



Welcoming the stranger

Reaching out to people with only 'the clothes on their back, hope in their pocket'



Sister Zita Telkamp, a Sister of Divine Providence and program director of La Posada Providencia, shared a moment with the baby of a client of the emergency shelter. The shelter's mission is to help those in crisis seek legal refuge in the United States.

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A pregnant woman, her husband and their 5-year-old daughter fled what they felt was life-threatening persecution in their home country. They entered the United States without documentation and were detained by the U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement.

The husband remains in detention, but his wife and child were released. They have found refuge at La Posada Providencia, an emergency shelter for people who flee to the United States due to political oppression, natural disaster and other life-threatening actions in their native countries. The center is a ministry of the Sisters of Divine Providence.

Sister Zita Telkamp, a Sister of Divine Providence and program director of La Posada, said the woman speaks to her husband by phone once a week. She has been told that her husband has one more court date.

"I feel such compassion for the families," said Sister Zita, a former educator in the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

Sister Zita recalled the case of a man named Yoanki, who arrived from Cuba and ended up at La Posada Providencia. While there, he began the legal process of attaining political asylum and took advantage of the English as a Second Language and life-skills education available at the shelter. Sister Zita tutored Yoanki, mentoring him the next six years. Yoanki enrolled at La Roche College in Pittsburgh and recently earned a bachelor's degree in facility management.

The shelter's mission is to help people in crisis while seeking legal refuge in the United States. The shelter notes that 85 percent of those who gained asylum or legal relief have lived with family or independently within five months of resolving their legal status.

La Posada will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year. Sister Zita, who served at Mount Providence School in

Normandy, Ascension School in Normandy and North American Martyrs School in Florissant, came to La Posada as a volunteer in 1990, intending to stay just a couple weeks. She came as a volunteer for a couple weeks each summer after that and became program director in 2008.

Earlier this year, Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownville, Texas, nominated Sister Zita for the 2013 Lumen Christi Award. The Catholic Extension Society award honors an individual or group working in a U.S. mission diocese who demonstrates how the power of faith can transform lives and communities. They are considered "hidden heroes" who bring light and hope to forgotten corners of the country.

Bishop Flores said that under Sister Zita's care "the residents at La Posada are provided access to the services they need for their next resettlement step and are encouraged to embrace the notion that they can achieve successful futures with hard work and their inherent skills. Welcoming the stranger is a Gospel value that is practiced daily at this haven for those without a home."

Sister Zita said the Sisters of Divine Providence set up the house of hospitality after Blessed John Paul II encouraged religious communities to become involved with migrant workers and immigration. "Ever since, we've been offering hospitality to those who come from countries where they've been persecuted because of either their religious or political views," she said.

The ministry is "an opportunity to welcome those who come only with the clothes on their back and hope in their pocket," she said.

Many of the guests stay until they can contact family and friends, while others stay until they get a work permit or Social Security number, she said. "It's a wonderful feeling I have to make them feel welcome and loved not only by God, but by us at La Posada," Sister Zita said.

Currently La Posada has clients from Rwanda, Er-

itrea, Ethiopia, the Congo, Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The ministry "shows each one that God's providence is made visible to them in a gentle way," Sister Zita said.

The ministry especially fits with the vision of the religious community's founder, Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler of Germany. He was known as the "social justice bishop" because of his tireless work in helping oppressed, unskilled German laborers in their effort to unionize for just wages and decent working conditions. His advice was to "be aware of the signs of the times," Sister Zita said.

Especially in St. Louis, the Sisters of Divine Providence focused on health care and education, but they have expanded to work with homeless people and immigrants.

A new way of looking at immigration and welcoming those who come to the U.S. borders is needed, Sister Zita said. She asks people to become better educated on the situation of immigrants, noting that so many "come here not to take people's jobs but because they have been persecuted. We should be grateful to God for the freedom we enjoy and should be unselfish in sharing that freedom with those who never experienced it. We thank God every day that we are free, have food on our table and clothes on our back."



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