PAX and Christmas in April

Charles Hookey, June 2022

For several years, in the late 1990s, PAX partnered with two other faith communities (Caldwell Chapel Catholic and Little Falls Presbyterian) to form a Christmas In April team for the Arlington/Falls Church area. Christmas in April (now Rebuilding Together) is a volunteer program to repair the homes of low-income elderly people. To qualify for help, the person must own the home, sign a ‘contract’ that they plan to live in the house for another five years, and meet some financial threshold (a private document we never saw).Our work involved organizing volunteers from the three faith communities, gathering supplies from a central ‘warehouse’, and showing up on the designated Saturday at the assigned home to work.

The houses we worked on were all ‘presentable’ from the outside. Maybe they had some overgrown bushes, maybe some fallen fencing, but nothing that made the need for our help obvious.

However, as the Christmas In April ‘corporate’ staff had discovered in its vetting, inside was a different matter…and that’s where the homeowner needed help.

The residents were usually an older couple. A lifetime accumulation of ‘stuff’ was the first thing you noticed -- too much furniture, too many knick-knacks, too many things hanging on the wall. Then there was the kitchen, which always needed a ‘good cleaning’. Greasy walls and decrepit cabinetry were easy fixes. Plumbing and electrical issues (leaks, broken switches, lights) needed special talent, which always seem to show up among the volunteers.

We remedied tripping hazards – rugs, old carpeting, broken tiles, loose thresholds – as we were able. We widened doorways and built entrance ramps. And always there was painting. In some cases, old lead paint was a challenge. We couldn’t scrape it, so we had to just paint over it as best we could.

Christmas In April staff always encouraged able family members to assist the volunteers, and usually they were helpful and grateful. Sometimes, one of the most valuable gifts a volunteer could supply was ‘keeping company’ with the homeowner(s) -- usually outside, in good weather, or in a room where we were not doing any work. Listening to their lifetime of stories became an integral part of our effort to help restore to them a valuable sense of dignity and community.

Dozens of PAX volunteers worked on the Christmas In April houses. I learned that Brinton Brown (Steve’s dad) was an expert with anything made of wood. Balky door jams, stripped hinge screw holes, and rickety cabinets were his specialty. Others were all-in on the painting (I hate painting!). Some of our teens were a big help at the yardwork. I learned valuable tips from a professional electrician on the Little Falls contingent. I had some interesting spiritual conversations while working with the Caldwell Chapel leader.

Nowadays I occasionally happen upon one of ‘our’ houses. It usually brings back a fond memory of doing good deeds with friends old and new.

There was one situation I will never forget and think of more often than any other. It was the home of two older women – siblings – who had become hoarders. This was before reality TV shows about such, and I had never heard of, let alone seen this condition. It was so sad. The one-level house was filled to the ceilings with stuff piled upon stuff. The furniture, magazines, storage bins, old telephone books, clothes, and lifetime accumulation of ‘treasures’ was overwhelming to us volunteers. When I previewed the house as a PAX leader, I assumed we’d have a giant dumpster and clean this place out. In reality, we struggled to dispose of anything! They would not let anything go. One of them spent hours sorting through the kitchen ‘junk drawer’ (we all have one!) but could not part with a single paper clip, pushpin, random screw, or rubber band.

We ended up building (assembling from a kit) a metal shed in the back yard to allow for saving almost everything. The only good thing about this was it did free up, for the while, some space inside the house, allowing them better access to their beds and the bathroom.

We installed smoke detectors. We worked hard on making the kitchen usable and ‘unstuck’ some doors. As we could not get to the walls, we could do very little painting. We worked until dark and left pretty depressed. The sisters were alternately passive and combative, but never grateful. I saw then what I now know, that hoarding is a kind of mental sickness. Even trained professionals struggle in their efforts to help people who have this affliction. As with our other Christmas In April houses, you’d never know the story inside by walking by on the sidewalk.

I’ve done other good deeds and I’ve volunteered at other community and PAX opportunities. I’ve helped folk one-on-one. But my Christmas In April experience stands out as possibly the best combination of giving, sharing, learning, helping, and growing as a person and a Christian.