



NEWS FROM ABRAHAM HOUSE

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**From the Desk
of Sr. Simone**
Executive Director

Building for Their Future – and Yours

Few Americans realize that they often encounter former prisoners in their daily lives.

A current Resident at Abraham House (serving time in our alternative-to-incarceration program instead of behind bars) was employed this summer as a salesman at GAP. The young man was soon lured away to sell thousand-dollar outfits in midtown Manhattan for a world-renowned designer. This Resident is doing an excellent job.

My point is that preparing prisoners for re-entry in society is essential. Some 600,000 will be released this year. They are parking your SUVs and preparing your four-star meals. We all have a stake in their success.

And I hope you have a stake in Abraham House and its future.

Through the extraordinary generosity of Carl and Renee Landegger, we have been able to purchase the brownstone next door at 344 Willis Avenue, and with week-to-week guidance and a \$150,000 preparation grant from The Robin Hood Foundation, we plan a major renovation of our brownstones. Our goal: to make the three buildings into a safe, spacious, cohesive whole. The sky, literally, is the limit of our dreams—architect Henry Myerberg is researching the possibility of adding another story across our roofs.

The final cost, depending on the approved design and zoning restrictions, will range between \$1.7 million and \$2 million. The target date for completion: 19 months from now in June 2004.

Abraham House does not expect, or want, a flashy, slick building. I insist that the completed facility reflect the simple approach of Abraham House and its family atmosphere.



STEPHEN FERRY

We need a swift solution to crowding in our programs (upwards of 2,500 people rely on Abraham House nowadays). This—and the price—led us to choose renovation. The space for our programs will increase up to 40%.

Each weekend 300 of New York's poorest men and women, many of them illiterate immigrants, come to Abraham House to get food and clothing, attend parenting and English classes, and receive counseling (housing, legal, drug and psychological). Many attend one of the Masses at our Parish of Offenders.

At their own suggestion, these men, women and

children began collecting dimes and quarters and dollars for the renovated building. By last month, they had raised \$1,000, and the collection continues. I am overwhelmed by this gift. It speaks, more than all my words can, of the great need that Abraham House fills.

**“Preparing prisoners for re-entry in society is essential.
We all have a stake in their success.”**

Sr. Simone Rondel, Ltg

This man and his friends had the idea for Abraham House

James Washington was a corrections officer at the Rikers Island prison 23 years ago when he first knew Sr. Simone and Fr. Peter. He had been raised in South Carolina and had taken part in the dangerous civil rights marches organized by the Rev. Martin Luther King. Wash brought extraordinary humanity to the worst Rikers cellblocks. He was insistent on remaining a simple officer, refusing promotions to captain. He and two co-workers, Willie Sutton and Robert Jones, had a dream, like King, and it was motivated by the same concern for justice. They wanted to give poor people a chance,

and they recognized what had landed some inmates in prison was not always their fault. Twice a week these Rikers officers began brainstorming with Fr. Peter and Sr. Simone about setting up a novel rehabilitation program, the one that ultimately became Abraham House.

Soon the prison warden



The place where the idea took root: The Rikers chapel, decorated by prisoners, was the spot where Wash, Sr. Simone and the other founders began to dream.

Indeed, he helped us load the U-Haul that May morning in Brooklyn and when the Bishop who was driving our van (Bishop Andre du Puy) became lost in the South Bronx streets, Wash took over. Mott Haven was familiar to him, too familiar. He and his wife Maxine spent the first years of their marriage in a

Just as we were going to press, we learned that Abraham House and its executive director have won the Humanitarian Award of the Greater New York Wallenberg Committee. The purpose of its work and the International Wallenberg Foundation is to ensure that the legendary Swedish figure be remembered and his humanitarian philosophy continue to be a force for good.

noticed the Catholic chapel was being painted more and more frequently. Wash brought his crew of prison painters to the chapel often so that discussions could continue. And his insistence and encouragement played a significant role in Abraham House becoming a reality and moving to the Bronx.

ground-floor apartment in the projects across the street from the brownstone that would become Abraham House. On that block the Washingtons had encountered fierce prejudice as the neighborhood shifted from Irish and Italian to blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Wash is now a cancer patient, in and out of the hospital. He still is dreaming on our behalf, and attentive to the work being done at AH. ■

Understanding Our Approach

Many ask how does Abraham House successfully rehabilitate offenders placed in its Residents' Program by the courts. We are demanding.

