

A Blessing to Serve Others – Ecumenism in Action

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Juneau will be lessened two members with the retirement of John and Melanie “Mel” Zahasky. “It has been an honor and privilege, we love you all,” said John and Mel as they reminisced on memories of helping friends and sharing with fellow Vincentians.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is active in many communities in Alaska. In Juneau, a conference was started in 1984. Traditionally the main activity of the Society is to provide aid to the poor and this is most often done from the local parish. With collaboration between both parishes in Juneau, they do what they can to address the needs in our community.

John and Mel have served the Society’s Home Visit Team ministry for more than 3 years and will be retiring to the lower 48. They have worshiped at a variety of churches in the area and their strong Christian faith led them to be active members of the Home Visit Team. Before joining the Home Visit team ministry, the Zahasky’s were regular customers at the St. Vincent Thrift Store. When the thrift store moved to a new location they offered to help and during that process learned that St. Vincent’s is so much more than a thrift store. They learned about our transitional shelter and the many low-income housing options we have for those moving from homeless to safely housed. They were most intrigued by the person-to-person aid program that was just getting started. They signed up for the initial Home Visit Team training in 2018. They had previous experience serving others with Family Promise, a non-profit that helps families out of homelessness, and cooking at the Glory Hall, our local emergency shelter. They once again heeded the call to serve Christ in the poor. John and Mel added, “We are all called, and we are all in this together to serve others. We never felt like outsiders; we are all welcome.”

The fundamental principles of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are spirituality, friendship, and service. Vincentians go out in pairs to visit our neighbors in need, during this visit, we learn how we might help and offer to pray with those we serve if they are receptive. We also offer up a prayer before and after our visit, always seeking the guidance of our Good Lord. Another aspect of the Home Visit Team is that twice monthly we gather to pray together and debrief the visits, what touched us, what could we have done better, what need still exists and how we can be Christ to those in need. John and Mel shared that, “Even though you are not on every visit you feel part of the ministry and ache for these people and their stories.”

Although John and Mel signed up as a couple, they teamed up with other home visit team members to make visits as well. Initially, knowing that St. Vincent’s is a Catholic ministry, they weren’t sure how it would go but shared that, “this whole experience has been more of a blessing than we can put into words”. They also expressed how incredible it was to have the resources and an organized approach to go out and serve the poor. Participating in this ministry also made them very thankful for what they

have. They commented, "It has opened our eyes to what other people have to deal with and to be proactive in knowing what resources are available."

One particularly touching example of the ecumenical experience was when we were helping an elderly, recently widowed disabled woman clean out her storage unit. On her limited income, this was one expense she could trim but she needed our help. Six Vincentians helped for a few hours that day. One was our own Deacon Mike, who is our Spiritual Advisor, as well as Deacon John and a nurse were all part of the effort. At one point, as the group was finishing up hauling boxes to her apartment, the dump and the thrift store, the elderly widow was overwhelmed with gratitude. She said, "I thought God had forgotten about me and here he sent two deacons and a nurse". John and Mel continued to be a support and friend to this woman as she made a few more major life transitions.

When asked what they wished others knew about St. Vincent de Paul ministry, they replied, "Anyone can do it and wish more people participated and knew about it. If you are interested in joining the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Home Visit Team ministry, contact Maureen Hall at: hvt@svdpjuneau.org.

We wish John and Mel well in the next chapter of their lives.

Peggy Mattson and Maureen Hall for St. Vincent de Paul Society of Juneau