

Matthew 25



January 2024

A journal on ministry and service to the margins in western Oregon

Catholic Charities

Lifting each other

Refugee family and neighbors create a transformative bond

This is a story about a family from 9,000 miles away with so much gravitas and good nature that a Portland neighborhood has fallen hopelessly in love.

In March 2023, Prosper Toubaro and Evelyne Motorom and their seven children made it to Oregon, having escaped peril in the warring Central African Republic.

Extremist rebels wanted to kill Prosper and other men of fighting age. He and his family fled, landing first in Chad, then Gabon on the Atlantic coast and then waited for 15 years in the relative stability of a Cameroon refugee camp.

Ten months ago, Catholic Charities of Oregon provided a resounding welcome and case managers began to help with legal processes, health insurance, education, transport and job placement.

In cooperation with the agency, zealous volunteers and neighbors gave a new definition to the word “hospitality.”

The family moved into a Southeast Portland house that a group of neighbors had purchased and renovated expressly to help families that are priced out of housing. The children are amazed their house is made of wood. They grew up in tents and humble lodgings composed of mud, grass or sheet metal.

The house has become a hub of neighborhood relationships. Youngsters run from all over to play; adults amble by to chat. On the porch 18-year-old Debo sometimes sits alone, thumping his drum gracefully, sending a

sweet rhythm into the evening.

Many neighbors have rendered assistance. Two boys studied French so they could speak with their new friends.

A family hosted Gentil, 12, and Danyo, 10, for a sleepover, complete with pillow fight and scary movie.

Neighbors helped the family navigate public transportation and even organized cookie-baking lessons, which resulted in great rejoicing.

Organizing all the help is a sterling Catholic Charities volunteer who prefers not to be recognized. Using social media, she introduced the family to neighbors. She has maintained a calendar and stayed in constant touch, becoming a trusted friend and advocate.

Volunteers and staff give help, but always with an eye toward helping the family become self-sustaining. Prosper and 21-year-old Max have landed jobs on the custodial staff at Lewis and Clark Col-



Debo, 18, speaks with neighbor Jeffrey Kolwitz.

lege. Evelyne works cleaning rooms at a downtown hotel. Debo took a job at a local restaurant.

“They have brought so much life to this corner,” said Dr. June Reynolds, a next-door neighbor and a leader of the plan to fix and offer the house.

“I am astounded by what Catholic Charities brought to this neighborhood,” said Jeffrey Kolwitz, another of the owners who renovated the house the family now calls home. “You could ask what the neighbors have done, but you really should ask what it is about this family. What attracts people to them? Everyone wants to be around them.”

At the local middle and elementary schools, the new children are dazzlingly popular. Other middle schoolers asked to shift schedules to be in class with them.

“These volunteers and neighbors are beautifully living out the idea of welcoming the stranger,” said Natalie Wood, executive director of Catholic Charities of Oregon.



Crib heroics

Families and staff at Holy Cross School in North Portland filled the Catholic Charities Traveling Crib to overflowing in just a couple of weeks in the first half of December. They gave diapers, wipes, clothing and even a few hand-knit blankets. To top it off, the junior high leadership team loaded the Catholic Charities vehicle with the massive load in about six minutes. Families in need in the Portland area will receive the items, offering a huge relief to their budgets.

Joy in a sack

Fourth graders from St. Thomas More School in Southwest Portland brought artsy joy into the day of women who have dealt with being homeless. As part of a monthly project, the students decorate lunch bags and fill them with meals to be distributed at Catholic Charities in Southeast Portland. “The lunches provided by the students warm the hearts of the people who receive them,” said Victoria Waldrep, program manager for Homeless and Transitional Housing Services at Catholic Charities. The projects help students develop a habit of thinking about others, said Marisa Grim, who coordinates student volunteering at St. Thomas More. Lunches are needed for more days. Sign up by scanning below.



‘Filling to the soul’

Nothing expresses love like a good meal, tenderly prepared.

Chris Ideson, founder and head chef of CI Lifestyle Meals in Portland, has been dishing out helpings of tender regard at Kenton Women’s Village, a tiny home community operated by Catholic Charities of Oregon.

Each week on Sundays and Wednesdays, he arrives at the Kenton property in North Portland with bags of individually packaged delectables like Jamaican beef stew and grilled Tuscan chicken salad.

“I can’t sing, and I can’t draw but I can cook,” said Ideson, a bearded and powerfully built man who says he is motivated by religious belief.

“You stop chasing the titles and the money and give in to being more present as a father and being more involved in the community,” Ideson said.

On recent mild November day, he made his usual drop-off at Kenton. But staff and residents had a surprise ready.

Valerie Yvette Peterson, a case manager who is also a poet, recited a poem just after the loving chef walked in, musclebound arms full



Lunette Wimberly and Rosie Walker give chef Chris Ideson a tour of the community room at Kenton Women’s Village.

of lunches. “Happiness while at the Village means a delicious hot meal coming through the gate...It means no more hunger because your love for us comes without a price.”

“When women get here, they have nothing but the shirts on their backs,” villager Rosie Walker told Ideson. “But when someone gives them one of your meals, they have hope.”

Villager Lunette Wimberly said she didn’t have healthy food before coming to Kenton Women’s Village. Ideson’s meals have changed the way she eats.

“Now I know what I like and what makes me feel good,” Wimberly said. “This is filling to the soul.”

Catholic Charities distributes toys and cheer

Donors provided toys and Catholic Charities of Oregon staff and volunteers distributed them to about 400 children Dec. 11-12 at the agency’s headquarters. Central Catholic High School was a particularly generous provider.

Parents could pick toys and gift cards. Volunteers and staff wrapped the packages in holiday paper. On their way out, clients received a holiday food box.

Smiles filled the halls of Catholic Charities as clients, staff and volunteers enjoyed the interactions.



LEFT - Cing Sian Nem and Jen Toohey prepare the 2023 Christmas toy distribution at Catholic Charities.

Have a story about Catholics reaching out to those on the margins? Contact Ed Langlois, Catholic Charities communications director, elanglois@ccoregon.org or 503.539-6333.



To read the extended versions of these stories, visit: catholiccharitiesoregon.org

See the video by scanning at right:

