

Serving the homeless, parishioners break through barriers

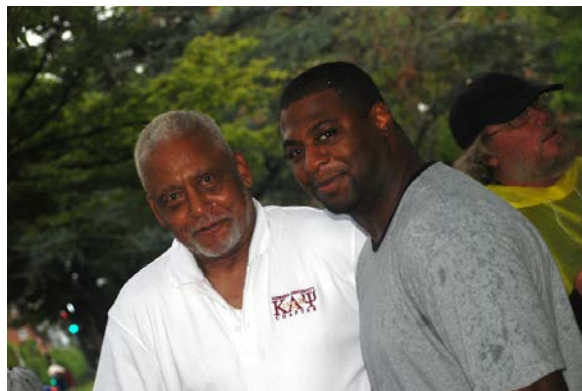
For eight years, Jocelyn Steiner lived at 12th and M Streets, N.W., and she would walk every day to work past a group of homeless people at Franklin Square at 14th & K Streets, N.W.

“I would always see homeless people there, and when I could, I would give them money,” Steiner said. “But I never took time to speak with them or interact with them as human beings.”

That all changed during two Saturdays this fall.

Steiner was part of a group of about 30 St. Augustine parishioners who served a group of more than 200 homeless people for three hours at Franklin Park on a chilly but sunny Nov. 5. The Walk in the Park II outreach event sponsored by St. Augustine's Team Homeless Outreach Prevention and Education (HOPE) followed a similar event in August that took place just as Hurricane Irene was beginning to batter the nation's capital.

In addition to serving meals, St. Augustine parishioners handed out men's sweaters, sweatshirts and blankets and gave haircuts to the people they served. Musicians and singers also performed, leading sing-alongs, and a licensed podiatrist did foot consultations at both events. St. Augustine parishioners served about 150 people at the Walk in the Park I event and more than 200 at the Walk in the Park II, according to Steiner.



“Being a part of these outreach activities, in which I spoke to people and learned their names and had conversations with them, was deeply gratifying and a blessing to me,” said Steiner, an attorney who came back to town earlier this year after living in Mongolia and serving as a missionary. “At the second Walk-in-the-Park, I took a few surveys, and the men I spoke to were so willing to share their stories. And I was able to pray, out loud, with both of them, holding their hands.”

“As human beings, we all need to be touched and acknowledged as human beings, and to be reminded that God is there and that He loves us. I can't imagine living day-to-day anonymously, with no one to say my name out loud to me or treat me like a person,” Steiner said. “Being able to experience a connection with the brothers and sisters we met in the park blessed me greatly and made me want to continue to work for social justice and change.”

Tiffany Arnold, another parishioner, attended Walk in the Park II and was very moved. “It meant a lot to me to be involved in this event. I was so touched and moved by the people involved, the gratitude of those served, and the camaraderie

and team work of the church members at this event," she said. She had previously volunteered through her home parish, St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Petersburg, Va., preparing Thanksgiving meals and serving the homeless with her family.

"The team work was awesome and I met some parishioners that I might not have met if I had not done the event," Arnold said. "I just had to get involved," she added. "I felt I could be doing more to share my time and blessings with others," adding that she became interested after hearing Mayra Griffiths' passionate announcements in church, which showed a clear sense of mission. Griffiths is a parishioner who heads the St. Augustine Social Justice Committee.

"The gratitude, politeness, and friendly nature of everyone impressed me," Arnold said. "The more I spoke with some of the men coming to the table, the more I was curious about their backgrounds and how they had come to be homeless and in the park. I did not see many families, but lots of older black men." Arnold added that she can't wait to participate in the next Team HOPE event.