



# Slow Miracles

*"We must speak to them with our hands, before we try to speak to them with our lips."  
Saint Peter Claver, SJ*

## Merry Christmas

*In the Tradition of Father McKenna*

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On Tuesday December 4, the feast of Chanukah began at sundown. Our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated the Festival of Lights. Gifts were exchanged and ancient stories told. Chanukah is about the determination of the faithful to worship God.

2300 years ago, Israel was in the hands of a foreign king, Antiochus, who demanded that the Jews reject their God, tradition and symbols in favor of Greek gods. Some of Jews, led by Judah Maccabee, refused and eventually drove the Syrians out of Israel. Then, they reclaimed the Temple and wanted to light the eternal flame, *N'er Tamid*, but they only had enough oil for one day. Once lit however, the flame burned for eight days.



Like Christmas, Chanukah is about much more than the exchange of gifts. During Advent, it is

## *Thankful for Thanksgiving*

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Last year, three sophomores at Gonzaga got it in their heads that they could raise money for the homeless on Thanksgiving Day by giving folks a chance to run along the Potomac. They signed up fellow students, parents and teachers to join them and sought sponsorships from local businesses. Patrick Sullivan, Richard Johnston, Brendan Connor and Tim Dwyer organized yet another race on this Thanksgiving Day. Ninety-one runners got up extra early on a holiday to run a 10K or run/walk a 5K with the entry fees going to the McKenna Center, "a place the homeless call home". Sure this exercise served as an excuse to eat a little more turkey and pumpkin pie but it was a wonderful event and the 2<sup>nd</sup> of what we hope will become a traditional Thanksgiving means of counting our blessings.





### 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Father McKenna Lecture

Each year, the McKenna Center hosts the Father McKenna Lecture to hear from a person who has devoted his or her energies to a cause that Horace McKenna held dear. On November 19, the McKenna Center and the Gonzaga Mother’s Club were honored to welcome **David Shipler**, the author of *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*. His presentation was powerful.

Shipler, who won the Pulitzer Prize for this writing on foreign affairs, said that he began to research and write on race and poverty because he finds them America’s most troubling issues. Shipler indicated that it was time to get past the competing political positions that blames society (Democrats) as opposed to individuals and families (Republicans) stating “people do not fit neatly into either box”. He stressed that the nature of poverty was ecological with a variety of systems feeding off one another.

Shipler told the stories of a boy who was missing a lot of school and his mother who was missing a lot of work due to his struggle with asthma. As it turned out the solution to the problem was to get his apartment fixed and it took a lawyer to do that. The medical clinic in Boston that handled the case now employees five lawyers. Shipler went on to tell of Lisa whose son had medical problems that required emergency care but was paid \$8.21 per hour, so she was able to save nothing. When her insurance refused to pay ambulance expenses, she found herself in debt. When she tried to replace a car, no reputable dealer would make her a loan so she ended up paying 15.34% interest on the loan digging her hole deeper in the process.



David Shipler

Shipler contrasted the compelling myth that those who work hard will prosper with the reality that many people work very hard but are so poorly paid they cannot participate in society. He cited a day care worker who could not afford childcare for her own children.

#### **Did you know?**

**THOSE WHO HONOR  
THEMSELVES WILL BE  
HUMBLED, BUT PEOP-  
LE WHO ARE HUM-  
BLE THEMSELVES  
WILL BE HONORED.-  
LUKE 14:11**





## The Scarf

My job, helping to operate a small non-profit, takes on many tasks, accepting clothing donations is no exception. A mother from the school that shares the same property was dropping off clothing for us as I was passing by with the daily mail.

Normally I just thank them, ask if they want a receipt, give the items a cursory scan and that's about it. It's the beginning of fall and we're preparing for the winter, which means we're gathering coats, sweaters, hats, gloves and scarves for the upcoming cold season. We still have some of these from last year, especially hats and scarves.

On top of one shopping bag is a burgundy wool scarf, clearly hand knit. As I inspect it, the woman says "I made that for my son" with a wistful pride in her eyes. I'm baffled at this point. The scarf was clearly made with a mother's love for her son, when he's wearing a power suit, with a power tie, and a power overcoat in mid-winter when he's off on his own. "How old is he?" I ask. "24." She replies.

