



A LETTER FROM LEE MARTIN

Our Daily Bread Employment Center Program Director

April 2020

ACROSS MY CAREER IN HUMAN SERVICES, I've never dealt with a crisis of this magnitude. It is challenging and fluid. I've been through major crises before, but usually in a snowstorm or a hurricane, you can see then the end. With COVID-19, we just don't know where the end is.

Our Daily Bread has never missed a meal in 38 years, and we want to make sure that streak continues. When the governor announced restrictions on the number of people gathered in one place, we modified the seating structure in our dining room. When the president advised against gatherings of 10 or more people, we knew we would have to do more.

On March 18, we started distributing grab-and-go meals, beginning with breakfast. These meals are the same hot meals we had been providing; they just come in a to-go container, as if you decided to carry-out at a restaurant. As far as I know, in the history of Our Daily Bread – at least since the opening of this building – this type of distribution has never been done before. We've always seen breaking bread together as a way of building connections. But we're still providing that same valuable service of feeding individuals.

Our staff has responded remarkably in this overnight transition to a whole new process. We had to suspend some vital client services

– including Work4Success and St. Edward's Workforce Development Center – and we're using staff from those programs to support meal distributions. Everyone has pitched in to make this possible.

It's been a frustrating and fearful process for many, but we are prioritizing the safety of our staff and the ability to continue to deliver services. Going through a crisis like this is only going to make the Our Daily Bread Employment Center team stronger.

Part of our need to call in extra hands stems from Catholic Charities' decision to limit the use of volunteers, allowing them to observe advice to stay at home. We have some faithful volunteers that have been with us for more than 20 years. It was hard to inform them of the decision, but they understood.

There is fear in the homeless population now, too. They are practicing social distancing themselves. I had thought we would have people everywhere and more trash from the take-out containers. But people aren't congregating, and trash hasn't been much of a problem, either.

It's frustrating to me that we can't provide all services at this time. But even now – especially now – we need continued help from those who support Our Daily Bread Employment Center. Thank you for all you do to advance this vital work.

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The Holy Spirit expressed through peanut butter and jelly



AMY BUTTARAZZI IS STILL PLEASANTLY PERPLEXED about how she ended up dropping off around 1,000 sandwiches and 200 cartons of milk from St. Joseph School of Cockeysville at Our Daily Bread Employment Center in mid-March.

“It was the Holy Spirit!” she exclaimed. “Things just fall into place with the Holy Spirit.”

Buttarazzi is the director of family ministry at St. Joseph Parish. Shortly after the school closed in response to the spread of COVID-19, a school administrator mentioned they had more than 200 milk cartons left over and asked if her family of 10 could use some.

Instead, Buttarazzi thought of Our Daily Bread. As she was loading the milk into her van the following day, she received an email from Ann Kihn, a pre-K teacher, who also runs the school’s service club. Hundreds of sandwiches the students had made were in the school’s freezer, and she wondered if Buttarazzi knew what they could do with them.

Moved by the perfect timing, Buttarazzi added them to her van, hoping the center would want and be able to accept the donation.

The answer was clear from the staff member who greeted them, she said. “The worker almost threw his hands in the air and said, ‘Do you want to know how good God is? We didn’t know how we were going to provide breakfast tomorrow and you show up with all this food!’”

Kihn said the sandwiches represented several weeks of work from the 5th through 8th grade volunteers who join her on Thursday mornings at 7 a.m. in the school’s multi-purpose room. For 45 minutes, the group sits, talks, and listens to music while spreading peanut butter and jelly, or assembling cheese sandwiches. They make about 300 sandwiches each week – often more in Lent and Advent – with donated supplies. Kihn boxes up the finished products and leaves them in the large kitchen freezer for a volunteer parent to transport to Our Daily Bread Employment Center.

For a couple of weeks, however, the parent had not been able to make the trip.

“I had close to 1,000 sandwiches,” Kihn said. “I knew we were not coming in the following week, and I didn’t want them to go to waste.”

Understanding how important the students’ work was to Our Daily Bread moved Buttarazzi and her family.

“We were giddy, and we texted everyone at school immediately,” she said.



Weathering the ups and downs with help from Christopher's Place Employment Academy

Eric Williamson



Eric Williamson was just shy of a year in his current job when the COVID-19 pandemic closed down Macy's, where he works as a receiving manager. It was the longest the Christopher Place Employment Academy resident has held a job in years, an accomplishment he credits to his recent sobriety and the structure offered by the Catholic Charities-run program.

"It gave me my life back," he said of the program. "I wouldn't have been able to do this without Christopher Place, a higher power, and the family and friends I've made here."

A New Jersey native, Williamson moved to Maryland with friends when his family inherited a house in Prince George's County. "But I brought some of my addictions with me," he said, explaining that he fell into a "vicious cycle" where binge drinking caused him to lose one job after another over several years.

After he was kicked out of his house about two years ago, he spent a few months in a treatment center in Baltimore, and then found Christopher Place, which offered the coaching and guidance he thought he needed at that time.

