History of Karen House

Karen House belongs to the "second generation" of the Catholic Worker in St. Louis. Catholic Workers were active in St. Louis from 1935 until 1942, and again in 1977 when a new house of hospitality was opened.

Named for its first guest, Karen House was founded in 1977 by seven women as a shelter for women and children. At one point, Karen House housed seventy guests in a building more suited for thirty. It was one of very few shelters for women at the time, and commented Virginia Druhe, one of the founders, "We learned everything by doing it wrong the first time." Gradually, the community members began to accept fewer people in order to provide them with better hospitality.

Today about 30 people, including five community members, live in Karen House. Several community members also live in the surrounding neighborhood. The Karen House community strives to perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy within the context of a crowded and chaotic house. Food and sandwiches are given out daily between 12:30 and 3:30. All are welcome to the Tuesday night Mass held in the upstairs chapel, and to the community-led liturgy on the second Tuesday of the month. Karen House publishes The Roundtable quarterly, and Roundtable discussions for the clarification of thought are sometimes held in the big dining room.

The Karen House community is supported by a huge local network of volunteers, friends, cooks, and housetakers. Donations of food, clothing, and supplies made to the house are shared with the neighbors and guests by the community, and money donated supports the bills, maintenance, and general running of the house.

The "second Generation" of the Catholic Worker in St. Louis has included several “experiments in truth.” over the years. By far, the largest endeavor was Cass House. Between 1978 and 1988, Cass House served an immense number of people. Accommodating both men, and women & children in separate areas, Cass House was a huge operation that also included a soup line. The tremendous demand for leadership and dedicated volunteers at Cass House led to it's termination in 1988. In addition to problems with lack of people, the city would have required the house to undergo widespread repairs to remain in operation. The community had not the people-power, nor the resources, to continue.

The Ella Dixon House is another such experiment in truth. Known also as "Little House," the Ella Dixon House is a smaller and more long-term establishment for those with low income, which provides three apartments for guests.

The Dorothy Day Co-Housing Community attempted to create a more egalitarian community between Catholic Worker-types, and former guests of Karen House. The community existed for five years, with members meeting weekly and supporting one another. Participants all lived within the Karen House neighborhood. Meals were shared, kids received new opportunities for education, and a truly radical experiment was conducted.

New communities are emerging in the Karen House neighborhood as we speak! The Carl Kabat Catholic Worker community is beginning a new ministry of offering hospitality to immigrants. The Teka Childress Catholic Worker House, still being rehabbed, will offer longer-term hospitality to one family.