggestion of them came into being. That's how the communitarian end of the movement started. People read about our way of thinking and our way of life and want to join us. They come to visit and remain.

Things just happen. Jesus said if your neighbor is hungry, or if your enemy is hungry, feed him. So we took to feeding those who came. We didn't intend breadlines. They just happened. The same with sheltering people. The same with starting farms. We write about these things and they sound wonderful in writing...One gives up his life in order to save it. And "love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

People come to join us in "our wonderful work." It all sounds very wonderful, but life itself is a haphazard, untidy messy affair. Unless we can live simply, unquestioningly and solitarily, one might say, in the midst of a mob, then we cease to be a personalist. The more we live with people in a community the more we must look to ourselves and regard the beam in our own eye. The more we live with a babbling crowd, the more we must practice silence.

~Dorothy Day

*Top right, Catholic Worker masthead;  
at right, "Christ Lives in Me" both by Ada Bethune*

During morning prayer today we considered the darkness in which we all live a good part of the time, but rarely talk honestly about...As much as we may rail against it, life is sometimes very hard. We all will feel the rug pulled out from under us at some point – when the life we thought was solid suddenly melts away and we find ourselves grappling with a new reality. Recognizing that it is like that for us all can bring a strange comfort; we are not alone. And we are at the same time empowered to help someone else feel less lonely in their suffering.

This time of year is often so hard on people who are suffering. Grief and loss stand out in sharp contrast during a season of supposed "joy." This darkness we experience comes and goes in our lives. The season of Advent promises a Creator who suffers with us, who made the world ultimately "good." We can "help each other through it," even as we struggle to see the light ourselves.

-Kelli, Gainesville Catholic Worker



## GIVING THANKS

Casa Alma is thriving because of the many individuals who share their time and resources. In addition to those who volunteered on the renovation projects (page 4) we thank: Mini, Owen and Christine, Sarah, Bob and Terry, MarySue, Katie, Ann, Gary, Monica, Dan, Joe, Juan, Curt, Heidi, Dallas, Richard and MaryAnn, Nora and Richard, Debbie, Elaine, Bob, Dell, Pat, Jayne, Deb, Dale, Rebecca, Kathleen, Jim, Bill, Richard and Fr. Michael. We thank those who support Casa Alma with their prayers, and all who have attended service days and community events.

Groups who have shared their time and energy with Casa Alma include: the crew of the Carnival de Resistance, Madison House volunteers, the Alpha Phi Omega Service Fraternity, the Frasatti Fellowship, the St. Thomas More Society, the UVa Catholic Student Ministry, and Tandem Friends School. Many thanks to all!

Pictured below: volunteers from the UVa Catholic Student Ministry and Tandem Friends School.



## WISH LIST

- \* Prayers
- \* Perennial cuttings (comfrey, lavender, butterfly and honeybee attractors)
- \* Potted house plants (low-maintenance)
- \* Canning jars, especially pint and 8oz. jars
- \* For our Casa Alma library: "The Long Loneliness" (Day), "Loaves and Fishes" (Day)

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911 Nassau Street  
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