



Editor's note:

The meaning of L'Arche is rooted in and expressed through our relationships. We interact with our core members in their homes and extend these relationships outward to the greater community. In both these ways core members achieve meaningful accomplishments and share their lives with us all.

Spring 2009

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Core Members: Jean

By Peg O'Brien

"That's gonna turn out good" said artist **Jean**, evaluating her painting on a six paneled window pane and adding bright yellow background. "When I'm painting I got to concentrate." Jean works at Arts of Life and on the day we talked she showed me her sketch-book where she has drawn eyeglasses, a teddy bear, a coffee pot, an umbrella, a mug and a light that became the subjects of her work. Her favorite colors are blue, green and brown.

"I belong at L'Arche. It's more happier 'cause I like it a lot." The word happy comes up frequently these days. She is happy about the "more bigger" studio space, happy to paint and happy to be paid. Her Wednesday band practice is a pleasure. Music makes Jean "happy in my heart. I can hear the songs in my heart." Earlier life was painful. Jean told of being burned when she lived in a state-operated institution and showed the scars from wounds inflicted by "a wicked roommate." Nor



did she like her previous job in a sheltered workshop where she worked packing boxes. Her life is "more better" now. "I got a lotta friends". She makes a point that she has "close friends" Elbert, Christianne and Chris and "some outside people at church".

"I gotta lotta friends"

Her ability to get beyond that suffering is one reason why Jean was given the strength award by Arts of Life "She has had a rough life. I don't know if I could be as flexible and brave as she is if I had her history" says **Denny Fisher** a founder and Executive Director of

Arts of Life. **Ryan Shuquem**, Art Director, says that was a perfect award for Jean because "she works to face her past." Ryan guides Jean and the other artists both in art and music work. "We want to help her on the path to self fulfillment. She has a great sense of humor that has been a tool for her when things were negative or did not make sense. We give a strong sense of shared

interest and shared work that is an important basis for expressing yourself, showing who you are and getting appreciated."

Ryan circles through the studio and facilitates the work of each artist. Christianne, along with Jean, creates art in the studio. Chris volunteers once a week, maintaining supplies of canvases, boards, paper and other materials and helping with frame-painting, framing, wiring and other exhibition preparation. Arts of Life also has a music program and a band. Jean, a singer and songwriter, and Elbert, a pianist, are both in the band, and Christianne just started out.

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I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them.
Ezekiel 37:26

Every day newspapers, radio and television broadcasts reveal our unashamed desire to show our teeth, fight and be the strongest superpower. Genuine words of peace are not often heard in our world and when spoken they are mostly distrusted. When said by the enemy they are dismissed as “mere propaganda.” While the word freedom has become a word uttered with self-confidence, the word peace is said timidly and often with the fear of being considered disloyal and untrustworthy.

Christians today, if they want to be Christians, have to find the courage to make the word peace as important as

the word freedom. There should be no doubt in the minds of the people who inhabit this world that Christians are peacemakers.

~from *The Road to Peace*, by Henri J.M. Nouwen

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“Jean had a hard time when she first arrived,” Ryan explains. “She didn’t understand the process and felt a suggestion: ‘maybe a little more blue’ meant the painting was a failure.” He’d return later to find she had painted out the whole picture with white. “Now she understands that offering a suggestion like ‘Maybe your contrast needs some pushing’ is not telling her what to do, but that she needs to take the next step.” She learned this by shadowing Ryan as he talked to each artist and then she understood that everyone got advice, different for each individual. Now she can talk about her work objectively –

a big achievement.

Denny is pleased with Jean’s growth. “She is a really, really good artist, very creative and paints personal stuff that’s important to her. She has leadership potential and the potential to be a good friend. There are people that feel she is stronger than they are who look up to her. She seems to get along with everybody. She has an amazing survival instinct. She is very helpful, has a very kind heart and is definitely someone who genuinely cares for things that might be missed like animals or people less able than her.



...detail from *Spring in the Air and Peace* by Christianne

“Whatever your life work is makes you an artist” says Denny who says the fact that the program philosophy “is very similar to L’Arche’s minus the faith based part” is helpful to Jean. “What is nice about her life now is that everyone is saying the same thing. We make decisions together. Jean has a great opportunity to grow.”

Community News

As Elbert says: “They comes and they goes.” We will soon bid farewell to third-year L’Arche Chicago board member **Nicole Bonk**, who is off to the University of Madison for the next stage of her medical training. We are very grateful for Nicole’s friendship, thoughtful counsel and sense of humor.

We recently welcomed **Tim Andriano** and **Rob Vall** to the board.

The L’Arche Chicago office has moved. Our new address is 2010 W. Carroll Ave., Chicago, 60612. Our new phone number is 312-226-1276. Fax and email remain the same. If the address looks familiar, it’s because we are subleasing space from our friends at Arts of Life.

Congratulations to **Chris** who celebrated his fourth anniversary at L’Arche on March 16. Chris has

chosen to remain a daily-life member.

Congratulations to **Christianne**, who celebrated her seventh anniversary at L’Arche Chicago on April 1. Christianne has chosen to remain a daily-life member.

Congratulations to **Jeremy**, who will celebrate his second anniversary on May 8.

The Road Ahead...

Ronnie is 78, but she is our future, at least that is the dream. As we approach our ninth anniversary, we more actively balance the dreaming and the pragmatism of our community. The dream is to expand our housing and the sad pragmatic truth is we're between the 47th and 51st worst state for support of people with disabilities ...even worse by some calculations.

