Volume 24 Number 1 Spring/Summer 2024

Hunger News & Hope

A Seeds of Hope Publication

Waco Habitat for Humanity Takes on the High Cost of Housing

by Katie Cook

John Alexander has been, off and on, director of the Habitat for Humanity affiliate in Waco, TX, since 1996. When he took the helm, Habitat had been in Waco for nine years and 40 houses had been built. Now, in 2024, there are 186. However, in recent years, it hasn't been so easy.

When the Waco affiliate built its first home in Waco, TX, in 1987, it cost $20,000. When John took over as director, houses cost $30-$40,000 to build. Now it takes $120-$140,000 to build a home of the same size and style.

"Back in those days, we were able to purchase a lot of land for $3,000 each and most of them cost less than $1,000," Alexander said. "Now, it costs $20,000 to $25,000 to purchase a lot, even when we go stand on the courthouse steps and bid for lots that have been foreclosed on. These are the same lots, in the same neighborhood as before. That's our biggest challenge—buying land."

When the organization started out in Waco, organizers chose a neighborhood most in need of good, affordable housing. In those years, there were thousands of lots in the area. In the beginning, the projects stayed in North Waco, but during Alexander's years, it spread to South and East Waco. All of these are neighborhoods where many people struggle to get a financial foothold.

"There are still hundreds of available lots in those neighborhoods, but a lot of them have tangled-title issues; you can't get them," Alexander said. "The city

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What You'll Find Inside:

art by Erin Kennedy Mayer

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has started a new program for selling lots, about eight at a time, through bidding, but these cost more than $25,000. We used to get them from the city for $500."

Some of the inflated prices for land have been attributed to the Waco phenomenon of Magnolia Realty, the people behind the television show "Fixer Upper," and some are attributed to national real estate inflation. And there are more challenges. Even though most of the labor is done by volunteers, prices for construction and building materials have skyrocketed in recent years, and stringent new building codes have also driven up costs.

"The houses are significantly more energy-efficient now, which is good for the homeowners in terms of energy bills," Alexander said. "But, other than that, and the fact that they are more expensive, they are essentially the same houses we've always built."

Also, everything takes longer than it once did. Between 2001 and 2016, Waco Habitat was building eight houses a year. Now it's three or four. "And that's true for Habitat across the nation," he said. "As a whole, Habitat for Humanity is building half as many houses as it used to."

Another huge challenge is that wages in Waco have not come anywhere near to keeping up with housing costs over the past few years. Habitat homeowners have always been selected from a pool of low-income families who would not otherwise be able to purchase a home. The Habitat model has always been to provide these opportunities at cost through zero-interest mortgages. But this becomes more difficult as building costs soar.

Current Sources of Revenue

"Our two big money makers have been our mortgages and the ReStore ," Alexander said *(see below)*. "Our mortgages bring in $130,000 to $140,00 a year; it stays about the same because the homeowners are paying off their mortgages as fast as we are building them. The Restore brings in a couple hundred thousand a year. That hasn't stopped, even during recessions.

The Habitat ReStore

Habitat ReStores are independently owned resale stores operated by local affiliates. The stores accept donations of building materials—everything from cabinets and bathtubs to lamps and old hinges—and sell them for a fraction of the retail price. This raises revenue to keep building homes and it also diverts reusable household items from area landfills.

Years ago, the Waco affiliate opened a ReStore downtown in an old city bus station building. After a while, the organizers found a location with more traffic, and the ReStore began to make a profit—which it has continued to do for some 20 years.

"We have had lots of donations from building distribution centers," Alexander said." For instance, we had a big shipment of bathtubs worth $2,000 apiece that we sell for $350. And the city is very open to helping because it keeps all these things out of the landfill."

An Unexpected Gift

In March 2022, Waco Habitat received a $1 million grant from American author and philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. The gift was part of a $436 million gift to 83 US Habitat affiliates.[1] For the local affiliate, it came out of the blue. "It seemed almost too good to be true," Alexander said. "Our goal is to leverage these funds with local donations so that we can make affordable housing available for more families in our community.

Please see "Habitat" on page 4.

Volunteers raise a truss on a Habitat building site in Waco, TX. Photo courtesy of Waco Habitat for Humanity.

John Alexander: A Life of Building Homes

John Alexander graduated from Texas A & M University in 1986, with a degree in recreation and parks. "I was thinking about leading Outward Bound projects or something like that. But I was reading *The Other Side* magazine, which included an interview with Millard Fuller [the founder of Habitat for Humanity] and a list of volunteer organizations, and I decided to go to Americus."

Alexander moved to Americus, GA, in 1987, to volunteer for room and board at the Habitat for Humanity International headquarters. After working there five years as a volunteer, he was getting ready to go to Guatemala to work on his own, when he met and married Ruth Boardman.

