



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 005: Cathedral Housing Partnership

The Cathedral Housing Partnership began as a search for a new purpose in Joanne Kelly's life, after her husband John Good died. "Three and a half years ago, my life felt very empty. I felt I needed a new cause, something worthwhile to sink my teeth into. Being a member of Christ Church Cathedral, I'd become quite aware of the many homeless folks in our city. I'd began to seek them out when it was time to pass the peace." A speech by a local homeless advocate, the interest of others at the cathedral, and the partnership was dreamed up. In 2016, and again for 2017 the partnership was awarded New Ventures in Community Ministry grants from the Council of the Diocese of Missouri.

Deborah Nelson-Linck is the host for this episode. An educator, she's founder of the Hands-on Black History Museum and a member of Christ Church Cathedral.

Debbie : Welcome to Jesus Hacked, a weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Debbie Nelson-Linck, long time parishioner at Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis. Today we're talking to Joanne Kelly, an organizer of the Cathedral Housing Project. Welcome, Joanne.

Joanne: Thank you, Debbie.

Debbie : Joanne, I'm excited to learn about what sparked the ministry that you've been involved in. I'd like for you to share some of the nuts

and bolts of the project, some in-depth things about it and it how it all got started.

Joanne: Jeff Goldone and I were both interested in helping the homeless. We saw a lot of people at church who were living without a home and we got to know some of these people casually and we both thought we could do something to help. We had met Teka Childress, she's the woman who founded Winter Outreach in St. Louis. She was a life-long Catholic worker who had lots of experience with homeless folks. We shared with her our ideas and she helped us get started. She helped us come up with three or four people to interview, to see whom we might select as our first partner. We thought it was important to think of these folks as partners, not ... It's very hard, when we're in a helping situation to look at those people we're helping as partners. We tend to see ourselves as the helper and them the helpee and that's not necessarily helpful.

Debbie : You talk about there were members of the homeless community that you wanted to help and that's a sea of humanity...

Joanne: Yes.

Debbie : How did you narrow that down to one person?

Joanne: We didn't know where to start, we were brand new at doing this, so we had Teka Childress as our helper advisor. She lived near Karen House in North St. Louis and there were women who were living there, who were living without a home, who'd been in Karen House for a time. There were also a few people that we had gotten to know at the cathedral, from them being at our Sunday services. We started out with about three people that we interviewed.

Debbie : Talk about the characteristics of the person that you wanted to be involved in the program, so that you would have the success with them that you envision.

Joanne: To begin with, we wanted somebody who could be successful. From being in education, we always started out a pilot project with, hopefully students, people who could be successful, because it gives credence to your project and it helps you feel that you can do this work. We wanted people who we thought that with one year's help could get back on their feet and be a successful, self-sustaining person. We wanted people with job skills, or a sufficient amount of income that if we got them into an affordable apartment and furnished that apartment and got them situated, they could carry on.

Debbie : How hard was that to narrow that to one person?

Joanne: It was hard. It's a little like playing God ...

Debbie : Absolutely.

Joanne: ... nobody wants to do that.

Debbie : No.

Joanne: We had one person who seemed just right. She was a very resourceful ... is a very resourceful person. She had a minimal income that she could rely on. She had lived independently before. She'd had a fire in her apartment and everything was ransacked and taken. We thought she was a pretty good bet. Since we were newcomers to this whole thing, we needed to do something easier rather than harder to begin with.

Debbie : You decided on the person and chose characteristics that you thought ... and the team talked with that person?

Joanne: Yes.

Debbie : Interview? Was that in interview format?

Joanne: Yes. We interviewed, I believe, three people. We had the same questions for everybody. Afterward we talked about it ... and that was difficult, but we agreed on the one person.

Debbie : What was that difficult conversation?

Joanne: People's sympathies get tweaked and you want everybody to have this opportunity, and we only had one person. We had to get rather pragmatic. We finally came up with one that we agreed would probably work out.

Debbie : What was the next step after you had chosen your candidate? Was it funding or choosing the place or what did that look like?

Joanne: Actually, we'd done the funding beforehand. We'd had people who came when we met at church with Teka Childress. Some people had been interested and they were invited to come if they were interested in this project. We had a list of people. We emailed them, talked to them and asked them to give us a monthly pledge or stipend or a promise of so much money. That's how we began. We also put our own money into it. We all pledged, those of us who were on the group that did most of the work.

Debbie : Was there grant money involved?

Joanne: Not at that point.

Debbie : Eventually grant money?

Joanne: Yes. Mike Kinman made us aware that the diocese was starting a new ministries program and that there was going to be a grant available. We wrote a grant and it needed to be, I think, in September of that year, but we'd already begun. Jeff and I wrote that grant. We submitted it and we found out in November that it was successful.

Debbie : And very excited about that?

Joanne: Oh, yeah, we were thrilled.

Debbie : Yes, yes, yes.

Joanne: Sure.

Debbie : Had you thought about how you would use those funds ahead of time or were you confident that this would come through?

Joanne: We weren't exactly going month to month, but we didn't have a bunch of money. To get started, we had people donating furniture and household goods. I emailed all my friends and asked them for household goods that they didn't need. Jeff had a neighbor who was downsizing and had some nice furniture, so we found out about The Word At Shaw. They have a basement full of furnishings that they provide for people who are in a similar situation, so we got some furniture from them. We started to network.

Debbie : You were supplying all of these things for an apartment?

Joanne: Yes.

Debbie : How did you identify what part of town this would be in?

Joanne: The first person that we chose, as I said, she was very resourceful, so she had ideas. She'd been out looking, she'd get on the bus and go and look. She found a couple of places, put her name on the list and she had a call. One of these places was available. It was a HUD building, Housing and Urban Development. At a HUD building, a person supplies one third of their available income for an apartment. That's pretty affordable in today's world.

