# Chris Johnston: Home Made

*By Nellie Ohr, based on a September 25 2022 interview and written notes from Chris. Nellie’s note: I was inspired to collect PAX members’ stories of service after reading the book Home Made, by Liz Hauck, describing how she held cooking sessions with boys in a halfway house and, in the process, tried to make that grim place into a home. The phrase “Home Made” also seems to fit* ***Chris Johnston’s*** *life-long work of helping provide dignified housing to people in need.*

**Chris Will Find His Way**

Chris Johnston’s aspiration to serve others began during his years in the seminary. Growing up in an Irish Catholic family, Chris served as an altar boy and choir boy. He would help clean the church on Saturdays. After high school he applied for seminary and was accepted. He attended seminary college and earned a master’s degree in theology at Catholic University.

One “fateful” day during his theology education, Chris had a crisis of vocation. Fearing he had failed a Christology exam, “I was in agony and was walking by Caldwell Hall, down a long sidewalk by the Basilica [of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception], walking down it in tears. I just knew that this was it” for his priestly career. Unsure what to do, Chris consulted with his advisor, Sister Ann Stango, SC, and with his spiritual director, Otto Hentz, SJ, who both assured him that they believed him to be a committed Christian who would find his way. Chris left seminary, married three years later, and began earning a master’s degree in social work at Howard, while working at a Catholic Charities shelter in Alexandria, known as Christ House.

**Housing Guru**

Chris worked five years for Catholic Charities, two years for Fairfax County Housing, and then eleven years at the Fellowship Square Foundation in Reston, Virginia, which sponsors senior housing and is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Chris recalls becoming a “HUD guru,” referring to the US Department for Housing and Urban Development. “I got good at quoting HUD handbooks.”

One time he felt a grace-filled moment when directly confronting HUD bureaucrats: “I called about an emergency at Fellowship Square. We had lost power in one of our buildings. No elevators, no fire alarms. We needed to pay to have a generator truck brought in to temporarily replace the power. An 18-wheel generator cost a lot, and the bureaucrats wanted us to jump through all the usual hoops. That’s where I learned sometimes you have to be blunt and say no messing around—especially with government stuff.” In another tangle with bureaucracy, Chris recalled an Iraqi woman who received a place in one of his housing developments after the First Gulf War of 1990-1991. The administration of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein had stripped her bank account. “We subsidized her entire rent. (HUD agreed because the US had frozen Saddam’s money). I realized then how world politics can trickle down to us.”

**Grace-Filled Moments**

“Fellowship Square was mostly wonderful,” Chris recalls; as administrator of Hunters Woods in Reston, for example, he found money to redecorate and put more books in the library. “People were generally happy, though they complained about the food.” After somebody learned that Chris could sing, “The ’30-Plus’ women’s club invited me to sing at their monthly luncheon meeting.” Chris then began dressing up as Santa for house Christmas parties. At one Christmas party at Hunter’s Woods, after Chris had worn his Santa costume and sung for the residents, “I slumped down in the chair next to the Christmas tree. A lady comes up, on a walker, moving quickly. She threw the walker out of the way and said, ‘I’ve been waiting 85 years for this!’ and she plunked herself down on my lap and gave me a big kiss. People were taking pictures for five minutes. Talk about grace-filled moments. That was straight out of God’s playbook,” Chris recalls. Chris was promoted to Director of Operations for Fellowship Square and continued to sing at Christmas parties each year at all five Fellowship Houses around the US Capital Beltway.

During this time, Chris also learned about the PAX community through a social worker who knew Amanda Messinger. He decided to check it out. Full of apprehension, one day Chris visited PAX Mass for the first time. “Who should open the door for me but Carl Siebentritt, who exclaimed, ‘Welcome! You’re in for a good one! We have Ken Himes today!’” Cementing Chris’ good impression was that Fr. Himes was wearing a Brooklyn Dodgers cap with his habit.

**Catholics for Housing**

Chris found a new job as Executive Director at Catholics for Housing (CFH) and served there for 10 years.

In his effort to secure funding and property for various projects, Chris recalls that he took advantage of politics and personal clout.

