

TESTAMENT

“We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and do it very well.”

Archbishop Oscar Romero
El Salvador + 1980

The St. Francis Residences offer permanent housing with supportive services to men and women with long histories of homelessness and chronic mental illness. But it did not start out that way. The roots of our project lay back in the early 1970's with the wholesale deinstitutionalization of thousands of men and women from state psychiatric hospitals. Many were sent to New York City where there was a stock of single room occupancy (SRO) hotels for housing but few social services. Many of these former patients lacked the ability to manage their basic needs such as money and medications, food and clothing. They remained isolated in their rooms, often becoming homeless through eviction for non-payment of rent or rehospitized because of their failure or unwillingness to take medications.

Father John McVean, O.F.M. first became aware of this population when visiting one of these SRO's not far from St. Francis Church. He met others who were trying to provide some social services in the building and they joined together to seek a more humane solution to the needs of this fragile population. They were given a small office in the hotel and began helping the tenants with their money and medications along with starting programs which sought to break the isolation of their illness. The Aberdeen Project, named after the hotel, prospered until new management planned to renovate the building and return it to a tourist hotel. A search for a solution to this challenge led to the development of the Residences. Father John Felice, O.F.M. offered to help find a new building and Father Thomas Walters, O.F.M. moved from the Aberdeen and joined in the opening of the first Residence. The year was 1980.

The development of the first St. Francis Residence began with more enthusiasm than skill. The slow learning curve accelerated as Residence II and Residence III came on line. The buildings became the necessary foundation that would allow for the continuation of supportive services first developed at the Aberdeen. Enriched staffing, appropriate funding and experience all led to the growth of the Residences. But underlying the Residences were a set of values deeply rooted in our Franciscan tradition. And it is that tradition that we hope will help frame our future.

At the heart of the beginning of the Franciscan movement is the story of the leper, the isolated character of the medieval world. When St. Francis embraced the leper, whom he so feared, he found himself embracing another human being and it changed his life. Their lives and their needs became his, and he asked his fellow friars follow this example. That same spirit is behind the approach we modern day friars have brought to the Residences.

Our first commitment is to the absolute worth of every human being, no matter how battered or bruised life has treated them. One by one, we accept the isolated ones of our society and, one by one, we seek to maximize their humanity and dignity within the framework of their illness.

We offer help and comfort in times of illness and pain. We honor their birthdays and holidays and offer basic assistance with their money and medications. As the years go by the tenants find stability and trust in their lives. We remind them that their lives are of worth and that they enrich the community by their presence and gifts.

Our second challenge is to help our tenants navigate the changing needs and requirements of the systems that exist to help them. We stand in solidarity with our tenants, working to protect them from policies that could jeopardize their stability and growth. These policies, often driven by financial considerations, can promote short term gains with long term unforeseen consequences. Our vision strives to value the humanity of our tenants over the convenience of policies that may not be suitable for all.

Our third and strongest commitment is to the common good. We friars are nothing without our fraternity and we believe that the forming of community, even among a population that struggles with isolation, is our most important task. The wide variety of activities that are available to our tenants are only part of the effort to build a familial atmosphere. At the heart of this effort for both the friars and our dedicated staff, who every day teach us the real spirit of St. Francis, is the value placed on each individual and the part they share in the larger community.

The vision we have sought to bring to the Residences rests solidly on our Franciscan tradition. For more than 800 years friars have embraced the lepers of their own time and it is our hope that friars of the future will continue the work of the Residences in that same spirit. We have tried to lead the way beyond the neglect and indifference that has inflicted this population in the past. Over the years many have followed in our footsteps developing projects in supportive housing for the varying needs of the homeless population. There will be new challenges and new needs in the years to come. It is hoped that the next generation of friars will continue to bring the same spirit of our Franciscan tradition to these fragile but cherished least of our brothers and sisters.

Father John M. Felice, O.F.M.

Father John J. McVean, O.F.M.

Father Thomas J. Walters, O.F.M.