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Life at L'Abri

Residents' Stories

"I can look at any apartment in L'Abri and see the success stories; people who have struggled with their mental illnesses and have not given up and are out there volunteering or working and coping."

I have lived at L'Abri for three years where I have kept a busy schedule, first volunteering and now working part-time. When I first got a job after completing a year of study, I thought to myself, now I am a success. I am a success, I am earning my way. It didn't occur to me that there was any other way of succeeding. Working was always to me what success meant. I even said to a former resident, "You are working. Is it ever nice to meet someone who has succeeded!" It didn't occur to me at the time how narrow-minded that was. It was only with reflection that I now understand what success is. Another resident said to me one day success to him was making a meal or completing a drawing. I can look at any apartment in L'Abri and see the success stories; people who have struggled with their mental illnesses and have not given up and are out there volunteering or working and coping. I realize now that I have always been a success and you, my friends, who are in the other apartments, are successes too. There is no monetary value on that word "success"; it is only ourselves that put it there.

Karen Mitchell, Resident
Winter 2000

"Mostly, I feel free at L'Abri en Ville."

On November 1st, 2001 I will have been at L'Abri for two months. In that time I have been getting used to doing my own grocery shopping cooking and cleaning. My two apartment-mates are easy to get along with, and I feel at ease in my surroundings. In the past two months I have been busy with my social insertion program, volunteering three days a week at a centre that offers activities for seniors. I have done everything from peeling 20 lbs of potatoes for the noon-day meal, to arts and crafts, making friendly phone calls, calling bingo, and animating the monthly "Birthday Party."

Some interesting L'Abri experiences include: a wonderful meal shared at the home of one of our talented volunteers, lentil soup and homemade bread with our "vegetarian" volunteer, exploring the Mosaic Culture sculptured gardens, bowling with other L'Abri residents and, last but not least, a delightful video and entertaining reading group at another volunteer's home. Other pastimes include my country line dancing which keeps me on my toes!

Since I moved to L'Abri, I also found time to get creative and do some embroidery, which I haven't done in years! After I completed this project (an embroidered jean vest) I felt great! I am grateful for each new experience and the desire it brings to expand my horizons. Mostly, I feel free at L'Abri en Ville.

Terryann, Resident
Fall 2001

*“Quand je suis revenue de cette réunion,
je me sentais solidaire et supportée.”*

A cette date, j'ai assisté à une réunion du conseil d'administration de L'Abri en Ville et j'y ai appris beaucoup : tout d'abord l'ordre avec lequel on a procédé, le respect des interventions de chacun, la diligence à prendre les décisions et l'implication sérieuse des membres. Le travail continue quant à la levée de fonds, les nouvelles idées pour améliorer le bien-être des résidents et pour favoriser leur implication, le souci des finances et leur bonne administration me prouvent à quel point ce projet de L'Abri en Ville est indispensable et construit sur des bases solides.

Je me réjouis d'apprendre qu'un cinquième appartement sera ouvert bientôt et que d'autres « psychiatriques » pourront profiter des services généreux de L'Abri. D'ailleurs on favorise les interrelations entre les usagers ce qui nous permet d'avoir une vie sociale plus active et plus normale. De plus l'anniversaire de chacun est fêté, ce qui ajoute un caractère familial à l'organisation.

Quand je suis revenue de cette réunion, je me sentais solidaire et supportée. « Comme la symphonie a besoin de chaque note, comme le livre a besoin de chaque mot, comme l'océan a besoin de chaque goutte d'eau... l'humanité toute entière a besoin de toi, là où tu es, unique et donc irremplaçable. » (Texte de Michel Quoist, Chante clerc)

Christiane Lefebvre, Resident
Fall 1995

Une Bénévole exemplaire et nouvellement diplômée

Le 5 décembre dernier, il est arrivé un événement très spécial à une de nos bénévoles l'appartement « Bahama ». Depuis quelques années, elle y travaillait avec acharnement, notre amie Margaret Naud a décroché un diplôme avec titre « Baccalauréat en Psychologie » de l'université Concordia. Je puis vous assurer que la cérémonie des finissants s'est tenue à grand déploiement et j'étais accompagné de Sean et de Diana Bennett. Après toutes ces années d'effort, les autres bénévoles de l'appartement étaient très fiers de Margaret (qui travaillait à temps plein et étudiait à temps partiel).

