

BROTHERS OF THE THIRD AGE AT THE SERVICE OF THE HANDICAPPED

The Community of Lachine (Montreal) numbers seven Brothers, six of whom are retired.

To quote the words of Father Alfred Ducharme, S.J. the Director of the District retreat in December 1986, "Retiring age does not mean that the moment has arrived to stop everything and just go on living". And then he adds that the religious, by his profession, has given his entire life to the service of the Lord, not just up to the age of sixty-five.

Aging should not be an obstacle to the spirit of faith and of zeal which always animates the Brothers. On the contrary, belief in the values we are called upon to make known and to develop will always help us find a field of apostolate in conformity with the Church and the spirit of the Institute.

In the District of Montreal, teams of all ages dedicate their talents, their time and their physical capacity to the service of poor. Naturally, men in the prime of life, go toward organizations where more strength and activity is needed, while older men look for quieter jobs of general interest where the most important point is to listen to others.

Speaking again of the Community of Lachine, the principal fields of action are: the mission of Haiti, handicapped persons, helping the poor, students with special problems in their studies, regular courses and immigrants, etc..

At the request of LASALLIANA, the article will treat of the handicapped persons whom Brothers Albert and Réal Lanthier are taking care of within a club.

Beginnings and growth of the organization

In the spring of 1976, several handicapped persons got together with the intention of taking matters into their own hands so as to convince government authorities to have their own organization in the area with all the rights and advantages then existing.

They invited several volunteers to form a temporary council and to work toward realizing their project: recruiting, seeking resources, organizing transportation, drawing up a charter, etc.

Things went on so well that by December 8, of the same year, the Club for the Handicapped of Lac Saint Louis received official recognition from the government, with an approved charter.

The Club for the Handicapped of Lac Saint Louis is a nonlucrative organization with the following objectives:

- To regroup the physically handicapped regardless of age;

- To provide activities during their leisure moments;

- To favor formation in cultural fields or in sports;

- Diffuse information concerning their rights to various services: health, transportation, work, education, lodging, etc..

The Club operates with the help of volunteers, it is 80% self-financed and receives aid from government authorities, local organizations and personal donations.

From six beginners, the Club now has sixty-eight beneficiaries. This well demonstrates the need for an organization in this milieu to brighten up their situation and help them find their place in society on an equal rights basis.

One large family

The Club is their second family. So say its members and they are happy to do so.

There are different types of handicapped persons in the Club; some were that way from birth and others became thus in the course of life: paralysis, muscular dystrophy, accidents while working, the effect of illness or operations, amputation of limbs, etc..

Two categories of handicapped persons come to the Center: those who have only their home or an institution to share and those who after an illness or an accident have had to abandon their work, slow down their activity and adapt themselves to a new style of life.

After having taught for decades of years, it is now our turn to take lessons in accepting life, in being resigned under tribulation and in courage to face the difficulties of everyday life.

The animators and their Commitments

The religious belief of the ethnical groups in this milieu make it easier to offer different religious celebrations: the Eucharist, the sacraments, prayer groups, etc.. The presence of priests or religious does not bother them at all. On the contrary, they are considered as messengers of the Good News, always ready to understand, to listen, to encourage, to help physically and even in a special way morally.

Activities are not lacking. In fact, the Club is considered an active organization by its very nature: swimming, craftsmanship, typing, meeting

days, trips, summer camps, participation in the city's community activities, sports competitions, telethons for the different groups, cultural expositions, social evenings, etc.. In internal as well as external activities, an active participation is encouraged rather than simply being present as spectators.

The participation of the handicapped is all the more comforting for them since they feel happy to be with others in their competitions, outings, trips, public assemblies, etc..

How did Brothers Albert and Réal Lanthier come to get interested in the handicapped? As sons of St. de La Salle, the spirit of zeal is naturally in the heart of all Brothers. Having given of themselves all through life, retiring age lends itself to continue the process. Then too, occasions and organizations are never lacking.

As for Brother Albert, a request came to replace a priest who was called away to another ministry. Following a funeral service in the parish church, Brother Albert and I (Réal) went to visit the Club for the Handicapped in the adjacent hall. This first contact started a series of visits that has lasted ten years.

Brother Albert, already retired, was more available than I. Secretary-Treasurer of the Club's Council, he also directs the Club on working days, buys the food and materials for the workshops and accompanies the handicapped when they have to move about either in the city or on outings. By his very function, he is in contact with the group all day long. Thus he can freely exchange ideas with them.

To be available to these people who are alone or confined to institutions is the most important point. Giving them the opportunity of changing their horizon, of leaving their four walls for a few hours is gratifying to them.

Formerly, handicapped persons hid themselves or were hidden from the public eye. Today, mentalities have changed. Since adapted means of transportation exist, one finds them everywhere now: in shopping centers, restaurants, universities, etc.. However, priority where transportation is concerned must be respected: medical services, workmen, studies, leisure, etc.

Access to public buildings has been greatly improved as well as facilities for moving around outside by means of a wheelchair. The international year for the handicapped had done much to sensitize authorities and the population toward treating them on an equal basis. Of all the years

dedicated to this purpose by the United Nations, 1981 will remain outstanding.

Concerning myself (Réal), as I was still teaching, I could be at the Club only during free periods or at meal time. My first contact with the handicapped, however, was previous to the founding of the Club. I had handicapped students in my daily typing classes and in my night courses for adults.

One day I was given the task of revising the three regular textbooks the Brothers used to teach typing. I decided to make special adaptations for the handicapped students. These appeared for LEFT HAND, RIGHT HAND and ONE-EYED in two languages, French and English.

Naturally, when a typing teacher appeared at the Club with textbooks he had composed especially for the handicapped, students were never lacking and they were delighted. Some of these at present write their own correspondence, do certain jobs, or better yet, find employment in offices as secretaries.

Besides teaching typing, part of my time is spent in the secretariate or with printing, photography, the news, etc.. What is left of it is devoted to accompanying the members of the Club in thousands of ways that are necessary in an organization of this kind.

Mutual evangelization

Our help as volunteers dates back to the founding of the Club. We number about thirty, depending on our availability during the week, in the evening or on week-ends and also during the vacation week in a camp especially adapted for the handicapped.

Thinking of others is a first step; giving to others is another, but taking on a personal, voluntary commitment brings incalculable joys and consolations. One understands better that there is greater happiness in giving than in receiving.

The handicapped show us signs of gratitude that are sincere and spontaneous. How often they tell us that they keep us in their prayers, in thanksgiving for what we do for them and ask the Lord to give us the health and the strength to remain with them a long time in the big family of the handicapped in Lac Saint Louis.

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