

Changing Narratives

by Sr. Donna Liette, C.P.P.S., PBMR

Do you remember December 31, 1999 when we all waited with fear and expectation of what could be? Some prepared for the worst — would the world come to an end? Well it didn't, and as the new millennium began, four Missionaries of the Precious Blood felt challenged to change the narrative of priests and their relationship to community, so they moved beyond their work in parishes to the streets of Back of the Yards in Chicago. They opened a safe place and Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation was born!

January is a great time to sit by the fireplace and remember what was and what is becoming, and yesterday I did just that. 2017 was an amazing year of transformation at PBMR. The dream of purchasing and renovating an abandoned house in the neighborhood became a reality, and so Mother Brunner (MB) House was opened. A few days ago, my heart was just bursting with joy as I walked through this beautiful new home — take a walk with me. There in the first room was Allyson, our social work intern, with a mother searching for affordable housing. In the next room, another mother was working with a volunteer on possibilities for furthering her education; this mother received her high school diploma months ago in our newly created Education Lab with the support of Sr. Janet. In the two Mother Brunner kitchens, pizzas were being prepared; in the family circle room, Leah, one of our Precious Blood Volunteers, was preparing for a Young Women's Circle, and Francis (Fr. Denny's dog) was checking out the activities, hoping a morsel of food would fall for his consumption. Then I stopped by Julie's office, one of four in the MB House. Julie and I celebrated the achievements of her advocacy group, CRIIC; because of their work, Julie and other mothers and fathers now know that their sons — who had originally been sentenced to life without the possibility of parole as juveniles — will not die in prison. In fact, some are already free! So, if anyone should think that our "Back of the Yards" neighborhood is just an ugly, violent, inactive community — come and see, the narratives are changing!

On a warm day several weeks ago, Raheem, one of the four young men who helped renovate the MB House, and I planted tulip bulbs around the house (a new experience for him). As he was digging the holes and placing the bulbs point up, we talked about how these bulbs need to be in the dark earth for the winter but then we will see new life pop up all over — and we will delight the whole neighborhood. We compared that to our own lives and to our community: out of the dark, new life has been popping up.

Of course, you have all heard of our community garden. Once in this community, there were no fresh, affordable

vegetables — a real food desert — but Sr. Carolyn and her team (Mary, Sharrow, several youths, and our friends from St. John of the Cross) have transformed a parking lot into a luscious vegetable garden which produced over 3000 lbs. of food for the community this year.

With the constant coaching of Patrick, we have youth, mothers, and fathers out in the workforce delighted to have a job and the support of PBMR — another changing narrative!

Yesterday, Mr. Lewis from Coldwell Banker delivered our \$12,000 check for the startup of our next building, and he was amazed when he saw all the activity, and was especially impressed by the youth in the woodworking shop — so engaged in their projects, yet so hospitable and proud of their work under the guidance of Mike.

As always, Restorative Justice plays a major role at the Center. There have been circles of reconciliation, celebration, training with young women, young men, and mothers throughout the year. Pamela has facilitated many of these and introduced circles into the schools and community, along with introducing our young people to pumpkin carving!

I would be remiss if I did not mention the transformative ministry in our jails and prisons. Every Tuesday and Thursday, Frs. Denny and Dave along with Sara and Mike and other volunteers visit our incarcerated children at the Juvenile Detention Center. Mike Donovan goes from one Illinois prison to another, week after week, visiting young men who have been sentenced, offering them support and love. Many have no other visitors but him. More of our staff, including Artrice and Orlando, also provide services for people re-entering society after incarceration. We walk with these people through a very difficult transition.

Our Restorative Justice Café (RJ Café — Art Center) has also transformed and been transformed by the art displays and the many visitors: ministers, police officers, Latino families, and guests from our Fall Barbeque fundraiser. Speaking of that wonderful October event, our community joined in prayer and celebration with friends from the north, south, east, and west and suddenly people who were far off were brought close at the table of Eucharist and roasted pork!

Yes, our staff has rapidly increased and so has our presence in the neighborhood. We have a very eager and energetic group of young volunteers who — along with Jonathan, Lamonte and Phillip — really change narratives and keep the older ones of us on our toes — even Fr. Kelly!

It is a New Year. May we continue to work together, allowing God to transform us and our communities, churches, and families so the old narratives are changed and new life springs up out of the dark. †