Pour couronner la fête, Margaret nous a amené manger dans un restaurant vietnamien.

Ce souvenir demeure pour moi impérissable dans ma mémoire et je dis Bravo Margaret et Mille Félicitations!!!

Tu es un exemple de courage et de ténacité. Nous te souhaitons maintenant la maîtrise.

Alain, Resident
Spring, 2006

“Silent Wings”

The launching of my book “Silent Wings” took place at the publisher's, The Double Hook bookstore. People came in with greetings, many with orchids, roses and azaleas. It was so lovely to be surrounded by my family, friends and acquaintances. We sold 48 books that evening and I signed almost that amount. Lovely cheeses, wine and strawberries had been set out. The books in the store looked radiant, especially “Silent Wings”.

The best part of the evening for me was the reading of the poems. I loved every one of them, and it was a delight to share them with others. Everyone received them well and encouraged me to keep on. We continued to party across the street at the Second Cup. Friends who had not known each other mixed, and it was a joy to me. It would be great if this could happen every night!

I am so grateful to all who showed me such support that evening and throughout my life.

Mary Quinlan, Resident
Spring 1997

A resident's greetings to a project sponsored by the Dissemination Committee

L'Abri en Ville! Je m'y suis offert une chambre pour mes 40 ans et j'y demeure depuis bientôt 10 ans suite à de nombreux déménagements dont les péripéties m'ont conduite à une courte période d'itinérance. Qu'il est bon de se retrouver dans un nid douillet, bien au chaud en compagnie de co-locataires qui aident à briser le cercle vicieux de la solitude! Qu'il est rassurant de pouvoir compter sur un gîte permanent! Notre 5 1/2 est entièrement décoré et meublé. Ainsi chacune d'entre nous peut se retirer dans ses « quartiers généraux » (sa chambre) pour plus d'intimité.

L'Abri en Ville m'a finalement amenée à vivre une stabilité qui autrefois, m'était inconnue. J'ai pu retourner aux études et me trouver du travail. Le coût du loyer étant partagé à trois, je suis même parvenue à faire quelques économies malgré à une perte d'emploi due à une hospitalisation.

Il est certain que l'interaction des résidentes peut mener à certains malentendus. Qu'à cela ne tienne! Les visites hebdomadaires de notre coordonnatrice permettent un climat de dialogue et de recherche de solutions. Ceci se déroule dans le calme étant donné que ni la violence verbale ou physique n'est tolérée. Vivre à trois n'est pas toujours facile mais il faut aimer les compromis et l'harmonie.

Nous sommes en relation avec des bénévoles et avec les résidents des autres appartements. Parfois, on se lie d'amitié, on trouve une oreille attentive et compatissante. Le réseau social s'agrandit et les échanges se multiplient. Enfin on se sent moins seule. Quant aux bénévoles! Tantôt nous sommes invitées au musée, conviées à partager des agapes à leur domicile et même à vivre une journée à leur maison de campagne. Ils n'oublient jamais nos anniversaires de naissance. Autant de gestes pour lesquels mes 2 compagnes et moi organisons un repas en guise de remerciement.

A chaque année, les 30 résidents de L'Abri organisent une levée de fonds afin de financer une partie de leurs loisirs. Nous nous réunissons pour dessiner des cartes de Noël : le choix des meilleures cartes étant fait, nous les vendons à différentes églises. Et voilà, les profits servent à visiter un musée à Ottawa, faire un BBQ, visionner un bon film ou savourer un repas au resto. Les fruits de notre labeur varient d'une année à l'autre! Le plus remarquable, est que presque chacun d'entre nous y participe avec cœur. Ah! Oui, il y a notre fin de semaine au camp Kinkora à Ste-Agathe. Cette initiative complémente les nombreuses

activités qu'organise L'Abri en Ville. Bien entendu, j'ometts d'en mentionner, la liste étant assez impressionnante.

