Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers
Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

Oral History of Catherine Murray Mamer,
Board Member, Volunteer, and former Executive Director with Peace House Community
Minneapolis, Minnesota on February 28, 2017

Summary of Interview
Catherine Murray Mamer works as a board member and weekly volunteer with Peace House Community. She previously served as the Executive Director. Peace House is a drop-in ministry offering companionship, meals, and meditation for people experiencing homelessness and others. Peace House is located at 1816 Portland Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55404

This interview took place in a meeting room in Golden Valley, a suburb of Minneapolis, at the library, located at 830 Winnetka Ave North, Minneapolis, MN 55427.

Interview Log

00:00:01 Introduction

00:00:17 Description of Catherine’s role; has been involved with Peace House for 30 years; there are no paid positions other than the five homeless or formerly individuals hired as:

- Cook
- Dishwasher
- Janitor
- Security person
- General operations person

Catherine has been Peace House’s treasurer, Executive Director, and is now an honorary member of the board;

00:01:56 Description of the Peace House model; started in 1985 by Sister Rose Tillemans, Sister of St. Joseph Carondelet who learned from working at the Free Store distributing clothing, that people wanted to talk and pray; She created Peace House with no services other than building community in the Phillips Neighborhood, poorest neighborhood in South Minneapolis; “simply come and talk”; meditation is central and is a discussion, followed by lunch; open 10:00-3:00, Monday through Friday;

00:04:27 Peace House rules; everyone is welcome but no drinking, drugs, violence or violent language;

00:04:57 Location was originally located at 510 East Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, 55104 a building rented from John Bacich, “the mayor of skid row” for $500/month and then Bacich gave the building to Sister Rose in 1999; in 2012 moved to current location to make way for the
Portland Gateway Project; Alan Arthur, Executive Director of Aeon Housing negotiated with Sister Rose to move;

Description of a typical day at Peace House; open at 10:00 and offer donated breakfast items; try to have five volunteers each day; at least twenty arrive at 10:00 and between 20-40 arrive before meditation; many are homeless, but some live in nearby low-income housing; loneliness; many leave before meditation; 11:30 door is locked for meditation;

Description of meditation; meditation can be reading poetry, discussing a specific topic; three students from Cretin-Derham Hall High School intern weekly from October to May; others visit also; story about a recent meditation about kindness;

Continued description of a day at Peace House; meditation goes until 12:10; followed by prayer; description of meditation rules: don’t speak out of turn; give the current speaker your attention; story about a man who rarely participated; description of a survey for Retired Seniors Voluntary Program (RSVP) [also known as Senior Corps of the Corporation for National and Community Service];

Discussion of emphasis on community, “the living room on Franklin Avenue”; many people come regularly; Peace House memory wall shows 90+ photos of those who have died; discussion of mortality of people who are homeless; discussion of an upcoming memorial for an individual; nurses have been helping people write living wills;

Philosophy of Peace House and training of volunteers; there is a handbook; volunteers love to bring or serve food, but making conversation can be challenging, and for volunteers to feel that conversation is “enough”; Catherine’s story of learning this; had done Honeywell protests, had met Sister Rose, was “out to save the world” so to sit and talk with people didn’t feel like it was enough; teaching volunteers that talking and listening to people is enough to give; stories about a high school student volunteers and the impact that being with people has impacted them;

Discussion of why giving and receiving is important; examples from Peace House attendees; story of a man in a news article about how much he cost the city for livability crimes and his alcoholism; challenges of measuring Peace House impact; emotional challenges of not doing more for the people visiting Peace House; success story about a pregnant woman who visited regularly;

Most volunteers are retirees

Discussion of food purchased or donated; sometimes a group brings a meal; Second Harvest has a lock on most food donations and tends to give more food at a time than Peace House can accept; a couple of grocery stores and Wedge Co-op donate food; Blake High School donates leftovers from school lunches; Augsburg College campus meal service donates also; fresh produce is a bonus since hard to come by when homeless;

After lunch, programs such as Art, Poetry; aside about donation of books to the library; Spanish lessons, hygiene supplies giveaway, scrabble games;

Discussion of Peace House not providing services; volunteers and visitors provide referrals; St. Olaf Church as shelter triage location in Coordinated Entry; distribute Handbook of the Streets; will call 911 if there is a health or injury issue; discussion of mental health and chemical dependency on the streets; Peace House staff are good at managing such issues; a
Hennepin County psychologist is on call; and medical professionals from Healthcare for the Homeless visit;

00:45:33 Discussion of budget and fundraising; $160,000 budget; when Sister Rose was alive Catherine was treasurer, Rose lived on faith that the funds would come; costs have since gone up because they pay five staff; they own the building free and clear having traded it for the Franklin location over a 13 years negotiation; Peace House is in the black; biggest funder is Sisters of St. Joseph, Sr. Rose’s religious order; a few family foundations and churches donate; the board president, Anita Dukor, writes the grants; details about fundraising;

00:52:04 Changes she’s seen over the years; demographics have changed; story of her first day and having the wrong key; there were more women in earlier days and now more men; individuals from Chicago and the south; Native American community stopped coming for a while; discussion of the new building feeling safe than Franklin Avenue location; fewer drug deals;

00:55:15 Causes and barriers over the years; more visitors have gotten housing than in the past; coordinated entry and complaints about not moving up on the list for housing; story about a couple who have been waiting; story about stable housing and rent increases;

00:57:29 Discussion of managing emotions and boundaries; she manages better than in the past; able to decompress with her friend Doris on the way home from volunteering; some trust that God will take care of people;

00:59:10 How Peace House changed her; has been an important part of Catherine’s daughter’s life; many widows and widowers volunteer; discussion of whether Peace House would survive after Sister Rose died (2002); it’s unique and it’s family;

01:03:38 End