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Winter Nights in Lamorinda

By Jean Follmer



Lafayette Orinda Presbyterian Church volunteer reads to a young client Photo Jean Follmer

The Winter Nights Rotating Family Shelter is run by the Social Justice Alliance of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County. During the winter months, Winter Nights provides homeless families and seniors with a clean, safe and warm facility for evening activities and sleeping as well as a daytime services center.

Winter Nights can accommodate up to thirty persons at any given time. Congregations throughout central and east Contra Costa provide the space, meals and the numerous volunteer hours that are necessary to operate the shelter. Winter Nights is a rotating shelter so the residents move to the next participating congregation every 1-2 weeks.

This winter, the following Lamorinda congregations are hosting Winter Nights: Lafayette Christian Church, Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, Lafayette United Methodist Church, Orinda Community Church, St. Anselm's Episcopal Church, St. Monica Catholic Church, St. Perpetua Catholic Church and Temple Isaiah.

The Winter Nights Program has grown substantially since its inception. "Winter

Nights started off as a place where homeless families could get out of the cold," said Winter Nights Executive Director, Gwen Watson. Watson, a volunteer, said they soon realized they also needed to provide transportation since many of the families didn't have access to reliable transportation. "The first van was donated by a minister and then someone gave us a back-up. The original (van) broke down and we got another. We currently have a 15-person van," said Watson.

The non-profit shelter exists solely on the generosity of others. The annual cost to run the 6 1/2 month shelter is approximately \$135,000. That amount pays for the salaries of a Program Manager, Site Supervisors, Daytime Oasis Supervisor and van driver as well as administrative costs. Volunteers from the participating congregations are a vital part of the staff. "A pro-bono grant writer brings in 1/3 (of the \$135,000) from foundations. We also send out (donation request) letters to congregations and others who have helped us in the past," said Watson.

Winter Nights continues to expand its service offerings. "We keep seeing what more is needed to move our families back into the mainstream and we do what we can to do that," said Watson.

Winter Nights keeps its clients on a regular schedule. Monday through Friday, breakfast is served at 5:15 am. Most clients leave the shelter for the day at 6:30 am. School aged children are transported to school and adults and pre-school aged children are taken to the Daytime Oasis at St. Vincent de Paul in Pittsburgh. Mothers and infants remain at the shelter during the day.

The daytime facility provides job and housing search services to the adults and pre-school instruction for the children. "This year we were offered the services of an Americor teacher. She's at the Daytime Oasis with the pre-school children. There are lots of books and it's going so well," said Watson. Watson said a St. Perpetua member secured a First 5 Commission grant for \$3,000 and they used it to purchase kid-sized tables and chairs for the Oasis.

The clients return to the shelter around 5:30 pm. Dinner is served at 6:30 followed by homework, games and other activities at 7:00. Bedtime for children is at 8:30 and it's "lights out" for all at 9:30. All meals are provided and prepared by volunteers from the host congregation. Each night, the paid overnight site supervisor and two congregation volunteers spend the night at the shelter. "Over 50 people participated in one way or another by providing food, offering tutoring or children's activities, sleeping overnight, shopping for groceries, laundering bedding, etc. All felt that it was a tangible way of expressing their faith and compassion," said Lafayette United Methodist Church Pastor Lori Sawdon.

The hosting congregation arranges for weekend activities. "Our annual Halloween party coincided with the last night we hosted the shelter. We were delighted that all of the residents decided to attend the party and most of them came in costume. The party coordinator was pleased that the party had become a mission to share with others, not simply something for ourselves," said Pastor Lori.

Monday is moving day. "It's a lot for them to have to pack up and go to another church each week. Other than that, if you have to be in a shelter, I think it's one of the best ones around," said Watson. The move is completed by volunteers from the host congregation. Winter Nights is always looking for donations. BART tickets and monetary donations are always appreciated. If you would like to make a contribution or obtain more information on the Winter Nights Shelter, please contact Gwen Watson at 925-930-9965 or visit www.cccwinternights.org.

Reach the reporter at: jean@lamorindaweekly.com

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