John Alexander has been leading the Waco Habitat affiliate since 1996. Photo courtesy of Waco Habitat for Humanity.

"In 1991, after we had been married a year, we wanted to go overseas. She had been in the Peace Corps in Africa right out of college, and she wanted to do something overseas, but this time with a Christian organization.

"We went to Guatemala on our own in 1993 to study Spanish and worked on a project with an old Habitat friend, and then we came back to the US and hooked up with the Mennonite Central Committee.[1] They sent us to language school in Guatemala, and then we spent the rest of the [three-year] term in Nicaragua. We loved working with the Mennonite Central Committee. Their development model is great; we were on the same page with that. And we adopted our daughter from Nicaragua."

Alexander moved to Americus, GA, in 1987, to volunteer for room and board at the Habitat for Humanity International headquarters.

The Habitat International leadership at that time basically planned to train North Americans to go oversees and build houses without partnering with local groups. Alexander said that he preferred a plan in which local people are encouraged to take the lead. "One of the reasons we decided not to go with Habitat initially was because of this leadership decision, so we went with Mennonite Central Committee. But now the Habitat leadership style is much more like what we had in mind."

In 1988, Alexander led a trip to Guatemala, one of the first Habitat Global Village trips. These trips are weeklong international volunteer experiences in which people are exposed to the realities of life in other countries and have the opportunity to participate in the Habitat vision—that everyone in the world would have a decent place to live. The program is thriving now. Participants work with local leadership across five continents.

"It's funny to think back on that trip," Alexander said. "We just winged it; we were not organized at all. Now it is such a fine-oiled machine. The best part of it is how it exposes people to the work."

Eventually, the Alexanders found their way back to Central Texas and to Waco, where Ruth had graduated from Baylor University. John became the Waco Habitat director in 1996 and stayed in that position until 2013, when he decided to retire. "I was just burnt out," he said.

But then, in 2019, he felt what he thought was a call to return to Habitat. "I went through a discernment period with my church, Hope Fellowship[2], and then I came back to work."

Since then, the Waco affiliate has continued to be strong, in spite of the current challenges. –lkc

Endnotes

1. The Mennonite Central Committee is a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches that engages in relief, development and peacebuilding.
2. A Mennonite congregation in Waco, TX.

Some Things You Might Not Know about Habitat for Humanity

Above: Shamia Willis cuts the ribbon on her new house in 2023. Photo courtesy of Waco Habitat for Humanity.

• The Waco Habitat affiliate has been engaged, almost since its beginning in 1986, in numerous repair projects. That work, dubbed "Re-Habitat" by some, has slowed in recent years, partly because of the coronavirus pandemic, although repair projects still happen. Many of them are done in partnership with the Texas Ramp Program (TRP), a statewide project that builds ramps for low-income owner-occupied houses. Waco Habitat provides the materials and TRP builds the ramps for some 50 houses each year.

• Since the beginning, all Habitat houses have been built so that they are wheelchair accessible. This has always been done—for possible visitors to the home, if not for the homeowners themselves, and for "aging in place." Also, Waco Habitat was already using energy-efficient methods when the recent codes came into being.

• Habitat houses are built to be strong. It has a built-strong program for houses in areas vulnerable to hurricanes. Some years ago, when a hurricane ripped through a South Florida city, only the Habitat houses were still standing.

• Waco Habitat once had a volunteer partnership with the women's prison in Gatesville, TX. Several inmates would come to Waco twice a week to work on houses. Their meals would be provided by churches. They came to help build, learn skills and be treated with dignity. The program stopped during the pandemic, but local leaders would like to revive it.

• For every house the Waco Habitat affiliate builds, it donates $4,500 to build a house in El Salvador, a country with a strong Habitat presence. All of Habitat's US affiliates send a "tithe" to an overseas affiliate for every house it builds. Waco Habitat has paid for 10 houses in a Salvadoran community that fled the country during the violence of the 1970s and 1980s and then returned and resettled. Many other affiliates have also contributed to building there. –lkc

Waco Habitat for Humanity®

Habitat,

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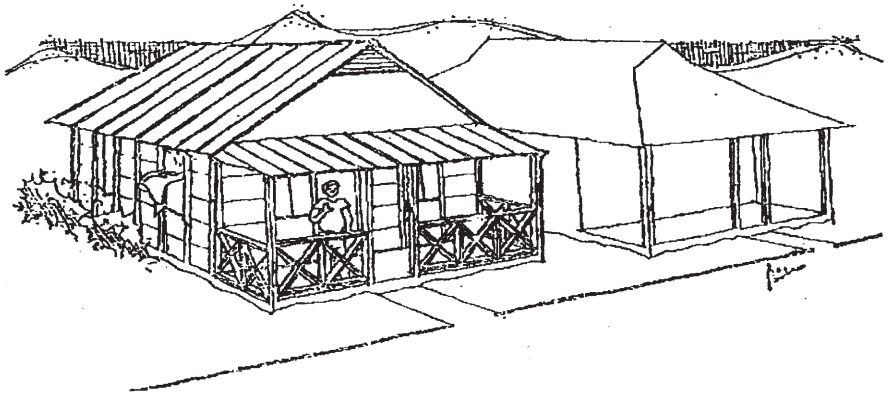
As I said before, our biggest challenge is finding affordable lots where we can build these homes. This gift will help us to meet that challenge."