Comme vous pouvez le constater, je vis bien entourée et je profite d'un soutien à portée de mains. J'ai retrouvé ma dignité, la confiance en moi, la sécurité financière et émotive. Bien sûr, la perfection n'est pas de ce monde mais L'Abri en Ville est ouvert aux critiques de ses résidents qui sont aussi représentés au conseil d'administration. Ceci est un résumé très succinct de mes expériences de vie à L'Abri en Ville.

Christiane Lefebvre, Resident
Spring 2003

"L'Abri en Ville"

- L Lets one be oneself
- A Also encourages socializing
- B Bright, courageous residents taking each day as it comes
- R Religious affiliation unimportant
- I Independent living in a warm, stable environment
- E Enthusiastic volunteers who are like friends rather than care-givers
- N Never ever forget the countless hours and tireless effort of our irreplaceable coordinators (whose own families must wonder sometimes if they 'live' at L'Abri en Ville).
- V Ville Emard, Verdun and N.D.G, we are twenty-four now, but shortly will be expanding
- I Interesting, invigorating projects are always keeping the residents busy, e.g. outings in the country and reading groups
- L Lots and
- L Lots of little things – I cannot even try to enumerate all of them. The coordinators always try to accommodate us to ensure our apartments feel like home
- E Enthusiastic! You bet. I'm making progress here. What's stopping me?

Harvey Browman, Resident
Spring, 2000

Montreal in Fall

*Shhh the birds are necking at the feeder
On the back balcony.
I feel like Mother Bird
And delight in watching them
Come for their evening meal.
The big tree is leafless
But there is a maple
Shining in the last rays of the sun.
I love the peace in my home
Golden leaves, birds, sky,
Black bark, brown earth.*

Mary Quinlan, Resident
Fall 1995

“Enjoying the experience of our new kitchen.”

We're bursting to tell you about painting our new kitchen. With the help of a coordinator and a volunteer pro, my apartment-mates and I spent three days picking colours (to hide smoke!), cleaning behind the appliances first, then washing, priming and applying the final coat. The colours are somewhat aboriginal, and a print in the aboriginal manner on the wall goes well with the colours of the room. The first night we used the room we couldn't cook because the paint hadn't dried, so we had pizza and enjoyed the experience of our new kitchen.

George Harris, Resident
Spring 2000

Christmas at Brasilia – Topsy Tree and Turkey

Oh yeah! Christmas came around again last year. Tee hee! What a time it was for our apartment! Unlike other years, we were going to have invited guests and one big meal. Initially it was all very exciting.

As the days went by our concerns were many and some of the excitement wore off. Who was going to do what? What time were we going to ask guests to come? All of that kind of stuff was considered. Some of it brought anxious moments, some of it memories, and some of it joy.

You see, through L'Abri en Ville we at Brasilia had been given a very thoughtful donation. This culminated in an interesting shopping spree at a supermarket downtown that we had not been to before. And with the help of Pat, one of our volunteers, we bought up what would make a meal fit for a king. After all, wasn't that what the season was all about, a king? We also had been given a tree. This inevitably caused some excitement. I think especially for Nancy, as having a tree was a new experience.

In the days leading up to Christmas, we opened up the box with the tree in it. The tree was all there (no pun intended) but we discovered that the stand wasn't. So after doing some exploring to find one at a store, we gave up and decided to make do with what we had. I had once been told, "We do the best with what we have." Now I was about to see it in action.

I believe it was Christmas Eve when we decided to put the tree up. Kathryn became quite zealous and darn it, intact stand or not, the tree was going up. So we took some of her heaviest books from the bookshelf and placed them strategically around the base of the tree and what do you know, it stood up! The delicate part would be putting the decorations on without it toppling over. We moved ahead very gently. Before we knew it, we had a decorated tree. It lent a whole new atmosphere to the apartment.