Debbie : That was part of the partnership is that gave the participant some ownership in this partnership that you had started with her, that we're going to provide these things which you are also responsible for helping us and identifying a place?

Joanne: Yes. Yes. I don't know if everybody will be as resourceful as she was. She was the model. She did everything right.

Debbie : Very good, very good.

Joanne: Yeah, we were very fortunate.

Debbie : That's nice to work with.

Joanne: Yeah.

Debbie : Yes. Now that woman is a graduate of the program?

Joanne: She is.

Debbie : Okay. How do you become a graduate of the program? How have you arrived?

Joanne: To begin with, we furnished her place and gave her all the things she would need to get started. We took her grocery shopping, stocked her pantry, she had food for several weeks. We then stepped down what we would give her in food. She was on food assistance, but we would give her money for household supplies, toiletries, those kinds of things. Every month it would be a little bit less, so we got to the point where she was doing 90% or 95% of what she would need to furnish for herself.

Debbie : Was there education? Was there an education piece of this? Because if you are not accustomed to home ownership, then some of those things don't come naturally.

Joanne: Yes. She had been living independently before. The biggest part of the education that she needed was banking. She hadn't been banking, she never written a check. She didn't have confidence in her math skills. One of our group gave her some assistance, went to the bank with her, where she spoke up for herself. She's a woman in her early 60s, she's lived a resourceful life, she's been around. She knows what's what, so she handled herself with the bank, she's got a checking account. As a parting gift to her, we gave her some money that she could use for a rainy day. She told us she never had that much money in her bank ever before in her life.

Debbie : So exciting for her.

Joanne: Yeah.

Debbie : Were there moments throughout this whole process that were milestones as she was growing into this experience and the committee, those of you who are overseeing the project, had some joyful moments as she started to grow into her home and home ownership?

Joanne Kelly: We felt good about her all along the way. There weren't really any pitfalls. There wasn't anything untoward that happened. Things just moved along. She was looking for work and we were trying to help her find a job. In her early 60s, that's not easy.

Debbie : No.

Joanne: She finally found a job, but it was helping out in a school kitchen and serving food. She found out that for [all 00:12:31] the money she made there would be money taken away from. The way it worked out, she wasn't really making anything and she was on her feet all day. Her feet hurt. She bought a pair of shoes, they were too tight, it didn't work out and she quit that job. I don't know if she's still looking. I don't know.

Debbie : After the year partnership is over, you've given her the lump sum of money, how responsible is the group then for any needs she might have after that? Is the partnership officially over?

Joanne: No, it is not. She calls me or I call her. She put me down in case of an accident, could she call on me? Could she use my name and phone number? We've developed trust in each other over time, so we have an ongoing relationship. When she hears from a building that has an open apartment, she'll call me up and tell me about it. She's on our team. Our meetings are on Sunday morning. She goes to another church, so it's not really convenient for her to be at our meetings. She's an unofficial member of our team.

Debbie : Yes. Do you envision that this is a program that other parishes can duplicate or be used as a model?

Joanne: We hope so. We've saved our materials and we've made a little booklet. Last summer, I got the names of all the Episcopal churches in the region in our diocese and I sent them a letter and told them that we'd like to speak to any interested group at their church. We had a very unsuccessful campaign, we heard from one person, but we got some valuable feedback. Our timing wasn't

good, our letter was too long. We didn't do the ask in the first paragraph, so we've learned from that and we're ready to do this again, to reach out.

Debbie : You'll send another letter out?

Joanne: Yes, that's our plan right now. Actually, we're going to talk about it next month at our meeting to see what we did right, what we could do better, how to begin.

Debbie : It sounds like the program was really successful. There were no obstacles along the way.

Joanne: It's like when you raise kids, you remember the good parts.

Debbie : Exactly.

Joanne: I'm sure there were frustrations and times when we were pulling out our hair.

Debbie : How did you get pass that?

Joanne: Faith in God. We really felt that God was helping us through this whole process. We felt like we were the boots on the ground.

Debbie : That was the thing that helped you all to continue the conversations with each other, with your candidate?

Joanne: Yes.

Debbie : With everybody, so you were doing God's work.

Joanne: It certainly helped. We're dealing with our third partner now who's way more challenging. We've learned from some experience.

Debbie : What kind of challenges are you coming up against now?

Joanne: This person doesn't want to do some of the things that we think would be helpful in finding a job, in finding a place to live, in finding an apartment she can afford at the end of her year with us. It's rather frustrating, because it looks like, at the end of the year, we'll be at a stalemate. Everybody has a right to make their own decisions. We can't make decisions for these folks. They're independent people.

Debbie : There's some frustration that you're up against now, but you still feel like the work is worth it?

Joanne: Definitely.

Debbie : Yes, and you'll continue?

Joanne: Definitely.

Debbie : Continue to have more candidates in the future as you are able?

Joanne: Yes, we decided on our fourth candidate just this past Sunday, so we're still going.

Debbie : Wonderful, wonderful. How can listeners find more out about your project, if they want to get involved and overlook the letter that you sent originally?

Joanne: They can get in touch with us through Christ Church Cathedral, The Cathedral Housing Partnership.

Debbie : Any closing thoughts that you have about this whole experience? Anything that enlightened you? That changed you? That was an eye-opener?

Joanne: I always knew this, but you find out, once again, that people are people. If we just talk to each other honestly, openly, work together, we can probably get some things accomplished.

Debbie : Thank you for coming and sharing this amazing experience. We've been talking with Joanne Kelly about the Cathedral Housing project. My name is Debbie Nelson Linck and thank you for listening.