

Homeless Shelter Workers in Midwestern Urban Centers

Archie Green Fellows Project AFC2016034

Oral History of Sister Kathleen Atkinson, Director of Ministry on the Margins

Bismarck, North Dakota on April 4, 2017

Summary of Interview

Sr. Kathleen Atkinson founded Ministry on the Margins, located at 201 North 24th Street, Bismarck, North Dakota, 58501. At Ministry on the Margins, Sr. Kathleen assists ex-offenders with re-entry after leaving the nearby North Dakota State Penitentiary, and offers meals, a food shelf, children's toys, and household items for anyone in need in the community.

This interview took place at Ministry on the Margins following a morning meal. Volunteers may be heard in the background cleaning up and preparing to leave.

Interview Log

- 00:00:01 Introduction
- 00:00:13 Why and how she founded her organization: six years ago started a faith group for prisoners at the nearby penitentiary, encountered people she knew, but didn't know were in prison; story about a man about to be released and very anxious and helping him with re-entry; recognition of the community need for re-entry support; story about inviting people on the margins to "build your own banana split" and otherwise engaged people on the streets; in November 2013, ministry launched;
- 00:06:30 How people learn about the ministry; Sr. Kathleen continues to go to the prison every week; also networking with people, providers;
- 00:07:22 Description of services; over 600 people participate in services every week; 70 volunteer slots are filled each week; as needs were identified, various services include:
- Support group
 - People at the men's shelter without food, coffeehouse
 - Food pantry open hours that others are not (evening)
 - Added a warm meal to coffeehouse
 - Sunday night church service, Episcopal priest, Lutheran pastor, 35 attend
 - Re-entry support & bible study specifically for newly released individuals
 - Bingo night and socialization
 - Cribbage & dominoes for social interaction, run by the Lions Club
 - Recovery Anonymous group
 - The "Stay Out of Jail" supper club
 - Pornography Anonymous
 - "Bridges of Hope" services specifically for youth exiting corrections
- 00:11:54 Discussion about belonging to the Benedictine order;

- 00:12:17 How she funds activities; in three years they've moved from 500 square feet to 1200 square feet to 6,000 square feet; everything is volunteered and donated; individuals, churches, businesses, clubs all contribute; in March 2017 Ministry on the Margins distributed six tons of food;
- 00:14:14 Description of people who visit the ministry; story about someone needing a co-pay; proximity to men's shelter at Ruth Meier's Services; ex-offenders; story about a woman coming from the county jail; some homeless, some children; people who came to North Dakota for jobs in the oil field and comparison to the novel "The Grapes of Wrath";
- 00:18:52 Other community supports she works with; Annunciation Monastery (where she lives) considers it one of the three main organizations they sponsor; she networks with anyone she can; worked with Chamber of Commerce to find employers to interview someone with a felony; works with the Burleigh County Housing Authority and Sr. Kathleen is a Housing Commissioner; discussion of difficulties for people with sex offenses; she wants people to ask about people's crimes—how long ago, what type;
- 00:22:59 Lack of affordable housing; housing was expensive during the oil boom, now the market is softer; people with any mark on their record or who don't have all the money for security deposit and rent will not be selected as a tenant; "Grandma's House" was a place with units to rent to these folks and she would work with people there, but new ownership has changed that a bit;
- 00:26:44 Description of the physical space; guests and volunteers moved and renovated the space; front area has the rule of Benedict "Let all be received as Christ", but being Christian is not required; people who have been drinking, high, suffering mental illness are welcome; visiting is based on people's behavior;
- Coffeehouse, where someone greets everyone for hospitality; tables for sitting with coffee
 - Separate sacred space where people pray or just be quiet;
 - Food pantry is very large; Anyone can shop; Mathew 25: "I was hungry, you fed me"; each shopper is accompanied by a volunteer to promote relationship; people pick only what they need; making choices is important;
 - Free clothing pantry with household goods is behind the food pantry;
 - Children's play area; every child gets a new toy;
 - Conference room; primarily used by people working with youth who can enter through the back of the building for privacy;
- 00:35:58 Challenges; the unfairness of things; how to support someone and then send them back into the cold; people who may never get the support they need; uses the Serenity Prayer and focus on people for the two hours she can; the "second prison" of being an ex-offender;
- 00:40:19 How she effects systems change; she was a senate intern in Washington, D.C., comes from a social change family; father was in the North Dakota legislature; she wants to change the world in a local way and with others and with spirituality; parents still active; father advocates for affordable housing for people in mobile homes;
- 00:44:05 A success is that people leave knowing that they're important people and know they are loved; when someone leaves homelessness for a home; story about a gentleman getting a job; story about a man in the penitentiary; success is that we don't lock people up in any kind of institution and forget them;

00:46:39 Other meals for people in the area are scant; a former soup café closed and will re-open nearby;

00:48:40 Advice for people who want to serve in this way: listen to people; listen to the passions of volunteers to leverage their talent; she works with two phrases: “Thank you” for the abundance, and “I didn’t know” to express an invitation to learn;

00:51:39 Sr. Kathleen feels this is sacred work; the trust and fragility of people;

00:52:25 End