–Katie Cook is the Seeds of Hope editor. She was the suport partner for the first Waco Habitat homeowner.

Endnote

1. There are currently 1,021 Habitat affiliates in the US.

Waco Habitat & Hunger Farm Team up to Build Simulation House



Above: A concept sketch of the Nicaragua House at the World Hunger Relief training farm. Courtesy of World Hunger Relief.

In 2001, a cooperative effort between Waco Habitat for Humanity, World Hunger Relief (formerly World Hunger Relief, Inc. or WHRI), and Mission Waco (an agency that serves homeless and low-income people in Waco, TX) brought about the building of a Habitat-style house on the World Hunger Relief training farm near Elm Mott, TX.

Jimmy Dorrell, then director of Mission Waco, and Lee Piche, then director of WHRI, dreamed of a space on the farm for poverty simulation retreats. Mission Waco already offered such events to help participants understand US homelessness. Someone, they agreed, needed to create a place in Central Texas where young people could go for a few days to study—and to actually experience—the poverty of developing countries.

John Alexander, director of Waco Habitat, was a former Mennonite Central Committee volunteer in Nicaragua, and he came up with the idea of connecting the building of a retreat space with the Habitat practice of tithing.

Every Habitat affiliate, worldwide, gives 10 percent of all unrestricted income to fund a project somewhere outside that country. The Waco affiliate has traditionally designated its tithe to Central America. In this way, the tithe from every Habitat house built in Waco goes toward funding one house in El Salvador or Nicaragua.

As a result, construction materials were donated by Waco Habitat, volunteers at the farm provided the labor, and the building became a reality. The house is patterned after a typical Habitat dwelling in Nicaragua—a 20x20 one-room, cement-block frame on a concrete slab.

Since that time, the "Nic House," as it is known now, has been used for many simulation retreats and housing for interns who want to know more about living in challenging situations.

—Story by Katie Cook. See "Habitat for Humanity Affiliate Teams Up with Hunger Farm to Build Simulation Site" Hunger News & Hope, *Vol 3 No 2, Spring 2001, page 8.*

The SCRAP Collective:
Cultivating & Composting for the Waco Community

by Grace Sincleair

Food insecurity lies in the middle of many problems. People living with food insecurity often live in areas called "food deserts," meaning that people do not have a grocery store with fresh, healthy food in their area. This causes health problems later in life. Some of these food issues have a heavier impact on people of color, creating racial divides.

Additionally, people with access to healthy food are often very wasteful. Nearly 40 percent of food in the United States goes to waste. This wasted food sits in landfills, emitting methane gas that exacerbates climate change.[1] While people with resources can protect themselves from some of the effects of climate change, those experiencing poverty often cannot.[2]

Waco, TX, is a prime example of this problem. With high poverty and food insecurity rates, many people in Waco struggle to access healthy, fresh food. On top of that, 25 percent of Waco's landfills are full of wasted food.[3] This leaves the poor disadvantaged in terms of the impacts of climate change. What Waco needs is a way to turn that food waste into fresh food for those in need, helping both the hungry and the environment.

A Local Solution

Other people in Waco pondered these issues, too. Eric Coffman, the first Waco Sustainability Programs Manager, noticed that composting was a popular topic in Waco. He pulled several of the local composting groups together. According to Emily Hills, director of Urban REAP (Renewable Energy and Agriculture Project), Coffman found a grant and, according to Hills, "it was all about climate change mitigation and resiliency in marginalized communities.

"Around this time, people were talking about composting as a way of mitigating climate change by reducing methane reductions at landfills, and so he thought we had a chance to apply for this grant and get some funding to think through what that would look like." They got the grant, and with funding from The Funders Network and The Cooper Foundation, they formed the SCRAP Collective, which stands for Sustainable Community and Regenerative Agriculture Project.

"Our project is a mix of food, food access and health, gardening, environmental stewardship—so it's got a lot of different components to it, and education is a really big part of what we do as well"Hills said.[4] By taking the existing community gardens and food-related organizations and empowering them to continue their work, the SCRAP Collective helps these organizations reach more people and continue to serve the community, making the collective and the community more resilient.[5]

Sister Toni Garcia shows off Family of Faith Worship Center's community garden, which uses homemade compost to produce fruits and vegetables for the church's weekly food pantry. Photo courtesy of Rod Aydelotte and the Waco Tribune Herald.