Last fall people from all our different member and support groups met, planned and agreed on what we'd like on our road ahead: better formation for assistants and core members, increased relationship with other L'Arche communities, more present and powerful ways to announce L'Arche throughout Chicagoland.



Ronnie and Rebekah enjoying each other's company.

Most exciting and imminent, we agreed to welcome new core members and assistants.

There are many practical reasons why now is a good time to do this. House prices are low and mortgage rates are low. The support system for people with disabilities in Illinois is overworked and under supplied. Nonetheless, our dream is to open our doors to new people.

Let me tell you about one person we hope to welcome. Ronnie, a.k.a. Granny, is a founder of Arts of Life. She is lively, talkative and makes wonderful collages and multi-media works with women as the central figures. She feels to us like a member of our family already when she comes over for supper and an overnight. Judging by her frequent and casual "la-di-da" comments, she feels the same way.

Ronnie would prefer to take just one bus to work. She'd like to go to

church on a regular basis and have her own room. She'd like to see her sister, her only remaining close relative, more often. Ronnie's not so sure she'd like doing her share of cooking and cleaning, but she's willing, if it means she can live with her friends.

We are always getting phone calls and Community Night visits from families and people with disabilities who want to join L'Arche. Potential assistants like Joel call too. He inquired about openings here even before his return from two years at L'Arche Tecklenburg, Germany. We are very enthusiastic about two new board members and greatly need people to join our capital campaign committee and events committee.

Opening a new home will take a lot of work and \$150,000 to \$200,000, but it's really exciting. We trust the excitement of making a dream come true for the marginalized and our loved ones will draw the talent and resources that we need.

Please consider if you can participate and please keep this long hoped for

expansion in your prayers. We trust that it is what God wants for Chicago.

In Illinois, almost 1400 adults with disabilities have an emergency need for a place to live. Our state has far more large institutions than small family sized homes. Only 30% of people with disabilities live in homes with six people or less. In four neighboring states the average is 82%.

We want to incarnate the spirit that every person brings precious gifts and a message of profound Divine Love. L'Arche is a sign, not a solution.

Please help us welcome more people in all constituencies of L'Arche, so that our city and country see, through our lives and relationships, that even with our various differences and abilities we all can live together in love, peace and harmony.

~Alex Conroy

Director's Desk

Let's consider together the third element of L'Arche's mission:

To foster community that is inspired by the core values in our founding story and respond to the changing needs of our members.

In L'Arche we hold that

- The essence of individual humanity is the capacity for relationship with God and others.
- The deepest desires are to love, to be loved and to express one's gifts.

- The challenge to our society is to build true community.

True community is a safe place that nourishes mutual relationships and individual gifts. Jean's growth as both a L'Arche daily life member and an artist is a beautiful demonstration of this. She is living into and living out of these core values. Her ability to love God, trust her housemates and make friends of the community blossomed when we welcomed her here. Jean could both feel and express her love and uniqueness. The L'Arche Chicago community provided a safe space for Jean's artistic talent to grow by

encouraging her to make cards and draw pictures. Now she recognizes and claims her vocation as a professional artist.

Jean was able to articulate her changing needs and quite clearly and firmly express her choice to leave the sheltered workshop and join the Arts of Life Studio as an artist.

Her story highlights both a changing need of our community as a whole and a natural outgrowth of our core values: intentional collaboration with other communities with like values. L'Arche Chicago could not, on its own, respond to Jean's emerging need for a dedicated, professional environment in which to develop her artistic talent. Working together with Arts of Life, however, we can respond not only to Jean's changing needs, but to those of Christianne, Elbert, and Chris as well. Each has found expanding purpose and pleasure. L'Arche Chicago's assistants and board members and I myself learn from our association with the studio.

As we of L'Arche Chicago look forward to opening a second home, some Arts of Life artists have asked if they might live with us. They recognize L'Arche Chicago as a place where sharing life and expressing gifts come before rules, schedules and structures. As needs change in both communities, we work together to meet them in fruitful collaboration.

I suggest these books if you want to read the founding story of L'Arche or learn how our spirit is lived in other L'Arche communities.

- *Our Life Together and An Ark for the Poor: the early days of L'Arche* by Jean Vanier
- *The Miracle, the Message, the Story* by Kathryn Spink
- *Room Enough for Joy* by Bill Clark

~Alex Conroy

Save the Date! Come help us celebrate our 9th anniversary
Sunday, July 19, 2009

Calendar

March

29 Happy Birthday, Rebekah

31 Happy Birthday, Jean

April

16 Community Night. Please note date change because of Passover and Holy Week. Come and join us at 1049 S. Austin, Chicago, from 7 pm for prayer, food and fun.

29, L'Arche USA Zone Community Leader's
30, Meeting

May
1-3 L'Arche USA Zone general Assembly

May

14 Community Night

June

2 Happy Birthday, Christianne

6 Happy Birthday, Steve

11 Community Night

July

9 Community Night

3-6 L'Arche Central Regional Gathering

19 9th Anniversary Celebration

Our Identity

We are people with and without developmental disabilities sharing life in communities of faith.

Mutual relationships and trust in God are at the heart of our life together.

We seek to build a world that recognizes the unique value of every person and our need for one another.

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