



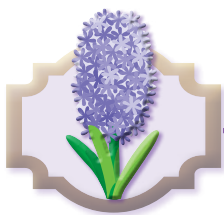
Part of the Magnificat Houses network, the Loaves & Fishes soup kitchen serves hot midday meals to 200 men, women and children.

## On being part of the story

By Sara Kay Thompson, RSCJ

"Remember that whatever happens ... you must say to yourself, according to circumstances, joyfully and thankfully or humbly and submissively or bravely or, if need be, defiantly, to the troubles within, "This is part of the story and the story is God's love for you and yours for him."

—Janet Erskine Stuart



When I arrived at Magnificat Houses (in Houston) ten years ago, I felt I knew all the answers. I was going to save the people of the community. It should not be so hard, I thought. I'd worked with the mentally ill and the homeless in Detroit. That work may not have been in transitional housing, but it was all the same. To me. Then.

But that was not to happen. Instead, the people I work with have had at least as much impact on my life as I have had on theirs. It is the residents who have taught me about separation from family, living on the streets and involuntary hospitalizations.

Often I go into the men's and women's houses to check on interior appearance (*Interior decorating eleven houses, my dreams have come true!*). I always find the women's houses in need of some extra cleaning, more so than the men's. One day, I went into one of the men's houses and just watched a gentleman work methodically back and forth with a mop. After some time, I asked Mr. Mike why he

was so careful about how he cleans the house. He replied, "I want to take care of my work. This is my home. I think if someone has to do something, they have to do it right." "But who taught you?" I asked. "My momma taught me to take pride in housework." Lesson learned.

Magnificat Houses is the only organization in Houston that practices the Corporal Works of Mercy. We have Mass six days a week and we live Catholic Social Teaching. We work with the homeless, former offenders, people who are mentally ill and men with HIV/AIDS to create a path to independence and personal dignity. Our eleven buildings house 189 men and women, a psychosocial rehabilitation center, a hostel for women, a soup kitchen, an upscale resale shop and a thrift store. All this is part of our story. This multifaceted life that makes up Magnificat is one fluid story of people coming and going.

Gertie came to us from the streets. I met her at our soup kitchen and noticed she seemed well educated, but she has this rolling gate and has trouble focusing on a person. Lighting her cigarettes could be considered dangerous, and if she did it herself, she was bound to burn herself. Gertie was pleasant when she wanted to be, but she was rough, street smart. I invited her into Magnificat on the condition that she curb the language and let someone make her bed everyday. I moved her to Duchesne House for our elderly women or those who have special needs. Gertie became the house jester and was a lot of fun to be around.

One day the Houston Associates arranged for a cupcake party at Magnificat's Duchesne House. Ann Caire, RSCJ, was there. When Gertie saw her, she threw her arms around Sister Caire's neck. "I remember you, you helped in the third grade at Duchesne. I made my First Communion at Duchesne." [Academy of the Sacred Heart in Houston]

It was like homecoming week: two people who had an instant love for each other. Memories in common but very different paths encountered. I truly believe Sister Caire and Gertie had that moment that Janet Stuart so eloquently described for us as "part of the story of God's love." Gertie stayed with us for a few more months before she moved on.

At Magnificat there is no one story. It is a collage of people who come from the streets, hospitals, family homes and prisons who form the community. God does love us. We are sure of it. That is why God has given us a home. Those we love whole-heartedly will know the love of God in others and in ourselves. *This is part of the story and the story is God's love for you and yours for him.* ✦

Magnificat does more than housing. Shown below is the building with the resale and consignment shop, woodworking and art studios.



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Sara Kay Thompson, RSCJ, with one of the Magnificat Houses drivers.