

A Critical Difference

“A Society that Doesn’t Care for Its Elderly Has No Future”

Pope Francis in his Homily; Vatican Radio, November 19, 2013

The renewal of Detroit is evident and life giving to a city that has been struggling for decades. There are joggers and people walking their dogs at all times of the day. Young adults are finding their way to refurbished lofts and apartments as the employment picture in Downtown Detroit improves. Investors are purchasing buildings hoping to be part of this renaissance. The renewal train of Detroit is picking up momentum; but the long time residents, our elderly neighbors, were never invited aboard.

About a year ago the elderly residents who lived in the Griswold Apartment Building in Downtown Detroit received the official news that they would have to move out. The Section 8 Housing Contract between Griswold and HUD had expired and a new owner had purchased the building.

The news traveled fast—anger and sadness penetrated the community. People struggled with questions of “why?” Many of the elderly have lived in their apartment for over 30 years, and quite frankly had said they hoped to die there. Stress and loss of self-worth was taking its toll. How could St. Aloysius serve?

In August of 2013, I contacted Garbette Garraway, PhD who is a retired U of D Mercy Psychology Professor; he also has a very active counseling practice. I shared with him the anguish of our elderly neighbors—he volunteered his time and expertise *immediately*. Dr. Garraway and I had opportunity to meet about 20 people in the Griswold community room. It was there that he began counseling the elderly residents. He met with them as a group and as individuals every Wednesday afternoon beginning in August; he did this faithfully (and pro bono) through December. Those who participated worked through their grief; the door to healing was open—Dr. Garraway made a *critical difference*.

January came and major problems were about to erupt for the Griswold residents. It was the last week in January when Johnny came to my office. He had some questions about his medications—a routine office visit. But this routine office visit became a *critical* event when Johnny said, “*You know Kathy, it is getting hard to breathe in my apartment. They started doing major construction in our building and there is dust everywhere—I can’t take it, Kathy.*”

I immediately called another resident and it was confirmed. Johnny wasn’t the only person suffering. Many of the elderly residents had chronic illnesses and now were facing exacerbation of their illnesses related to the filth. Moreover, two elevators in Griswold were not dependable, and now one of the elevators was dedicated to *only* construction workers. Imagine if you have an appointment for kidney dialysis or with your doctor and the only available elevator is not working! Imagine if you must use a motorized scooter and the elevator doesn’t work! Imagine being on supplemental oxygen and trying to breathe in your dust-filled apartment and hallways. Our elderly neighbors were not considered at all when this construction work began. How could this happen?

I made numerous complaint calls to the City of Detroit Building Department and spoke with division managers. Promises were made to send an inspector out. Simultaneously, the elderly residents of Griswold also made complaints. But a *critical* difference happened when Deacon Don remembered when a St. Aloysius parishioner said to him, “If you ever need my assistance, please contact me.” I was given this person’s contact information: I called Paul Novak, an attorney with Milberg LLP in Detroit. From that point on Paul and his staff attorneys focused on the issue (pro bono). They met with about thirty residents and took their and my affidavits which were more than enough to bring about a “Verified Complaint for

Injunctive Relief” against Griswold Apartments—we were heading to court! On the same day that Paul and petitioners were going to file their complaint in court, the City of Detroit placed a “Cease and Desist” order on the office window of the contractors—all contract work had to stop! Paul Novak, his staff attorneys, the elderly residents, and St. Aloysius made a *critical difference!*

To identify the actions needed to be completed by the Owner to address the whole health needs of the elderly residents, Paul Novak, his staff attorneys, two Griswold residents, a construction manager, the Owner’s representative, and I met. After all was said, the Owner’s representative imparted, “This has humbled me. If we had only known all this was going to happen, we would have done things differently.” I had the opportunity to say to him, “I hear you say that you are humbled and you would have done things differently. As you know, there are several Section 8 apartment buildings in Downtown Detroit; chances are when their contracts with HUD expire (or maybe even before) they will be sold. If what you say is true, will you be a champion for the poor elderly in Downtown Detroit? Will you make sure that the elderly are heard and let them be part of the renewal of Detroit?” He had no reply.

During the process, St. Aloysius Neighborhood Services joined with several other groups to form a Senior Coalition to address moving issues. Our review of the Brownfield Contract for Griswold discovered many items that the Owner was responsible for paying. One of the coalition partners confirmed these items with the Owner. We were then able to give complete and accurate information on the costs that the owner would pay associated with moving. This helped to alleviate anxiety on the part of the elderly residents. We will continue to participate with the Senior Coalition in an effort to influence future building acquisitions and developments.

It is the hope of Neighborhood Services of St. Aloysius that our elderly neighbors in Downtown Detroit, who have their homes in Section 8 apartments, will not experience the heartbreak of the Griswold departure. We have taken action to make a *critical difference*. Through Wayne State University School of Social Work and the College of Nursing, the former residents of Griswold are participating in research that studies the effects of unplanned relocation stress. Again, it is our hope that the research findings will convince Detroit City Planners and potential investors to include the poor elderly in the social and community renewal of Downtown Detroit so that *all can be aboard the Downtown Detroit renewal train.*

For our brothers and sisters who have moved, I have their new contact information. They are at the heart of our concern and I will continue to stay in touch as they learn to adjust in their new homes. As always, keep them in your prayers. One more thought, is there a way for you to make a *critical difference?*

In closing, Pope Francis shared a story in his homily of November 9.

“There was a father, mother and their children and a grandfather. This grandfather got his face dirty when he ate soup which annoyed the father so he bought a separate table for the grandfather to eat at. But one day the father returned home and saw one of his children playing with bits of wood and on asking his son what he was doing was told that he was building a table for Daddy to eat at when he became old.”