

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the twenty-ninth. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

A Church and a Community Step Up Together

by Marie L. Procter

On Tuesday, November 26, at 7 PM, the congregation of the First Baptist Church will worship on Main Street for the last time. The following Sunday it will begin worship on Town Crier Drive. At this final service, the interfaith community will encircle them with the final ringing of the church bells, and with music and prayer.

What follows is a story of how a caring community and an attentive church took compassionate steps to assist persons in Brattleboro without housing. Before 2007, there were two local organizations in Brattleboro dedicated to providing services for folks in need of such help: the Morningside Shelter and the Drop-In Center. By 2007, however, the need for more overnight shelter space during the cold winter months well exceeded local capacity, and local churches were called upon to offer emergency shelter for the increasing numbers of homeless individuals and families. I had been meeting with the newly formed Interfaith Clergy Association for a few years when the call for help came from Melinda Bussino, Executive Director of the Drop-In Center. Rev. Thomas Brown, Pastor of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, and Chair of the Brattleboro Area Interfaith Clergy Association (BAICA) at the time, offered his Church as a place of refuge. Rev. Lise Sparrow, Pastor of the Guilford Community Church of Christ, organized a team of student volunteers from the SIT Graduate Institute to provide overnight staff for the shelter. All was ready for a test run on January 9, 2007, and eight people were housed that first night.

The experience confirmed the need for emergency, on-going shelter, reliable staff, and a warm meal during the cold months. We also recognized the need for a more accessible, centralized location in downtown Brattleboro. At this point Rev. Suzanne Curtis Andrews, Pastor of the First Baptist Church on Main Street, came forward to offer their large community room and kitchen to meet what had now become an urgent need. On December 14, 2007, the Brattleboro Overflow Homeless Shelter officially opened its doors. That night 12 guests enjoyed a warm meal and shelter from the cold. The Shelter continued operation that winter through early April.

Organization of the Shelter's operations was a significant undertaking. Religious and activist organizations generated special contributions to finance a staff position responsible for overseeing the recruitment and training of volunteers, assignment of tasks, collection of bedding and other necessities for the guests, and for coordinating meals. At the same time, a call went out to these organizations to commit to the preparation of a meal once or twice a month. The response was heartening, and Shelter volunteers gained a new understanding of homelessness as

they intermingled with the guests, ate together and shared stories about their lives. One volunteer reported that this wonderful ministry had for her, given faces to the homeless.

Jim Levinson, serving at the time as Spiritual Leader of the Brattleboro Area Jewish Community, organized a Benefit Concert on Saturday, February 9, 2007 at the First Baptist Church to support the Overflow Shelter. The Concert featured Brattleboro's hot rock group, "Buddy Folly and the Experiments." Another benefit concert at the church featured music by the high school band prompting dancing in the aisles!

The Brattleboro Overflow Homeless Shelter at the First Baptist Church was off to a splendid start and, with the continuing help of volunteers and generous contributions, would continue at that location for the next 10 years. Volunteer shifts at the Shelter ran from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m., and then from 1 a.m. to 7 a.m. A retired friend, who staffed the "graveyard shift", told me touching stories about encounters he had during those hours with guests whose often trauma-filled lives made sleep difficult.

The Brattleboro Area Interfaith Clergy Association (now known as the Brattleboro Area Interfaith Leadership Alliance) was actively involved with oversight of the Overflow Homeless Shelter through the years. In addition to helping to raise funds for its operation, we were involved in collecting warm clothing, toiletries and other supplies for the guests.

In 2017, the Groundworks Collaborative which incorporated the Drop-In Center and the Morningside Shelter, assumed responsibility for the operation of the Overflow Shelter which was moved to the Winston Prouty campus while awaiting a permanent location. A transportation service was set up to take guests from downtown Brattleboro to this new location renamed the Seasonal Overflow Shelter or "SOS." (The SOS opened this year on November 21).

Importantly, the town government, Groundworks Collaborative, the Brattleboro Interfaith Leadership Alliance, Compassionate Brattleboro and other concerned entities are now looking beyond these immediate needs of homeless persons in our area, to identify and operationalize solutions to the problems contributing to that homelessness. Clearly, our community is to be commended for stepping up so creatively and compassionately to address these vital issues.

I conclude this story with grateful thanks to Pastor Suzanne Curtis Andrews and the members of the First Baptist Church of Brattleboro for their extraordinary generosity in opening their church facilities to provide shelter for so many needy persons for more than 10 years. As indicated, the church will be holding its final service on Main Street on Tuesday, November 26 at 7 p.m., an Interfaith Farewell Service of Gratitude and Blessing. All are invited to attend this service to express our enormous gratitude to this congregation.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.