As I explained in my opening paragraph, the season, well, it brought anxious moments, memories, and joy. A lot of the joy was in Christmas Day itself. The beast was in the oven on time to be ready and tender to the touch, stuffing intact. The accompaniments were prepared and all timed to a T. Then we were all ready to receive our guests. Kathryn and I are still having a little giggle over the coffee mug she chose to give Rodolfo. It seemed to widen his eyes! It was the one with the nude angels. Pleasant conversation took place and a good time was had by all. Many thanks to L'Abri and those who made donations.

From Sandra, Nancy and Kathryn.
Sandra, Resident
Spring 2005

Events

and Outings

“Intently, we explored our histories together.”

At one of our volunteer planning meetings, it was suggested that we have a book reading evening, and all thought it was a good idea. For the first reading, we sat in a circle on the balcony at the apartment and each read a paragraph of a Margaret Laurence short story. We were all part of the unfolding tale, each having a part in the telling of the story. Our circle seemed to become closer as the tale unfolded.

The story spoke of the author’s days on the prairies and how her roots are always within her, no matter where she goes. Our circle of story readers became a circle of memories and sharing. We listened to one another speak of the “roots” that we came from and the “roots” we carry within us. Intently we explored our histories together.

Each month, another person chooses a reading to bring to the circle. One resident introduced Wordsworth, which led to a very animated discussion, another graced us with a Maya Angelou story. When it was my turn, I suggested we each bring in something to read that we had created or found interesting. We had a good laugh that night when one volunteer read from a menu!

These evenings are highlights in our month. We all know that we shall sit in the circle and together explore an adventure. As one leaves off so the next shall begin. The experience ignites our intellects, our hearts and our spirits.

Judy Stevens, Volunteer
Spring 1999

“A party of course!”

It was the apartment’s third anniversary. For three years, three residents had lived together, shared meals and chores, met each others friends and families, encouraged or consoled each other, had fun.

How could they celebrate and show their appreciation for this serendipitous conjunction? A party of course! Yes, they would have a party and invite “the team” which had been part of their membership in the L’Abri family.

What a party. Soft music greeted us behind three welcoming faces. We were ushered into a candle-lit living room for cranberry punch and hors d’oeuvres, beautifully presented. A wonderful dinner was set at two tables and enjoyed by all. Back in the living room, conversation flowed as it does at the best of parties, and guests were loath to say goodnight at last.

Ann Reid, Volunteer
Spring 1999

“It sort of reminded you who your friends really are and why.”

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon. It was a chance to get the residents together. The food was great, and there was a lot of good company. It sort of reminded you who your friends really are and why. I am looking forward to another barbecue and the good companionship that comes with it.

Tony Perkins, Resident
Fall 1999

Ode to Nancy’s Place

Nancy and Fanny, two heart warmers
Birches, aspens and golden rod
Burgers, and hot dogs, Jim and Jerome
Big big beautiful burgers
Bocci an unbeatable Bronko
Bags fly through the 500 hole
Lazy living lawnchairs
Jim and Frédéric capture kite breezes
Salads, meatballs
George and the flowered garden
Keith and the fresh market corn
Rodolfo and Jerome and the moments in history
No snakes or deer or coyotes heard or seen
Outrageously organic outhouse
Fresh mint candy and cornhusks
To our friends Golden and Arabesque and Fanny
Thanks to the drivers Nancy and Denny
And Nancy Montgomery, may we share the moments again!
Bravo and hooray and applause.

Jim C., Volunteer, Jim R., Volunteer, and Jerome, Resident
Fall 2005

Canoe en Ville

The water was very calm on the old canal as we made our way back from a beautiful day in Lachine. It could have been anywhere in the world, we said, with the trees overhanging the sides and the houses, as well, mirrored in the water around us.

