

# Eight Minutes with an 'Unconventional Hausfrau'

Many people work hard to make a difference for the less privileged in Greater Cincinnati. "Eight Minutes" is an effort to learn who they are and what motivates them.

Serving up  
toothpaste,  
underwar,  
dignity and  
hope

By MARGO PIERCE  
COLUMNIST

Mary Magdalene House isn't a house but it offers some of the comforts of home -- a shower, laundry service and use of a restroom that doesn't boast a "patrons only" sign.

Those without a roof over their heads are welcome -- as are those who have a roof but little else -- to stop in and pick up a care package, just like mom used to make, with soap, shampoo, lotion, toothpaste and other toiletries. The head of this unconventional house isn't the German housewife who might have lived in Over-the-Rhine in days gone by. Here Brother Giancarlo Bonutti keeps the peace.

Referred to by all as "Brother Gian" (pronounced "John"), Bonutti sits behind a reception desk calling the names of those waiting for their cost-free shower. He offers powder, a razor and other personal care items along with a towel and wash cloth. All the while people come and go from the reception area in order to use the phone -- also

free of charge -- pick up mail and get a splash of cologne or a shot of Fabreeze to freshen up a heavy winter coat.

What the people standing in the reception area don't see are the shelves around the corner from Brother Gian's perch; they're jam-packed with shirts, pants, belts, socks, underwear, long johns and other clothing items. Piled in front of that, in milk crates and other bins, are shampoo, cold tablets, lotion and many other personal care needs.

"We believe that dignity is the beginning of hope," Bonutti says.

That dignity isn't restricted to the homeless or poor; anyone can walk through the door with any need and the staff and volunteers will do everything they can to help. All it takes is signing in with Bonutti so he can put your information into the computer; it's how staff and volunteer know items are given out.

"We keep track of everything we give people," Bonutti says. "We only have enough long underwear that we can only help people with one pair for the winter, and it's up to you to figure out when you can get them washed."

Mary Magdalene House can toss them in with one of the 20-25 loads of wash they do every day, also free of charge.

"Most people who shower here will also leave a set of clothes to be washed after they shower," Bonutti says.



Brother Giancarlo Bonutti at Mary Magdalene House. Photos by Andrew Anderson.

"When people are finished with their shower, they bring their towel and washcloth up front. We ask people to please separate out their clothes -- if they have two t-shirts, to not leave one inside the other. If they leave things like that we say, 'I'm sorry, your mother's not here to pull them apart for you. You have to remember to do that for us if you want your clothes washed.'"

Every effort is made to make sure everybody gets back her own clothes. An ingenious system for keeping track of what belongs to whom has developed over the 20 years that Mary Magdalene House has been in operation.

Dirty clothes go into a bag with the guest's name on it. A list is made of the contents of each load. Colored diaper pins identify duplicate items. The system makes it possible for clothes to be washed, dried, folded and returned to the correct bag for pickup the next day. Clothes are ready within 24 hours.

Three washers and four dryers are more than a typical house would have, but then a typical house doesn't have up to 100 people popping in everyday to use one of seven showers, either.

"About every six weeks to eight weeks we'll take the day and close up," Bonutti says. "We go through the computer, find out who's been here for a shower in the past two weeks. If their name is not on that list and their bag is on the shelf, we pull their bag off the shelf, take what we can reuse and put back in our stock. Things like toothbrushes and razors we pitch. If there's something like ID, we'll hold onto for a few months. People know we can't keep their things here indefinitely."

One of the few things that can suspend a guest's privileges at the house has to do with laundry.

"They leave things in their pocket -- they can leave anything from Kleenex to keys to ID card, tobacco, sometimes drug paraphernalia," Bonutti says. "Sometimes ... a few will have these glass crack pipes in their pockets; and when that comes out of the laundry, it's really dangerous for the volunteers, and staff cut their hands. So if we find out who it is, they're suspended for services for a period of time until they get some help or until we figure they're going to be a little more respon-

sible." The front desk has a list of rehab, mental health and other services, so a guest isn't left to figure out how to deal with an issue alone.

The system for receiving, sorting and distributing donated clothing is equally systematic; volunteers sort clothes into neat piles based on clothing types and size.

Sometimes buying trips are necessary to make sure there are enough socks and underwear, including bras of all sizes, because people typically don't donate those items.

At a time when social service organizations, including churches, demand "personal responsibility" according to their arbitrary standards, Mary Magdalene House stands out as a nonjudgmental example of what it means to help people in need. Nobody is considered "unworthy" of assistance, and the only expectation is that the guests treat each other and the 25 volunteers and six staff members with the same level of respect they give.

"If a person's coming here, they get everything they need," says Brother Gian, the most compassionate, fair-minded and generous "hausfrau" in Over-The-Rhine.

Mary Magdalene House, 1221 Main St., is open from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays and 8 a.m.-noon Saturdays. To offer clothing, time or cash, call 513-721-4811.



Volunteers at Mary Magdalene House sort clothing.