Howard Husock of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research visited the program last spring. He said afterward: "People visiting Abraham House, who are not well instructed, could come away believing the founders are softies. They are tough guys, supplying structure and discipline. I want to be very explicit about that. They are practical and unforgiving about the rules."

New York Supreme Court Justice Leslie Crocker Snyder, in her recently published autobiography, *25 To Life*, writes, "Every time you try to rehabilitate a defendant, you are sticking your neck out." She is an infamously strict judge, but also fearless. For that reason, she uses Abraham House frequently as an alternative to putting offenders behind bars—even for lengthy 25-year sentences. She explains, "Sister Simone is a realist. She accepts candidates only after careful screening and takes only those who she feels are likely to succeed at Abraham House."

Selection and discipline are basic. As Fr. Peter says, "Sometimes

an inmate doesn't have the strength to do 1+ years at Abraham House and opts for 13 years in prison." The men and women who fail to accept program discipline are returned to the courts and prison.

But the cornerstone of all our Abraham House programs is accepting people—no matter what their past—as FAMILY, and insisting that in return they act with the responsibility and respect that this entails. We go to significant lengths to rebuild families, recognizing that abuse and abandonment frequently lie at the root of criminal behavior.

Last year a Resident's teenager came to live at AH for an extended period, allowing man and child an opportunity to find common cause. A current Resident has seven family members taking part in weekend activities. Families who come to us for assistance in a time of trouble often never leave: A decade ago a Peruvian sought help for her brother. That solved, she continued volunteering.

Indeed, the very reason the Residents' Program usually takes 8 to 10 men at a time and hesitates to take a dozen is based on family dynamics. "Just think of a home with 12 kids," Sr. Simone says. "You know how crazy that can be. Now consider a house, this house, with 12 prisoners. Oh-la-la." ■

Reflecting on the Past... Considering the Future

by Fr. Peter Raphael

A new chaplain in a prison is on probation; it takes time—a lot of it—to be accepted, both by the officers and the incarcerated. The retreats that we organized for prisoners at Rikers Island in the 1980s were a beginning. These were precious days, heavy with meaning. The staff noticed the change they effected. One officer said, “We find it easy to work here because of you.” Even the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections became convinced that following a retreat, tensions in the cellblocks eased for a period of time.

Christmas 1989—10 years after my first Mass in the prison—was another turning point. Some 250 inmates filled the chapel that night, celebrating the feast in prayer and song. In prison you rarely have a full church. The staff, with good reason, does not permit large groups to gather. But this night for two hours the men were allowed to live as normal people. The guards knew there was no problem; their presence did not break the atmosphere of peace, hope and friendship. It was easy to love that moment, witnessing a cold, concrete place filled with warmth and light. The prison disappeared.

What had gone on before that in our years at Rikers was simply an apprenticeship. The Holy Spirit was just winking. We were on a road and could not go back, determined to find a functional place of rendezvous for both prisoners on release and their families. Abraham House and its

programs would be the outcome.

Friends in the Department of Corrections (see story on previous page) brought a reservoir of wisdom to our search. Most of them were from the South, and it was they who set in place the first stones to build this house and grounded our plans in reality.

We knocked on doors, pursued leads, visited foundations, vacant rectories and politicians, and were repulsed more places than I can

recall. I even called, without an appointment, on Cardinal O'Connor. His housekeeper was reluctant to let me in, but the Cardinal listened to my dream. “No one has talked to me before about this,” he said. “Let me study this.”

In prison you develop an infinite capacity to be disappointed, and more hurdles lay ahead. You need armor to fight off the negativity and cynicism. Government and church budgets do not have a line for compassion. But by February 1997 Cardinal O'Connor was visiting a functioning Abraham House, and

that experience was for him an awakening that made him passionate in calling for the establishment of more Abraham Houses.

We encourage others concerned with criminal justice to make that initiative in their own communities, and indeed, dozens of people come to study our program with this in mind. But even as we plan to expand our facility, we intend to hold fast to being a family place. Our staff is convinced that only in this way can we change people and be a place of hope. Only this way can we be effective. Our roots are here in Mott Haven.

The way I see it, the Lord is the architect of Abraham House and we are handymen. ■

“In prison you develop an infinite capacity to be disappointed.... Government and church budgets do not have a line for compassion.”