Eleanor told Audrey and me of her trip to Venice last year. We paddled out past the wharfs where the water was choppy and then to shore. We pulled the canoe out of the water and portaged it to the place where it is kept. Earlier, we had pulled it out of the water and portaged it twice to bypass the lock for the motor boats.

We had paddled the canoe on the main canal where the ships went long ago and which is now just for pleasure craft. The people on the shore and other boats waved at us and we waved back. People fished, skated, cycled and just took in the sun.

What a glorious, perfect, wonderful day in August.
Thank you Eleanor and Audrey. Thank you L’Abri en Ville.

Jerome, Resident
Fall, 2003

“We watched the sunset and then were able to see the moon and the stars.”

Last year and this year, I had the pleasure of going on a boat ride. Last year was extremely memorable. It was a beautiful summer day and we watched the sunset and then were able to see the moon and the stars. The company was great and one of my friends and I took turns sitting at the front of the boat watching the sights and enjoying the majestic water. This year, the weather wasn't as cooperative, but to sit at the front of the boat and watch a gull gracefully line the sky across the water was lovely. There is something quite extraordinary and calming about the water. Both occasions were enjoyed by all; even the huge spiders didn't seem to bother anybody. Special thanks to the volunteer who supplied the boat and is the captain on our voyages!

Karen Mitchell, Resident
Fall, 2000

“Our hearts were taken on a little flight.”

At L'Abri, many of us knew that one of our residents was interested in the cello and that he even played it. However, until last Saturday we had no idea that he was such an accomplished musician. He has talked about his weekly music lesson Sunday afternoons, and occasionally mentioned that he was giving a recital at the home of his teacher, but modest man that he is, never said much else and he didn't really want us to go and hear him play. However, a couple of weeks ago, he did say he had another recital and fortunately for us, he invited us to go.

What a treat it turned out to be. The program he chose consisted of two selections from Felix Mendelssohn: *Song Without Words, Op. 106* and *Sonata in F Major Op. 5 No. 1*. He played these beautiful and technically mature pieces with real feeling, accompanied on the piano by this teacher. As lovely music has the power to do, our hearts were taken on a little flight.

The occasion was graced by the presence of the cellist's parents, his brother, his apartment-mate, a volunteer and a friend from another L'Abri apartment. Bravo to our resident and thank you for a wonderfully enjoyable Saturday afternoon of music.

Maureen Ramsay, Coordinator
Spring, 2002

Camp Kinkora

“The experience epitomizes everything that L’Abri is.”

We all met early on a pleasant morning, joined the car pools that had been arranged, and set out for Camp Kinkora, near Ste. Agathe des Monts. It was even more pleasant to see all the smiling faces geared up for their recreation of choice. As soon as we’d departed the city, our spirits took a lift! For most the camp was a place revisited but, for some, it was a first time and a challenge to remember so many names and attach them to faces. Then there was the other challenge - jumping into the lake! It was definitely much cooler than it had been earlier in the summer. For those who took the challenge, the initial shock was worth each refreshing dip. Walks helped work up an appetite for meals, so thoughtfully prepared. We all chose a bed and a cabin, and, thanks to the fresh air and exercise, got in some very good sleep - all this after the warmth of a camp fire that had drawn us together to play games and sing camp songs.

Sandra, Resident
Fall, 1998

“L’Abri en Montagne”

On Sunday after breakfast, the mood was relaxed and familiar as Sharyn and we campers gathered in a circle and talked about altruism and religion. We made lunch from left-overs and some went to the chapel.

Camp food was delicious, catered by Marianne, Beverly, Sharyn and Greita. Ann made her famous soup. Sharyn and Greita got up early each day and made muffins and cookies. We ate a lot of fruit. We had corn and hamburgers and chicken. Audrey and Sheila came. So did Eleanor. Sue was there and Raymonde drove up me and Nancy G. Richard showed us his pictures of Peru.

People hiked, mountain climbed, swam and boated. We drew, painted and wrote. We made new friends. Brent is a new volunteer. Greita is a friend of Sharyn and now our friend too.

Andy assumed life guarding duties. Project Arc landed on higher ground where cabins five and six are situated and decided that all the rains which came in the previous few days had subsided enough to come down and join the party. Everywhere was heard the sound of water running down to the lake. If you need to know, Nancy G. was the one assuming dishwashing duties.

We gathered around Tony’s camp fires each night and sang tunes. It is Tony’s, Nancy B’s, Sharyn’s and Greita’s birthdays this month. It is my own eighth anniversary living in L’Abri en Ville. We had a blast. Bonne Anniversaire!

Jerome, Resident
Fall, 2004

Rainy September Memories

How could I possibly forget that summer’s day in September? It’s like it was yesterday. I went to Camp Kinkora in the Laurentians with L’Abri en Ville, the most memorable experience ever: the beautiful walk in the woods up to the mountain top, the glorious colors of the leaves on the trees, red, orange, yellow. Oh, so beautiful!

The drops of water falling on the lake, the rain washes these memories to me as the drops continue to fall. I could not possibly forget this special experience: the painting of abstract colors, an amazing rainbow of colors on canvas and paper, a walk in the rain and peddling the pedalo boats on the water, the beautiful ceremony in the church, the song Imagine played by Sean. The image of these three days will last forever in my memories and heart, especially that rainy day in September.

Renée, Resident
Fall, 2005

“Someone once suggested to me that every shared meal is a sacrament.”

Those members of the L’Abri family who have not taken part in one of our annual camp weekends don’t know what they’re missing. The experience epitomizes everything that L’Abri is. I’ve been there for at least part of every camp, and I hope to do so for many more years.

So many of us grew up in the tradition of time spent at a camp in the Laurentians, and we’re familiar with the invitation of a sparkling lake nestled among verdant mountains. Swimming and canoeing, rowing or paddle-boating are certainly popular pastimes, even during the second week of September. Popular too, are short hikes along various wooded paths or a climb up “the rock”.

Food is an important part of the weekend. It is plentiful, varied and the product of many hands. Someone once suggested to me that every shared meal is a sacrament, and I’ve never forgotten this remark. The simple enjoyment of good food, the sense of gratitude that we are all free to do this, conversation that ranges from the trivial to a deep search for answers, and the knowledge that we are safe and secure among accepting and caring friends all contribute to making such occasions holy.

So much is going on at our camp weekend. Everyone “follows his own bliss”. For some a special task is eagerly pursued – laying a fire, planning a service of worship, organizing a hike, peeling vegetables. For others it is important to shake off all the paraphernalia of daily life in the city and just “veg out”. There is a great building of old friendships and meeting with new people and new ideas.

Even more than in the city, there is no distinction between volunteers, coordinators, residents or members of the board. Nobody has to do anything but enjoy, and they can do it in bites of half a day to the entire forty-eight hours. So far, we’ve had almost entirely fair weather, the cabins are warm, the leaves are beginning to turn and you can see the stars at night. And you receive the most satisfying sense of being part of a very significant whole.

Ann Reid, Volunteer
November 2000

For more information on camp weekends, see “Summer Camp Plan”, Appendix 27, p. 153

Volunteers

Stories and Appreciation

“Thanks to the volunteers who make my experience here like being part of another family.”

It’s the year of the volunteer and I wanted to tell everyone just how important that is. You see, I have first hand knowledge, having just come out of the hospital after three weeks. My parents were away. My friends (our volunteers) as I now call them, are as much a part of my life as my friends are. The first day I was in the hospital when I awoke, there were flowers, and a note and some books to read. These were from a volunteer who didn’t want to wake me. The thought was so nice it kept me smiling. This volunteer visited a couple more times and although she has only been with our apartment for a year, she has become a near and dear friend to us all.

Another volunteer once helped me with a rocky morning and she ended our conversation by saying, “Love ya.” Well those words meant so much to me because I feel the same way about her. Another time we went for a walk on the mountain and she brought a delicious sandwich and some cookies which were a break from the hospital food and that milieu. Another night we all went out for supper. We just told jokes and talked and laughed and had great fun. When I had just got out of the hospital, another volunteer was my advisor on a particularly rough evening. So thanks you guys for all you did, continue to do and have done. Thanks as well to the other volunteers that make my experience here like being part of another family.