I immediately ask if she wants to give this away, to me it has too much sentiment. I'm not being altruistic here. I want it. "He's going to miss this in 15 or 20 years", I say, leaving unspoken, when you're dead. She picks up on it and asks, "Your mother passed didn't she? Well he did say give it away." Her face trying to become stoic, yet her eyes are betraying her.

Cont. p. 4



With a client

### STAFF

- *Tom Howarth*  
Director
- *Ron Rogers*  
Facilities Manager
- *Gary Hines*  
Assoc. Director
- *Gary Smith*  
Drop-In Coordinator
- *Virginia Jenkins*  
Reception
- *Henry Anderson*  
Showers
- *Keith Hilliard*  
Laundry
- *John Mead*  
Dep. Facilities Manager
- *Cathie Conway-Del Polito*  
Controller
- *Mary Ann Wilding, RN*  
Ignation Lay Volunteer
- *Joan Kelly, RN*  
Ignation Lay Volunteer

## The McKenna Center Needs & Wish List

### Men's Clothing

Jeans  
Sweaters  
Sleeping Bags  
New Underwear & Socks  
Long underwear  
Plastic Rain Gear  
Sneakers & Boots, sizes 10 thru 12  
Caps  
Gloves

### Personal Care Items

Deodorant, Razors, Soap & Shampoo  
Toothpaste & Toothbrushes  
Hair care products  
New Wash Cloths  
New Towels & Sheets  
1 gallon size Zip Lock Bags  
Baby Powder  
Lotion/ Vaseline  
Laundry Detergent

### Kitchen Needs

Pasta & Spaghetti Sauce  
Canned Meats  
Cereal & Instant Oatmeal  
Cooking Oil  
Oven Mitts, Steel Wool & Cleaning Supplies  
Measuring Spoons

### Urgent Kitchen Needs

16 Qt Pots  
12 to 16 in. Frying Pans  
Large Water Dispensing Coolers  
Large Commercial Pots & Pans  
Commercial Ice Machine



Our Staff



## *In the Tradition... (cont.)*

From p.1

well for us to remember that we are about to celebrate the entrance of God into our world just as the Jews celebrated the return of their true God to the Temple. There is in Jewish tradition, the idea that the Messiah will come but when the Messiah comes and into what kind of world God enters depends on what we do.

Father McKenna would love the fact that on December 25 the Washington DC Jewish Community Center's December 25<sup>th</sup> Community Service Project will send people to the McKenna Center to keep it open to the homeless. This interfaith collaboration is what Father McKenna was all about. How we welcome the poor is how we welcome Jesus, the Messiah, into our world.

May we celebrate Christmas in the same spirit as Chanukah is celebrated as a rededication to our faithfulness to God who wants all to have life and have it in abundance.

## **The Scarf (cont.)**

From p. 3

"But you made this!" I entreat. "Oh, I can make another." She replies, trying to sound cavalier. How can this kid be so insensitive, his mother made this beautiful scarf for his silly butt and he tells HER to give it away? "But you made this!" Put it in a box and give it back to him for Christmas and smack him, I think. A scarf this beautiful will be wasted on us. Most homeless men have no storage; it would be worn for a season and discarded. A mother's priceless love among the refuse, like so much trash. The irony doesn't escape me.

My mother has been dead for twenty years. For me to see a deep burgundy, cable knit, wool scarf that's six-foot long, probably knitted over the course of a season, was a bit much. OK, I'm projecting here I know, could she have thought her "darlin'" boy would be both dapper and warm with this gift? "But you MADE this, with your own hands, YOU made this." Emphasizing with my hands, I hammer into her, this didn't come out of a store, like everything else we use that's disposable. I know I'm being merciless, a priest and one of the church ladies look on daring not to interfere. I see the broken everyday, that perfect remembrance of love can be sustaining and make a difference in getting back up.

"But YOU made this." I implore for the last time. "I know," she says, blinking back a tear. I exhale and thank her, with words and eyes, silently vowing that a son will appreciate a mother's gift.