PHOTO OF FR. PETER RAPHAEL BY STEPHEN FERRY

STATISTICS TO CONSIDER

- 1,600 prisoners a day are being released in the U.S.—close to 600,000 men and women this year.
- 2/3rds of the employers canvassed say they are not willing to hire ex-offenders.
- 3 out of every 5 new inmates in the 1990s were for non-violent drug or property offenses.
- The minimum sentence for possession of 5 grams of cocaine is 10 months; the minimum sentence for possession of 5 grams of crack is 5 years.
- Mental illness in prisoners is twice as high as in the general population.

(Compiled by The JEHT Foundation)

❖ VIEWS OF ABRAHAM





"IF I DIE, COULD YOU SAY TO MY SON HOW IMPORTANT HE IS IN MY LIFE? I WAS NEVER ABLE TO TELL HIM THAT. PLEASE, COULD YOU TELL HIM?"

The chaplains at Rikers Island frequently are asked to find relatives and deliver messages such as the one that forms the title of this article. This message was from a prisoner who died of cancer soon after. Sr. Amy Henry of Abraham House goes to extraordinary lengths to fulfill these requests.

She catches a 5:15 bus most mornings for her 90-minute commute to the Rikers prison, rarely returning before dark. And she uses any free-time criss-crossing the city to search out or care for inmates' families.

"They move, are illiterate, have no phones and lose touch," she says. "I have had cases where a man left home to do an errand or

the laundry, was apprehended by a parole officer, and the family never knew why he disappeared or where he was."

Reestablishing family contact, no matter how tenuous, nearly always improves the inmates' short- and long-term situation. In New York state prisons, budget cutbacks



Sr. Amy Henry comes from France and is a Little Sister of the Gospel, a small European order of just 70 nuns. Others include Sr. Simone and Sr. Rita Claus, the Abraham House nurse and supervisor of our Food Pantry.

are causing noticeable changes. Sr. Amy explains, "Care at the city hospital, Bellevue, is costly and authorities are reluctant to send even very sick inmates

there. I have men who are dying and unless their families fight for them, the inmates don't get the care they need. You must make a lot of

noise to break through the inaction and rudeness. I know one mother who is a tiger and I say, 'Good.' She is getting what her son needs.

"Reduction in the number of guards makes ministry of even the simplest sort difficult. For a chaplain to visit every tier and each dorm weekly takes persistence and pressure that we never needed before. It does not matter whether the inmates are Muslims or Christians or have no faith at all. They may ask for a card to send to a dying sister or to a child. Sometimes they want me to make a phone call for them. They ask very little."

With that, Sr. Amy is out the door and on the move. Each month for 22 years she has visited the wife of a prisoner. The woman was shot in the spine and is a paraplegic in a Roosevelt Island hospital. The man himself died of a heart attack several years ago. Sr. Amy says, "This lady loves perfume, and I found some last week in donated goods." ■

A Holiday Surprise

Why not give one to Kiara and her classmates? You can send, in the name of a friend, gifts to the needy children in the Abraham House After-School... a warm parka to a youngster (\$40)... a sturdy backpack (\$25)... a pair of sneakers (\$30)... blankets to a family needing warmth. You can spend as little as \$15 for one blanket or as much as you want. And we will mail you a festive card to send to your friend to announce your holiday present.

To know how very little matters

to these children, all you need do is leave a pencil or ballpoint on a table in the After-School. The children watch it like a hawk and solemnly return it to the owner as if it were gold.

Your gift can make a difference to them. And as a non-profit, non-denominational program, what you spend is fully tax-deductible.

Write Ana Seda for details: Holiday Gifts at Abraham House, P. O. Box 305, Mott Haven Station, Bronx, NY 10454. Or phone Ana: (718) 292 9321.



Kiara, just 8 but already in the fifth grade, is one of 35 kids in our After-School. Many children sleep on the floor at home. In one case, 12 youngsters and four adults live in only two rooms.

Many Happy Returns!



Carrie Silberman, a treasured volunteer in our After-School, arrives twice a month with a satchel of books and a world of wonder through storytelling and art. She supervises the young people's program at Manhattan's time-honored and cherished New York Society Library.

