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Peacemaking in unexpected places

Judy Gross | Oct. 14, 2009

Kelli Brew and Johnny Zokovitch, managers of the Catholic Worker "Blue House" in Gainesville, Fla. (Photos by Judy Gross)

FRUITLAND, FLA. -- Seventy mostly middle-aged and older social justice activist members of Pax Christi Florida gathered here on a recent weekend at a Methodist retreat center to ask and answer the weekend theme: ?How shall I live??

Although at first it can seem a bit incongruous, Catholic activists now punctuate this otherwise sedate region of north central Florida, an area where rolling hills pasture farm animals.

Those attending the Pax Christi gathering offered a variety of responses to the theme?s question, advocating causes ranging from an independent Palestinian state to assisting developmentally challenged adults and children.

As peacemakers face a seemingly overwhelming number of issues, ?inertia is killing us,? said Debra Susie, executive director of Florida Impact, which addresses the problem of hunger.

St. Thomas University speaker Mary Carter Waren noted that the essential need for Pax Christi is to make peacemaking relevant to younger people. She urged refinement of the organization?s priorities. ?When you try to be everything you end up being nothing,? she said. She noted how serious social justice is, but cautioned those present to ?seek deep joy,? adding, ?Sometimes Pax Christi can be so down.?

St. Augustine Pax Christi member Mary Zamora helped shape the organization?s collaborative and ecumenical mission statement, stressing the ideal of Christian nonviolence. ?Peace is central to Pax Christi, but there is no peace without justice,? Zamora said. The vision has broadened to include ?listening to Earth,? creating a culture of peace, and migrant farm worker issues, she said.

In this part of the state, voters cast consistently conservative ballots, perhaps explaining how pockets of socially engaged activists manage to go largely undetected.

Not far to the north, the Gainesville Catholic Worker House, known as the ?Blue House,? was established in

2000. Its original mission was to serve the elderly homeless, but projects now include the ?Breakfast Brigade? in which volunteers meet at 4: 15 a.m. to bake bread, boil locally produced eggs and prepare fruit to feed day laborers.

A ?Blue House Pants Project? enlists community volunteers to make trousers from donated fabric for men in need.

Why a Catholic Worker house in Gainesville, a university town with a pleasant downtown and small inner city? According to Johnny Zokovitch, who established the Blue House, rural Catholic Worker houses have existed since the 1970s.

?Part of our work is forming University of Florida students? introduction and commitment to social justice by giving them a safe place to question,? he said. Most student volunteers hear of the house ?by word of mouth.?

Not all in Gainesville are as welcoming of the homeless. The National Coalition of the Homeless ranked the city No. 5 in a list of the ?meanest cities? in the nation. Wealthy business developers pressured the city to pass an ordinance to restrict feeding to 130 homeless each night. Any hungry after that would have to be turned away. Protest marches have yet to see the law overturned.

Thirty miles north of Gainesville, at a juncture of two county roads, is the wide open space of the Florida Coalition of Peace and Justice Teaching Farm, representing many social justice organizations in Florida. A lane into the farm is bordered by stately sentinels of century-old pecan trees. State coordinator and caretaker Bob Tancig is eager to converse about the raison d?être of the serene acreage.

In the mid-1990s, the coalition was given title to a plot of land. A multipurpose Peace and Justice building was constructed, and planning for use of the land began in earnest. In an envisioning process last year, the ?gift of the land? was held to be primary. To that end, coalition members aimed to demonstrate a ?culture of peace? by living in harmony with the earth. Plans now call for building a cluster of eight small, environmentally sensitive homes on the property.

One home site has been spoken for, with groundbreaking anticipated this fall. Tancig is hoping the project will attract younger people who buy into the Eco Village vision, as most coalition members are products of the political movements of the 1970s.

?We want them to know peace activists are not as ?fringe? as mainstream media portray them,? he said. In the meantime, he is spreading the word by offering local produce from the farm, offering hospitality to visitors, and urging all he encounters to ?eat local, buy local and support the local community,? wherever local may be.

Judy Gross writes from Tallahassee, Fla.

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