Karen Mitchell, Resident
April 2001

“Why do you like to spend time with us?”

We recently celebrated a resident’s birthday with a ‘pot luck’ dinner at a volunteer’s home in January. We all embrace these evening of celebration with anticipation and joy. The conversation is always stimulating, the laughter and warmth between us is contagious and the entertainment (singing, poetry, and story telling) is spirit lifting.

One resident often asks the volunteers, “Why do you like to spend time with us?” One volunteer’s response: “Because our evenings are filled with honesty and our conversations have real meaning. This is very important for me.” We always feel better after we have shared an evening with our friends at the apartment. It is our hope

that the pleasure we receive is similar to the pleasure we want to give. After one of these special evenings I think: I can hardly wait to recapture this splendour when we meet again.

Judy Stevens, Volunteer
Spring, 2002

“I have a lot to learn yet, but with such a caring group of individuals and a lot of guidance, how could I go wrong?”

First, let me say, I have been a volunteer for many years, mainly at hospitals, seniors’ residences and within my church community. The satisfaction I get greatly outweighs the time I give to the various groups. I feel useful and I have made many wonderful friends over the years.

I joined L’Abri en Ville in July after hearing Richard Tobin speak at St. Ignatius Parish about the organization. I must admit, it was with some degree of apprehension. You see, my experience of people with mental illness was limited to knowing someone whose husband had been diagnosed, but I never had to deal with it myself.

However, I was encouraged to join. God works in wonderful ways! I find I am able to contribute and, again, I have encountered many wonderful people.

I have been assigned to the Bessborough residence, three great people who are so appreciative, and the volunteers there are such a special group. I have a lot to learn yet but with such a caring group of individuals and a lot of guidance, how could I go wrong?

Pat Kearney, Volunteer
Fall, 2005

“Volunteering at L’Abri is like that - when you’re least expecting it, a resident’s words, gesture or laugh can make you feel close and cared for.”

Driving to the library recently with a L’Abri resident who’d been borrowing Spanish language books, I playfully tried out my Spanish on him and mentioned I’d soon be off to Mexico on a long awaited vacation. “Lucky you. I’ve always wanted to go there. I’ve even got a guidebook,” he said. “On the way back I’ll get it for you.”

Volunteering at L’Abri is like that - when you’re least expecting it, a resident’s words, gesture or laugh can make you feel close and cared for. It’s the essential link with others that invariably gets destroyed when a young adult is stricken with a severe and permanent mental illness.

One female resident described her pre-L’Abri life. “I lived alone, spent too much money on rent, went to food banks. I found it very hard to get motivated. Things weren’t going well and this got me depressed. One job I hated was grocery shopping, so I wasn’t eating right. After I came to L’Abri, a volunteer came over several times to help make a menu plan. It made grocery shopping much less of a chore. Life still isn’t easy but I’m handling the depressed feelings better. Having people around is what helps most.”

One L’Abri volunteer started years ago with no particular knowledge of mental illness. By listening and caring he’s come a long way in understanding what it must be like. He’s learned people afflicted with psychiatric disorders are “ripped out of the community so abruptly. From one day to the next they have nothing. There’s no mercy to it and it’s none of their fault. This place,” he says of L’Abri, “brings that sense of community back.”

As time goes on, it often happens that volunteers are less and less likely to set an agenda for activities with the residents, because the residents get quite comfortable doing things more spontaneously. One volunteer says: “They’ll call and chat and might agree to have a meal together. They’re actually coming over tomorrow for supper and afterwards we’ll probably play some cards. It’s not like volunteer work anymore; it’s just friends getting together.” Which is really what volunteering at L’Abri is all about.

Susan Purcell, Volunteer
April 2001

“The residents offer a gift - trust - and teach us how, if we are open to learn.”