Gary Hines



## A Home for the Holidays

*The following is an interview conducted by McKenna Center Director Tom Howarth (TH) with Michael Juggins (MJ), a current resident of the transitional night shelter program who has recently found a place of his own.*

TH: When did you first come to the McKenna Center?

MJ: About 10 years ago. It was a place I could come that I knew was safe and friendly. I could talk sports or current events with my buddies. I could also get the things I needed like clothing and toiletries. It was a place where you could retain your dignity.

TH: How did you become homeless?

MJ: I was using drugs particularly crack cocaine. My family lived in the Trinidad section of town but the drugs kept telling me that I was worthless and a burden on them. They didn't throw me out but I just left because I was listening more to the drugs than I was to them.

TH: Most of the men we see here leave after lunch at 1 PM. Where do they go? Where did you go?

MJ: I had a routine. Everyday I would go to the Martin Luther King Library and read or use the computers until 4 PM when the shelters opened.

TH: You have experienced some good news of late; can you tell us about it?

MJ: For the first time in a very long time, I have a place of my own and I'll be moving in soon. I will have six months without drugs or alcohol in a few days. Staying clean has done a lot for my self-esteem. My prayer life has increased.

TH: Are there challenges to having your own place?

MJ: Sure, I have to secure a lot of stuff. I'm doing a lot of things that I did 30 years ago. At 52, I feel like a baby just starting out in life.

TH: Gary Smith, of the McKenna Center, has served as your sponsor. What has he brought to you that you didn't have before?

MJ: When Gary spoke at the 11 AM meetings here, he spoke about recovery, about getting past the addiction. I had been in programs but never had much success. Gary made me realize that if I didn't have a sponsor, I really wasn't in a program. Gary helped me realize that good things happen in life and bad things too and you have to keep at life. He helped me when landlords turned me down for a place to live because of my background. I got discouraged but then a landlord came along who wanted to help me.

TH: Do you have worries about the new place?

MJ: As Gary has told me; I have to stay plugged into the aspects of my recovery. If I go back to using, the apartment will mean nothing and be nothing very soon.

TH: Drugs led you away from your family. Are you back in touch with them?

MJ: Yes, I spent last Memorial Day with my family, nieces and nephews at the beach. I don't ever want to lose touch with that feeling again.

TH: Where will you spend Christmas?

MJ: I'm really focused on this new place. I'm an artist and I've actually sold pieces. So I'm looking forward to being creative with this place. I'm really looking forward to putting my bag down and my stuff in a drawer like a regular human being.

TH: There will be guys on the street this Christmas. What will it be like for them?

MJ: It is a really hard time for the guys. I found myself reflecting on how bad things were. Your mind tells you that you are worthless. Some places treat you like cattle. I'm grateful to say that I've not felt that way here at the McKenna Center.

TH: Will you see your family at Christmas?

MJ: I can be with my family. I'm looking forward to telling them about my place.

TH: Last year, there were 50 men here on Christmas Day. This was there home on that holiday.

MJ: The holidays are about being with people. For the homeless, it can be just another day but if there are people around, it can be a good day.

TH: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MJ: Just this. I'm grateful. Of all the little stones I had to step on to help me across the river of my life, the McKenna Center provided the biggest stones.

TH: Thank you.

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## Slow Miracles



### From the Desk of the Director

As we approach the end of 2007, how can we sum up the year? Clearly, for those who come to the McKenna Center seeking various forms of assistance, it has been a tough year, but then every year is tough if you have no place to call home.

The McKenna Center exists to address the needs of the poor and homeless in our community. What is their plight as we approach the end of the year? The DC Fiscal Policy Institute studies the conditions of the poor in our city. In October 2007, they issued a report that found:

- Poverty in the District is at the highest level in nearly a decade;
- Income inequality is greater in DC than nearly every other US city;
- African-Americans with no more than a high school education face the lowest rate of employment in 30 years;
- 73% of those defined as "of very low income" pay more than 30% of their income for rent; and
- From 2000-2004, the District lost 7500 units of housing that rented for \$500 per month while gaining 13,000

### Director's Note

units that rented for \$1000 per month.

