



# JUSTICE FROM THE HEART

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMITTEE  
OF SACRED HEART PARISH

## COMMITTED TO ALL GOD'S PEOPLE

**By Nancy Hemesath**

To describe Mary Lynn Focht as an energetic and dedicated volunteer would be an understatement. Mary Lynn is a retired public school English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, a former retail manager, a mother and an involved grandmother.

Mary Lynn says she needs to be busy and busy she is. Mary Lynn's volunteer schedule is full. Monday she spends a couple hours at the Holy Family Closet Door, organizing and passing out clothing to those in need. She then drives over to Siena Francis House where she serves lunch to the homeless and others. On Tuesday, Mary Lynn goes to the Vincent DePaul Pantry where she spends a half day organizing and dispensing food to those who are food insecure. On Wednesday she goes back to Holy Family for a couple hours to make sandwiches and hand them out.

On Thursday she spends two to three hours doing whatever needs to be done at the Food Bank. In addition to these commitments, she is an attentive grandmother who cares for her granddaughter as needed.

Most of us would feel quite heroic to do just one of these volunteer commitments on a weekly basis! Mary Lynn does six gigs every week. In addition, she is on call for Lutheran Family Services where, over the years, she has often helped immigrant and refugee families get set up in their new homes.

She also worked with the Sacred Heart team to help Sudanese, Syrian and Afghan families settle in. Oh yes, there is also occasional activity with Omaha Welcomes the Stranger. (See page on Immigration)

The passion which motivates Mary Lynn can be traced in part to her career in teaching. Having taught for a while and then working full time in retail, Mary Lynn decided to return to the classroom, getting her certification as an ESL teacher.

She was the second ESL teacher at Bryan High School in the days when the immigrant population was smaller. Over her eighteen years the department grew substantially. She thoroughly enjoyed working with the immigrant children who were so eager to learn English and with their parents who were so supportive of the process.

Her love of this population led her to volunteer at the El Paso border in 2019 for two weeks. She heard first hand their stories and the dire situations from which these immigrants were fleeing. Often their lives had been threatened, and they were willing to make the arduous journey to get to a safer nation for themselves and their families. This experience further animated her passion for serving the needs of immigrants.



**Mary Lynn Focht, an energetic and dedicated volunteer**

Currently, Mary Lynn uses her Spanish (which she claims is limited) in her various volunteer jobs. She sees that an ever-increasing proportion of those in need are indeed immigrants or refugees.

Sacred Heart has been Mary Lynn's parish since 1995 when she read an article about it. She was seeking a vital Catholic community and found it here. The Freedom Choir sold her!

In addition to the parish, Mary Lynn is committed to the whole people of God, especially those most in need. She has a heartfelt concern for all who are marginalized.

# NEIGHBORHOOD ALLIANCE

## REACHING OUT TO SACRED HEART SCHOOL

The Neighborhood Alliance Team (NAT) has been working to strengthen the bonds between Sacred Heart School and the Sacred Heart Parish. Recent efforts have been directed to supporting sports and music programs at the school.

NAT, Mike Moylan and four members of the CUES School System met to support several activities going on at Sacred Heart School (SHS). SHS is starting a new choir this year led by Middle School teacher Tia Houston. The choir of 33 students of all grades will lead the music during all school Masses on Thursday mornings at 8:30 AM.

NAT is excited to support this new opportunity for Sacred Heart students and all those who will enjoy their music. We have received a request to help with choir robes for the Sacred Heart school choir. We have been working on requests for donations for this very worthy cause and are excited and hopeful about reaching this new goal. (See picture.)

The second task of this team is to share information about basketball games and to explore the possibility of new uniforms for our SH sports teams. The committee will meet again soon to determine the next steps to purchase sports uniforms.

The current teams playing are 4th-grade girls, 6th-grade girls, and 8th-grade boys. These are combined teams between Sacred Heart and Holy Name. Aaron Wright is the new Athletic Director who is coordinating this sports program.



**TOP LEFT:** Sacred Heart parishioners volunteered for Christmas in the Village on 24th Street. The carriage is just one example of the festival activities.

**TOP RIGHT:** The new Sacred Heart School choir will be decked out with stoles such as this one.

**AT LEFT:** Sacred Heart volunteers assist St. Benedict the Moor with its Thanksgiving dinner giveaway.



NAT wants to promote Panther Spirit and let people in our church family know when the games are scheduled so our Panther Boosters will come to the basketball and soccer games and cheer for them.

Mike Wostoupal, member of the Neighborhood Alliance and Chair of the Board of Directors of North Omaha Music and Arts (NOMA), is linking Sacred Heart School students with another musical opportunity. NOMA started a beginner junior drum class for students in elementary and middle school. Equipment will be provided. Classes meet at 5 p.m. on Mondays at NOMA, costing \$20/semester.

The Neighborhood Alliance Team has agreed to help cover some of the cost for students.

Members of Sacred Heart and St. Benedict the Moor are encouraged to strengthen our support of SHS students and families. This may mean attending games to cheer on our student-athletes. To see game times and locations, go to CUES Omaha on Facebook. Others may wish to contribute to the sport uniform fund through the office. Still others may want to sponsor a potential drumming talent from SHS to attend the NOMA class. Another way to support the new choir is to attend the weekly Thursday liturgy at 8:30 a.m.

