

Lisa-Ann Bilinsky 1999-2000

The Doorbell

I hated the Welcome Home Doorbell.

It rang at all hours of the day, even on our days "off".

It never failed that just as I was climbing into bed, or sitting down to my lunch, or picking up that long-neglected book, I would hear "ding-dong" and with it the demand to attend to someone else's needs at the expense of my own. Despite the fact that my very presence at the Welcome Home was supposed to be one of service, there was a big part of me that felt strongly that I should have at least some control over how and when I offered that service. But with the doorbell, it was always NOW – no matter what! With each ring, I heard the words "I don't care about you, serve me! Serve ME!" And it drove me crazy.

I remember one afternoon in particular. The doorbell rang in the middle of drop-in. I heard it and looked around for someone else to take it. But Fr. Larry was in the middle of a conversation and Philip was working hard in the kitchen. Reluctantly, I opened the door.

Immediately, I was overcome by the sickly sweet smell of solvents. Curled up in the corner was a man, with greasy hair, drooling at the lips, clearly high. He slurred to me, "got any can'food?" Taken aback, I tried calmly to explain that we did not give canned food to visitors who were visibly inebriated. He was welcome to come back when he was sober. He didn't seem to like that response. He staggered up and towards me and a little more loudly demanded, "got any can'food? I need can'food!" I froze. A moment later, Fr. Larry was behind me, calmly taking over and re-directing our visitor. When the door closed a moment later, Fr. Larry turned to me and said, "you've just met Ray the Stray."

My first meeting with Ray the Stray was less than pleasant. Yet, he kept coming back. Week after week, he would show up with the same request and I would keep responding with the same answer. With each encounter, I became less scared and he became less demanding. We would smile at each other. We would talk about the weather. Occasionally, he would try to flirt. We chatted a little about his life on the streets. One day a while later, he came back sober. I immediately went to the cupboard and packed him a bag of canned food. He said thank you.

About a month before I was scheduled to leave Welcome Home, the doorbell rang again. I opened it to find Ray the Stray standing there smiling. He was sober and I turned toward the canned food cupboard, but he stopped me. He said, "No, I don't need anything today. I just wanted to give you this." He held out his hands in which I saw a stuffed animal. It was a "pound puppy" like the kind I had remembered from childhood.

"This is for me?" I asked.

"Yes, for you and everybody."

"Thanks, Ray. Can I get you anything today?"

"No thanks. I'm good." And he walked away.

I closed the door and stared at the puppy. I was staring at a very profound message. What had started as a relationship based in fear and inconvenience on my part, self-interest on his, had changed for both of us. In the short doorbell conversations we had experienced over the

previous few months, both of us had been transformed. I had learned to look beyond the doorbell disturbance to see this man, child of God, and his human story of struggle. He had acknowledged that I was not just a symbol of service, but a person deserving of gratitude as well. Christ had enlightened us both.

I took the puppy and placed him in the Welcome Home Chapel as a reminder to all of us of the gifts that come when we overcome discomfort to answer the doorbell to God's invitation.