* On one occasion, when a private company tried to buy the land that the Briarcliff subsidized apartment complex was on, Chris contacted the office of county supervisor Gerry Connolly, who Chris had read was a Catholic and former seminarian. Connolly called a meeting and told the private developers that if they bought the land it would be “over my dead body.”
* On another occasion, Chris convinced the Psychiatric Association of Northern Virginia (PANV) to buy a group home that the PANV had formerly leased from CFH. This covered the costs of maintaining the house and allowed PANV to continue pursuing its mission of retraining the group home’s residents.
* Then there was the time when the Benedictine sisters of Bristow, seeking to downsize, offered to sell CFH 14 of their 100 acres on Linton Hall Road near the Manassas Battlefield. CFH negotiated with the sisters and with county engineers on a plan to include townhomes, single family housing, and, most difficult of all, a daycare Center. ”During a break in the negotiations, I was chatting with the two nuns. I said ‘By the way, being Benedictine, do you know Abbot Benedict? I’m his nephew.’ We had the property that afternoon. I’m very proud of that too, another grace-filled moment.” Having secured the land, CFH built townhomes for low-income people; a development for teachers, firefighters and police; and market-rate single-family homes whose profits subsidized the low-income housing. CFH also obtained a $300,000 contribution from Prince William County. However, during the financial catastrophe of 2008, the market rate for the single-family houses collapsed, while the HUD-subsidized housing rates remained “set in stone.” Chris acted quickly and “trimmed down the low-income townhomes” to fit HUD guidelines. “That was my pride and joy—pulling that one off in that time.”

Chris recalls two moments of seemingly divine inspiration in financing affordable housing projects: “I don’t know how God told me, but I got a whisper in the ear.” In one incident, someone had neglected to file paperwork for a mortgage on the Briarcliff development in Tysons. “Something told me to call and talk to this guy. I sat in my car and talked to him. They were ready to foreclose. We straightened it out.” In another incident eight years later, when the engineer of the Linton Hall Road development project failed to make progress due to other projects, Prince William County closed the case, thinking CFH had lost interest. “I realized that it was taking too long, so I set up a meeting with Prince William Housing. I said, ‘We’ve got shovels in the ground; I have to pay these people.’ If I hadn’t had the realization I needed to talk with these people, the project might have failed. That was a grace-filled moment.”

**Testing Times**

“After that is when God tested me.” Claudia and Chris divorced. Chris lived, off and on, with son CJ, but the family home was for sale. Waking up one day unable to move his legs, Chris yelled for CJ to call 911. “The next thing I know, I’m on a gurney; and the next thing I know after that, it’s a week later. I was hallucinating a lot, and they had to tie me down. One day when Steve Brown was there, I had one of these hallucinations and pulled out my catheters, and Steve had to help hold me down.” For the next seven months, Chris was in and out of the hospital.

During this time, PAX members showed “overwhelming” love and support. PAX members wrote to him and visited him. “Steve Brown was always there.” Father Joe Nangle visited him multiple times. Charles Schehl was “essential to my recovery,” Chris recalls. Charles “somehow always showed up” when the medical personnel were about to “insert something” or carry out some procedure on Chris. “He would come and pat my hand and say, ‘It’s OK’.” Ron Novak and Paula Hillery offered space to Chris and his Aunt Kathryn when the case became too intense for his Aunt Lois and her husband to continue hosting him. Chris stayed with Ron and Paula for six months. His Aunt Kathryn, a Sister of Charity of New York, stayed from June to February to attend to his needs. “If we were staying at Aunt Lois’s, I would bang a pot if I needed Aunt Kathryn at night. When we stayed at Ron and Paula’s, they set up a corner of their house with two bedrooms so Aunt Kathryn could easily help me.”

That July, Chris recalls, “I was going downhill. I didn’t know PAX was praying every week. I had an experience that has never left me, and I think was one of the greatest graces I’ve ever received.

“I was lying there and thought I had started to nap…. All of a sudden, I look around and can’t see anything. It was kind of lavender, with stars everywhere. I couldn’t see my body. Then I noticed I was not worrying about anything.” Even if he tried thinking about this or that problem, he could not remember any of them. “I had the wherewithal to think I could stay like this forever in absolute peace.”

All of a sudden, I hear, ‘Turn your hand over’. I was back in reality and realized the voice belonged to Joe Nangle. He was giving me the last rites. When I had come in to the hospital from my aunt’s on the previous day, I remember lying in the intensive care unit and hearing them say, “His organs are failing.” Chris recalls being so “flabbergasted” by this near-death experience that he didn’t tell anyone for several days.

By March Chris was finally able to move to his own place, and a buddy found him an apartment in Germantown, Maryland. He had two pods of belongings in storage from his former home, and PAX organized a convoy to go to Germantown and move Chris in completely in one day. A truly grace-filled moment. Eventually Chris found a job with the Jubilee Association as Director of Housing Development.

Chris counts his blessings. “In my isolation, my prayer life has definitely deepened,” after a busy career when he was sometimes too busy for prayer.

Chris also recounts having things he needs “just show up. One day I owed $500 for a bill. An Earned Income Tax Credit check for exactly that amount arrived.” On another occasion, his car fell apart, and “out of the blue” his mechanic sold Chris a well-maintained family car for only $5000. “When I really need something, it seems to show up.”

Chris spent his whole career helping people find good homes. He is grateful God allowed him to engage and flourish in this work.