**PURPOSE STATEMENT:** To develop a presence in and connections to the Sacred Heart neighborhood and North Omaha.

# IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE TEAM

## ADAPTING TO NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

By Gene Summerlin

Adaptation is the ability to adjust to a new environment or to changes in the current environment. It's something I suspect we have all either become better at or more frustrated with over the past few years. Adapting to new circumstances is hard. The alternative is often harder. Sometimes we take a vision and make plans with an expectation of exactly how things will work out. Sometimes conditions change, and we either walk away in disappointment or embrace the shift.

In February of 2023, we shared the story of the collaboration between many Sacred Heart parishioners and Omaha Welcomes the Stranger (OWS). OWS is part of a nationwide loose collaboration of nonprofits that sought to alleviate overcrowding at shelters along the southern border by receiving and aiding refugees on their way to their U.S. sponsors - where they would wait for a decision on their asylum applications. Just as this program got up and running in Omaha, revisions to the immigration policies on both sides of the border sharply decreased the number of asylum applicants allowed to enter the United States and the need for waystations like that provided by OWS.

A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into building the framework that would allow OWS to care for busloads of people at a time: volunteers, medical providers, translators, training, gathering clothing and other supplies, finding a facility to house large groups . . . and then the need just went poof.



But in this new environment, a different situation arose. Asylum seekers who have no sponsoring friends or relatives in the U.S. are now arriving in Omaha by various means and routes and are seeking to make their homes here. This summer two families from Venezuela, fathers, mothers, and school-age children, arrived unannounced and contacted the Juan Diego Center seeking help. The Center promptly gave them food, clothing, and legal advice. The families were referred to OWS for shelter. OWS quickly arranged for housing at their shelter facility.

Soon after, another family was referred to OWS when they were found begging on a street corner – a mother, father, and three children ages 3, 2, and 11 months from Romania. The OWS Board, which consists of Sr. Mary Kay Meagher, ND, Sr. Vai Lewandoski, OSM, Sr. Kathleen Erickson, RSM, and Margaret and Tom Hoarty, met and pivoted.

OWS is now fully supporting five families – one in the shelter and four in apartments. OWS has also provided financial help to three refugee families who became stranded in Omaha as they travelled to other cities.

These new needs created a new plan. Due to the immigration status of these families, it often takes six months or more for the adults to obtain work permits. Because they do not yet have “official” refugee status, these families do not qualify for help from government-funded resettlement agencies. They are in limbo: waiting for the right to work and without an official designation of their status.

OWS and SHP volunteers are crucial to helping these families resettle, enrolling their children in school, taking them to medical appointments, obtaining needed immunizations, helping the adults enroll in English classes, searching for permanent housing, and providing monetary aid for groceries and rent. The time and money required to meet these needs are substantial.

This work is done entirely by volunteers and dependent on donations to provide the shelter, food and long-term support needed by these asylum seekers resettling in Omaha. This is both a commitment and a labor of love by volunteers who have become mentors and friends to the families they serve.

Tax deductible donations to support these efforts can be made through Sacred Heart or directly to Omaha Welcomes the Stranger, Inc., c/o Dundee Bank, 5015 Underwood Ave., Omaha, NE 68132.

### PURPOSE STATEMENT:

*The Immigration and Refugee Team works to welcome, with respect and solidarity, the “foreigners” residing among us.*

# GREEN TEAM

## WHY WE COMPOST

By Patricia Fuller, Nancy Hemesath

Sacred Heart parishioners have been joining with the school in composting food waste. Each week, many parishioners discard table scraps and spoiled food in the bin next to the parish office. The Green Team initiated this unusual practice based on data that shows the harm that comes from dumping food waste in landfills.

According to the United Nations, every year around the world, 1.3 billion pounds of food is wasted or lost. Food waste contributes to three crises that threaten the planet: climate change, pollution, and loss of biodiversity.

When food waste is diverted to a landfill, methane gas is created as the food decomposes. Although methane gas stays in the atmosphere for a shorter length of time, it is approximately 80 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>.

The UN Environmental Chief states: “Our relationship with nature is unbalanced. Humanity is continuously taking and discarding, and nature is continuously giving.”

Composting is one simple thing we can do as a parish to give back to nature and improve soil health as well as improving the atmosphere. The Green Team has worked with Hillside Solutions and Soil Dynamics to set up a successful composting program with Sacred Heart School. With the support of Fr. Dave, two additional bins have been set up on the south side of the parish office building for parishioners to use.



Parishioners who do not have access to another composting site are encouraged to bring anything organic, including meat, paper products and compostable dinnerware and put it in the bins. Because Hillside has such a robust composting process, all these items will decompose and be turned into rich compost that will be returned to the earth.

The garden team composted 1,000 pounds of garden waste (end of season clean-up) with Hillside Solutions.

The school lunch program composted 2,400 pounds monthly over nine months, and the parish added 200 pounds over 12 months.

This totals 24,800 pounds that Sacred Heart Parish and School kept out of landfills!

If you do not have another compost bin, please consider joining in Sacred Heart’s effort to save our earth.

### RECYCLING TIP!

- In Omaha plastic lids and tops can be left on the bottles and put in curbside bins.
- Lids cannot be accepted by themselves. Because of their small size, they fall through the sorting machines and are sent to the landfill.

**PURPOSE STATEMENT:** *In partnership with our parishes and the surrounding community, the Green Team is continually learning, educating, calling all to take action, and working to care for our common home.*