"It was the best fit for me because it was a way for me to continue with the structure, but also start to re-enter back into society, with a safety net to come back to," he said. "It let me learn how to live life on a day-to-day basis without alcohol. It's been a godsend, to be honest."

These days, however, Christopher Place feels "kind of like a ghost town," Williamson said. People are "largely keeping to themselves, even as they try to help each other out."

The more than four dozen men living at the residential employment program are still managing day-to-day responsibilities, including cooking and intensive cleaning. But "this COVID-19 pandemic has totally changed the way we do things here," said Program Manager Nicole Williams.

Staff have moved some classes online – including Work4Success and substance-use education – and Williams hopes more laptops will allow facilitators to resume all regular classes. She also ensures residents are informed as state and federal guidance related to the coronavirus shifts.

"They have pretty much adjusted to all the changes," she said of the residents. "They just rolled their sleeves up and jump in, whatever they need to do."

Williamson has tried to fill his day with healthy activities – running, calisthenics, reading – and binge watching TV shows. He sees himself as one of the lucky ones. Even

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though his workplace closed, he still has his job, and still plans to buy his own home when he leaves the program in October. And he expects that home will be in Baltimore.

"I was able to get my life back to where I want," he said. "And I fell in love with this city. It has its ups and downs, just like me."



In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff from across Catholic Charities lent a hand to prepare and package healthy grab-and-go meals for clients. In this mid-March photo, staff from six agency programs or departments formed an assembly line – standing 6 feet apart – in Our Daily Bread's dining room to make the effort fast and efficient.

“If Catholic Charities stopped feeding people ... where would they eat?”

CEDRIC HOWARD, SENIOR COOK AT OUR DAILY BREAD EMPLOYMENT CENTER, arrives at work two hours early these days – but doesn't mind the 4 a.m. start.

“This place is like a lifesaver to me. I'm going to do anything I need to do,” he said.

Cedric graduated from Christopher Place Employment Academy, Catholic Charities' residential program for formerly homeless men, in 2003. Shortly thereafter, a punishing blizzard hit Baltimore, shutting down the city. Cedric said he made his way to Our Daily Bread, started helping with the cooking, and earned a job offer within a few days.

But even after 17 years, “we've never seen anything like this before,” he said of the COVID-19 crisis.

In response to the pandemic, Our Daily Bread shifted its food distributions to meals-to-go, and suspended volunteer activities. Both decisions had significant impacts on his kitchen, which typically hosts cadres of dedicated volunteers to prepare and serve meals.

Cedric has been preparing as many as 1,000 meals each day, sending around 400 across the street to the Weinberg Housing and Resource Center, also run by Catholic Charities. The 4 a.m. start allows him to prepare casseroles, chop vegetables – the kitchen still offers a vegetarian option – and set up a line to prepare the boxed meals. Each day, he also starts prepping for the next.

“Today, I panned up casseroles for tomorrow. You try to do a day ahead, because you don't know who's going to show up. ... Some of our staff might get sick. You have to be prepared,” he said. “I've got a system down. I try to do the best I can do, and so far, so good.”

Cedric said he isn't afraid of the pandemic. He's been “blessed” with good health, and his motivation is simple: “If Catholic Charities stopped feeding people right now, where would they eat?”

“I was in the drug game. I was in and out of prison. I'm 55, and Catholic Charities kind of saved my life,” he said. “This is more fulfilling to me than anything at the end of the day.”



I HAVE BEEN WORKING AS A REPORTER IN BALTIMORE FOR 13 YEARS. You experience a kaleidoscope of emotions with this job. One day you are reporting on a heartbreaking tragedy, the next day can put you in front of astonishing generosity. Like everyone, I have found myself in unfamiliar territory with this COVID-19 pandemic.

When it became evident that the virus was going to change our every day lives, I found myself at Our Daily Bread Employment Center. Throughout the years, I have done many stories at Our Daily Bread. In 2017, when they celebrated 35 years of serving hot meals to Baltimore's most vulnerable population, I had the privilege of going back into the kitchen with their volunteers to see how they have managed to serve 7.4 million meals. In February of 2010, our region was paralyzed by back-to-back snowstorms. Businesses, schools, and offices were shut down. Our Daily Bread was not. Their staff and volunteers found a way to serve hundreds of meals despite the unprecedented amount of snow.

Now, here we are in a time of extraordinary challenges associated with mandatory shutdowns, supply chain concerns, and the call to limit our contact with others.

As a reporter, I was curious and concerned about how Our Daily Bread would continue their commitment to the community under these circumstances. How could they serve 700-800 meals every weekday without volunteers? Is it possible to feed breakfast and lunch without a dining room? It turns out, it is. It's not easy, but it is possible. To keep their dedicated volunteers safe, they asked them to stay home. Their employees who are considered nonessential are now stepping up and filling that role. Through grab-and-go, they are still handing out meals.

It takes ingenuity to continue to feed those who are hungry during this extraordinary time, but Our Daily Bread continues to do with it and compassion and dignity. In a time when everything feels unfamiliar it is reassuring to know Our Daily Bread has not forgotten about the people they serve. They are still here and it seems nothing can change that.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES

CHERISHING THE DIVINE WITHIN ALL



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