This is then the reality we face as we approach 2008. Washington, DC, the capital of the most powerful nation on earth, is a tale of two cities. One city is experiencing rather impressive prosperity. To the west of Saint Aloysius where the McKenna Center is located is Mount Vernon Square with new buildings popping up like tulips in the spring. The same can be said for NOMA (North of Massachusetts Avenue) to the east of us where the neighborhood between Union Station and the New York Avenue Metro emerges. The dismal statistics quoted above do not apply to these areas but they do apply to the middle of the sandwich, to Northwest One.

What will become of the people who now live in this area, the area Father McKenna knew so well? Will they be included in the prosperity? As I pointed out recently in the Washington Post, things are changing in Northwest One. There is money to be made here. Within the last year, we have seen a plan to reserve 35% of the new housing to be built here for market rate housing, for those who can afford whatever the market dictates become a plan that reserves 60% of the new housing for these well-off folks. Within that same year, we have seen a plan to build housing before the poor are moved out (Build First) become a process of moving people out of 33 K Street as soon as

## About the Father McKenna Center:

The Father McKenna Center was established in 1983 to carry on the legacy of Fr. Horace McKenna, the saintly Jesuit priest who served at St. Aloysius parish from 1962 until his death in 1982 and maintained a heroic apostolate to the poor of inner city Washington. The Center today continues to meet his concern for the homeless and poor of our part of this city, the North Capitol street area of downtown Washington, by some accounts the poorest area of town.

The Center serves the area by operating a daytime Drop-In Center for homeless men, one of two such facilities in downtown Washington. We offer our guests assistance with showers, laundry, telephone and local transportation, as well as referrals for a wide array of basic services to meet medical, employment and other personal needs. We assist 100 men a day with these programs. Our Transitional Shelter program will assist a dozen men each year in learning to regain life and work skills. In addition, we respond to hypothermia alerts each winter by offering overnight relief from the cold to up to 25 men, who are otherwise extremely vulnerable to winter weather. Our outreach to households in our community includes provision of rent and utility assistance to scores of households each year, as well as the emergency food program, which assists two hundred fifty families annually, by providing a food bag each month.

possible. Will the people come back? Maybe, but the statistics tell us that the return rate in such circumstances is 39% giving folks a 61% chance of not returning.

These are tense times in this neighborhood. As poverty rises in the city, we see more homeless men coming to our door. We see more women and children coming to secure food or ask for help with a gas bill or the rent. Thanks to you we have been able to respond to those who come to us.

On November 19, we distributed more than 300 turkeys with all the fixin's to those in need. We announced that we would start our distribution at 9 AM, but people were in line hours before that time. When I arrived at 8 AM, the church social hall was full. Folks marched up to the front of the Lower Church, went through a minimum of paper work, a copy of a bill and/or an ID, and off they went with Thanksgiving dinner.

Since Father McKenna went home to God in 1982, America has become a harder place. We tend to ask a lot of questions about those who come for help. Do they really need the help? Have they grown dependent on our largess? If their lives were in proper order, would they need this assistance? I know those questions exist but we try not to entertain them here. If a person is so humble as to need a bag of food, we are happy to give them what we have.

As we prepared for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Father McKenna's passing, I asked several of those who worked with him for their memories of Horace. Fr. Tom Buckley SJ told me that Horace was maybe the last of the depression priests. He didn't ask a lot of questions. If you were cold and needed a coat, you needed a coat not a questionnaire.

I find myself in strong agreement with Horace when it comes to judging the poor. I do so because I knew a young man, whose dad had fallen on hard times. Illness and bad luck combined to lay low this independent man. Just a few days before Christmas, a nun from the young man's school knocked on the family's door. The young man answered. The sister did not say much; she just handed the boy two bags of food and said "God bless you". The boy brought the food into the kitchen. His mother was unsmiling but resigned that this was alas Christmas dinner and it was better than no dinner. His father was stricken by the reminder of how far he had fallen and wept.

No, I don't ask many questions about whether those folks in the social hall really needed the food. I follow the example of that nun and offer assistance and a simple blessing. For you see, I know that story well because I was the young man who received those groceries.