



front l to r, Gloria Dawson, Delores Barbeau; back 2nd from l, Carol Olstad; with staff & brothers at Neighborhood Connections, January 2010

... the gift of hospitality

- Delores Barbeau and Gloria Dawson

Neighborhood Connections

IT'S WHAT SO MANY OF US, FOR WHOM WESTON PRIORY is our "grounding place", have felt: the welcome, the warmth, the questions, the listening ear...and the challenge to grow, to become whole, to connect again to ourselves, to each other, to this God with whom we walk.

For a few of us, a bit over four years ago, that challenge led us to open the doors of Neighborhood Connections in Londonderry, down the road from Weston. We were a couple of social workers, a physician, a mortgage broker. We had lived and worked for years in these neighboring towns, well aware of the uniquely Vermont way "we watch out for our neighbors", but also aware of the problems that come with living in a rural economy, where distance is measured in time and work is often seasonal...and where people do not advertise their needs.

What we have tried to do from the beginning is to listen, to meet people where they are when they call or come in—for fuel assistance, for housing, for food or work or transportation, with health problems and family crises—and to walk with them until they are no longer in that situation.

This has meant work with budgeting and time management; offering education seminars and mental health counseling; helping file taxes and filling out applications; and planning senior trips. But we hope we have listened and supported and advocated for others when systems and family dynamics may have seemed overwhelming.

We have tried very hard not to fill immediate needs only, but to connect people back with their community and their lives.

We are only able to do this because we have a great group of volunteers and a gifted, supportive Board, and because we have strong connections with individuals and agencies and volunteer groups who work and live in the larger community of towns we are privileged to serve...and because of the extraordinary support of the brothers and of the members of the “extended priory community” who are our neighbors and companions on this journey.

House of Sabbath

One of the most pressing challenges we have seen over these last years is the concrete need for hospitality—not just for a welcoming office or a warm smile, but for a place to live. In the last months 27 people looking for a home have walked through our doors:

- A family of four who have lived in their van for months
- A 17-year-old who had hitch-hiked all over the state for weeks, carrying everything he owned in a small backpack
- A mom with a 2-year-old, "couch-surfing" with whoever would take her in, desperate for a job and for education
- A 52-year-old, long estranged from his family, living in his truck, looking for a shower
- A 40-year-old mom of 3 who had just taken in a homeless 17-year-old girl, and who now needed to get out of her own abusive situation.

Sometimes, to walk with these people, we have to find more than just an overnight shelter. Sometimes they need a place where, for a time, they can put their things down, be home and feel safe.

The brothers, who have been sustaining supporters from the first, heard our frustrations and our dreams, and offered us the chance to provide this hospitality. As of January, we at Neighborhood Connections will be able to offer Sabbath House to some of those who walk through our doors.

Our dream: to have a place where people—individuals and small families—can be for a while, where there is an offering of support, healing and re-connection.

We have been meeting with people from the community and with others from around the state (and as far away as Virginia!) who work in this type of housing; we are learning to be responsible caretakers of the gift that has been offered.

We hope to use Sabbath House as a home—and as a community center for education, for gathering, for growth and celebration. We hope that it will be, in the deepest sense of the word, a place of hospitality. ■