

# Heartbeats

The Company of St. Angela in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## In Dialogue with the Vulnerable in our Society

*Angela Merici has said that “we have more need of serving others than they have of being served by us.” Through this service, if we are truly open, we will come to know the persons we serve and gain new insights through experiencing the challenges of their lives. This month we are blessed to have reflections of two Ursuline sisters who minister to very vulnerable members of our society today. Julie Hickey, OSU relates to homeless persons who find help at Haven for Hope in San Antonio; Maureen Mc Carthy, OSU, lives in a safe house in New York sponsored by Life Way Network and works with women who have been trafficked. We are grateful to Julie and Maureen for their insightful reflections that help us continue to be in touch with the signs of our time.*

### The Many Faces of the Homeless

I wonder if most people’s stereotypical image of a person who is homeless is a drunk staggering down the street. Since I minister at a center for persons who are homeless, I’m reminded everyday of the diverse population of homeless persons. Each morning as I walk into the office I see parents helping their children onto a school bus. I think of the courage they have to keep life as normal as possible for their children, in the midst of getting their lives back together. We have on an average 250 families, including children with an average age of 6 living here.



Besides children and parents, I meet the elderly who have become homeless because of health debts or because they cannot survive on the pension they receive. The face of homelessness is aging. People 50 and older make up more than 30 percent of the nation’s homeless population. A lady I visit almost every day tells me her children are coming for her. That is her dream, but dementia in some ways eases the pain. They will not be coming.

While in my office I hear a bell ring, a signal that another person at the center has found a job. All in the office clap and cheer for the person. This means a move out of the center soon and a chance to live in their own place. Unemployment statistics are low, currently at 3.4% for the city. Yet one needs to look more carefully. Is it because people are taking low-wage jobs with no benefits or have found a middle-wage position? Twenty-seven percent of persons who are homeless are employed, but nearly half of them earn less than \$ 350 a month.

The next time you see a panhandler on the street, please keep in mind that person is only one face of the homeless.



by Julie Hickey, osu

## LifeWay Network: Survivors of Human Trafficking

For the last seven and a half years I have been living in a safe house for women survivors of human trafficking. It resembles other row houses in an urban neighborhood in the New York metro area. But the women who come through our doors are among the most marginalized of society and have been subjected to a life of dehumanization, where they are viewed as chattel, objects, property, animals



I work with LifeWay Network, an organization founded in 2007, committed to ending human trafficking through education and direct services to survivors. The safe house where I live with two other women religious of different communities can accommodate up to five women survivors of human trafficking, providing a safe and nurturing place where they can heal from their trauma and abuse.

The women have come from all over the world – many countries in Africa, Mexico, China, Russia, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, and of course the United States, to name just a few. Human trafficking is one of the defining human rights crisis of our time and very much an international and transnational phenomenon.

The women stay with us for one year, participate in educational and skill development programs to help them move into new and empowered lives of independence. The community model we strive for offers survivors the things they have been robbed of by their exploiters: self-esteem, an environment in which to regain their sense of self worth and human dignity, and

something most important to these wonderful, resilient women – safety, the experience of living in a loving, supportive and secure stable home.

Human trafficking is a crime like no other – a crime in which wily, skilled perpetrators wrest control of their victims through psychological manipulation and trickery and then exploit them physically through labor or prostitution. Many of our women were promised a paying job that would allow them to support their children back home and instead found themselves being pimped out as someone's property.

Maria, a sweet, gentle woman from Mexico, who was lured far from home by false claims of a better life, was forced into prostitution at the age of 14. We accompanied Maria to court the day she faced down her traffickers who were being sentenced. In a Brooklyn courtroom she bravely said, "I can only describe my life in New York as five years in hell.

From the day I arrived until the day I escaped, he

forced me to work seven days a week. I was just merchandise for him. His associates, his clients treated me as an animal." After finally escaping his clutches, Maria was so traumatized she wanted to kill herself. Locked in a ward under suicide watch at Bellevue Hospital, she felt safe for the first time in years.

Maria is married now, has a beautiful daughter and is expecting her second child. She keeps in touch with us and with LifeWay Network. And ironically, the judge who sentenced her traffickers also presided at her wedding! God does have a sense of humor



*by Maureen McCarthy, osu*

1. After reading the reflections of Srs. Julie and Maureen, what do you hear as giving you insight to the signs of our times?
2. In your experience of connecting with persons living in very vulnerable situations, what have you learned from them?