When my husband and I retired, though we were both involved in some volunteering, we decided to look for something we might be interested in doing together. We read about L’Abri in our parish bulletin and after a call to learn more about the organization, we were invited for an interview. That was about five years ago and I can truthfully say it was a gift. We have learned a great deal.

We started slowly. We took two men grocery shopping each week, gradually trying to help them make alternate healthy food choices in order to eat well within a budget. We also tried our hand at basic cooking lessons, which we quickly learned were well received and appreciated as long as we were present, and doing the cooking and cleaning up. Our challenge was to translate these lessons, so that the residents executed the cooking and cleaning up. Meals also had to be prepared in less than five minutes, so we gave some of the lessons using the microwave. Slowly we worked at building relationships through these activities.

A year and a half later the residents in the apartment

changed (for various reasons) and we started anew, but with a difference. We now knew some of the other volunteers, were comfortable with the staff, and had started to learn some of what I feel are the basics for L'Abri volunteering: *understanding the rhythm, being flexible, having patience, enjoying laughter, and never taking yourself too seriously.*

We started again with three new residents, again helping with grocery shopping, meal planning, budgeting and basic cooking. We tried our hand at organizing periodic housecleaning events. This became another learning experience for both us and the residents. Slowly, over time, with lots of laughter and some hard work, we now have a regular maintenance schedule and the residents' pride in their home is noticeable.

We've learned to recognize that the rhythm of the residents is not necessarily the same as ours. One beautiful, sunny spring day after shopping, I suggested we take a walk. "How far?" was the response. "Just around the block," I said. The reply was "Let's just go to the corner this time." The resident who said this now does a good deal of walking.

Flexibility is also important in another way. I have accepted the need to reschedule, sometimes 6, 7, or 8 times – because the residents may want to do something, but are unable to carry through at the particular time I make the suggestion.

It takes patience and time to build a relationship, and trust. We have to be willing to wait until someone is ready to share a cup of coffee, or to go shopping for new clothes, or to ask for help, or to want you to listen.

I believe laughter is the glue, the healing balm – like touch. To be able to laugh together or share a hug breaks down barriers, and opens us to sharing of ourselves. It helps us believe in ourselves and in each other.

Our volunteer team has eight people, each supporting the residents and each other in different ways. Whether it's putting up pictures, going swimming, helping with budget planning, or washing the floor – we all share. At monthly planning meetings, birthday celebrations, special outings, and potluck and holiday dinners – we share and support one another's gifts.

We have the privilege of working with an organization that helps people with mental illness integrate into society. We have witnessed the residents form a community, negotiate boundaries, share chores, show consideration of each other, and form caring relationships

The residents offer a gift – trust – and teach us how, if we are open to learn.

Gerry Legrove, Volunteer
Spring 2003, speech excerpt

Conclusion

L'Abri en Ville

*A Narrative Poem by
Mary Quinlan*

Think of a house

With three bedrooms, a den
A kitchen with a fridge and stove
A bathroom and two balconies
A living room, a laundry room

Feel a home

With three persons in it
Who read in the den
One watches the telejournal in the living room
Another warms up ham and mashed potatoes in the
kitchen
It is my turn to clean the washroom
Our bedrooms are private and cosy, In them we read,
write, relax and sleep.
Beginning to sound like your home? Anyone's home?

Well our home is even more special. It is an "abri en ville"

Advocates build shelves for us,
Make curtains, balance budgets, move furniture, take us
for groceries and to the movies.
A board of directors raises funds from churches and
synagogues, corporations and individuals.
So we can live modestly, do our laundry here.
Go to summer camp. Coordinators meet with us, help us to
better organize our lives.

What else is our abri en ville?

Well to us who've known the terror of emotional illness,
who've struggled with it, for so many years.
This *abri* in Notre Dame de Grace
Is a peaceful home
Blessed by God
And the work of many human hands.
With our hands and our hearts,
We in turn, give a very warm
THANK YOU – To all of you who make it possible.