Its landmark building on East 79th Street is a far cry from our backyard porches, but Carrie relishes the AH children. "They are incredibly eager and excited about learning and life," she says. "The Abraham House youngsters eat up books. They love language and embrace it, even those who are just learning English. And within a year those children are able to speak it. I wish I could go to the After-School every day!"

Last August Carrie married Omid Zareh, a lawyer who was raised as a child in Iran. Abraham House has a posse of journalists-in-training, and the After-School reporters lay in wait like paparazzi for Carrie's return. And our teenage photographers keep pestering her for a look at the wedding album. ■

Splash!

The Abraham House swimming class, held weekly at St. Ann's pool a few blocks away, is far more than a toe-in-the-water exercise. Beyond it lies an Outdoor Adventure Program, scheduled for next summer.

In July and August a group of the older children will begin testing themselves physically and mentally. They will spend a weekend learning basics—trust and team building exercises, communication (verbal and nonverbal), safety in the field—and end by camping out and hiking a short distance on the Appalachian Trail. To urban children, far more comfortable on city streets, this will be a true plunge into the unknown.

Canoeing, camping on Cape Cod with trips to a nature preserve and bird sanctuary, and hiking in the Adirondacks will come next. And eager participants will be able to master a high-ropes course and sea kayak in a national park.

Your Time? A Precious Gift

Half the children of inmates commit a crime themselves by the age of 18.

In contrast to the above sobering statistic, since our After-School Program began in 1999, not one child enrolled has become a truant or delinquent. For the past two Septembers every student has moved ahead academically, on schedule.

The children themselves are the best measure of the Abraham House After-School Program. Our goal is to break the cycle of crime in families by providing a strong preventive program for the youngsters. Without that, things are likely to go very, very wrong in the lives of these high-risk kids.

If we are to continue to succeed in this work, however, we desperately need mentors for our children, particularly the teenagers. *You* can make the difference in their lives. They need *your* presence, *your* skills and an introduction to *your* world.

• A New York Times/Time magazine photojournalist, Stephen Ferry, has been teaching a photo and design class. But the art of seeing is just part of the curriculum. Analyzing newspapers and magazines raises a host of questions for the half-dozen kids.

• At 15, Federico now paints rooms himself and guides a teen crew on how best to sand the walls, prepare them and apply the paint. Brother Rick Dixon, a professional carpenter, has made this possible in his woodworking and painting classes. Job skills create excitement and tangible hope.

• Yoli reads Kalil Gibran on the bus in the morning, the result of an Abraham House mentor exposing the older students to award-winning authors and unfamiliar genres: sci-fi, drama, mystery, non-fiction. "I have never worked with such receptive, hard-working kids," says the mentor, Stefanie Takacs, who has a masters degree in educational psychology and is a published author. "When these children know that someone cares and is devoting time to them, it makes an enormous difference. Their desire to learn and improve themselves increases when a mentor lends encouragement. If they had that, their academic and social growth would be limitless."



To volunteer for the mentoring program, please contact our After-School Director, Teresa Gomez, at (718) 292 9321.

Your time, skills and life experiences could make all the difference in the lives of our youngsters. *Please call today!*

"When these children know that someone cares and is devoting time to them, it makes an enormous difference."



ABRAHAM HOUSE

P.O. Box 305

MOTT HAVEN STATION

BRONX, NY 10454

**“One of the
three best programs
fighting poverty
in New York City.”**

– THE ROBIN HOOD FOUNDATION

Abraham House is the proud
recipient of the international
KERK EN LEVEN PEACE PRIZE
Ghent, Belgium
February, 2002

ABRAHAM HOUSE ANNUAL FUNDRAISING APPEAL

☒ **YES,** I WISH TO SUPPORT THE WORK YOU ARE DOING AT ABRAHAM HOUSE.
Enclosed please find my tax-deductible donation in the amount of:
☐ \$5,000 ☐ \$1,000 ☐ \$500 ☐ \$250 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$35 ☐ Other _____

- ☐ Please use my donation to purchase HOLIDAY GIFTS for the children of Abraham House.
- ☐ I request that my contribution specifically be used for BUILDING RENOVATIONS at Abraham House.
- ☐ You may use my donation as you see fit, in support of the ON-GOING PROGRAMS at Abraham House.

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*Please use the enclosed, pre-addressed envelope to send your contribution, or mail to:
Abraham House, PO Box 305, Mott Haven Station, Bronx, NY 10454*

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