A Group of Partners

Urban REAP is an inner-city nursery that teaches members of the community about composting and gardening.[6] Urban REAP offers composting services. Participants can bring their food waste to the nursery to have it composted for free, or they can subscribe to the Bucket Program to get their own bucket to put food waste in and the ability to bring it by the nursery at any time.

The City of Waco is also participating in this project. According to Hills, Eric Coffman is "trying to provide support and resources to everybody but also just be a platform to talk about what we're doing and advocate for us on the city level and use the platforms that the City of Waco has to promote SCRAP."

Baylor University joined the project as well. English professor Dr. Joshua King, creator of the Environmental Humanities minor, is one of Baylor's representatives on the team. He is trying to incorporate community service into course work.[7] Additionally, Dr. Stephanie Boddie, Associate Professor of Church and Community Ministries at Baylor, serves as the collective's equity consultant. She is in charge of organizing congregations and schools around composting and gardening projects.[8]

Da'Shack Plant Nursery and Farmers Project is a farmers market, plant nursery, and holistic health center. Owned by Donna Nickerson, Da'Shack offers classes on gardening and composting.[9] Nickerson is also passionate about transferring her knowledge of how to work with different plants to working with diverse groups of people.

Another partner, the Family of Faith Worship Center, received guidance from Da'Shack on how to create its community garden. The church uses its garden to grow fresh food for its food pantry. Each week, the congregation feeds around 800 people.[10] The Family of Faith Worship Center also emphasizes health. The congregation offers nutrition and cooking classes using the food produced in the garden.[11]

World Hunger Relief (WHR) is another member of the collective. WHR runs a Christian nonprofit farm that focuses on regenerative agriculture and other sustainable practices. World Hunger Relief focuses on composting, specifically how families can compost at home.[12]

Global Revive, an organization founded by Kay Bell that focuses on involving individuals in their own gardening, is the final member of the SCRAP Collective. Bell used funds from SCRAP to create a community garden and start a garden specifically for senior adults. Their "ROW" Garden—"Raising Organic Wealth"—allows people to grow whatever they choose, and whatever they do not use can be sold at the Waco Downtown Farmers Market.[13] "It's all about trying to connect people back to food and gardening to help promote health," claims Hills.

A Community Goal

The SCRAP Collective has several different goals. First, they simply want to empower the participating organizations. They can lean on each other's strengths, avoid repeating one another, and expand the work each organization is already doing. Additionally, SCRAP Collective wants to get more people involved in composting alongside them.

This takes two main forms. One is by adding more organizations to the collective. Hills says they have to be intentional about who they add and when. The other side of increasing composting is just by getting more local people involved. They do this through offering composting services and classes.[14]

The collective has already seen success. Emily Hills shares about the results of the last year's work: "When we don't compost [food waste], it goes to a landfill, and then it produces methane, which is actually a really strong greenhouse gas. And based on the number of pounds of food waste we collected that we actually recorded, that's the equivalent of taking 1,400 cars off the road for a year." They also had four times the number of participants at SCRAP Collective workshops as expected, showing an unexpected receptivity to composting in the Greater Waco area.

Composting is something simple yet beautiful. Hills reflects, "composting feels like a perfect representation of how cyclical nature is and how connected we

Please see "SCRAP Collective" on page 11.

Volunteers at Family of Faith Worship Center's food pantry, which serves homegrown produce to 800 families weekly. Photo courtesy of Rod Aydelotte and the Waco Tribune Herald.

In Praise of the Potato

by Dawn Michelle Michals

In the late 1500s, the potato made its way from its home country of Peru to grace the dinner tables of Europe. Since then, billions of people worldwide make this a regular staple in their diets, deeming it "an advantage crop in the global food security system" according to Director-General Qu Dongyu of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Recognizing its resiliency, importance and popularity to our world's food supply, the United Nations recently declared May 30 of each year as a day to honor the contribution of this prolific root vegetable.[1]

With more than 5,000 varieties, the potato is conquering climate change by proving itself as a drought-resistant, climate-resilient crop that can be planted in the most remote of places.

Yes, folks. We are celebrating the lifesaving, yet often overlooked, potato.

And let me tell you why.

With more than 5,000 varieties[2], the potato is conquering climate change by proving itself as a drought-resistant, climate-resilient crop that can be planted in the most remote of places.

"By focusing on improving yields and making full use of historic potato cultivation areas, worldwide production can be raised to 500 million tons in 2025 and 750 million tons in 2030," adds Dongyu. In fact, Asia and Africa are quickly becoming the fastest-growing production regions of the crop, and China is now the world leader in potato consumption. In order to meet China's hunger needs, the country expects that "fully 50 percent of the increased food production it will need to meet demand in the next 20 years will come from potatoes."[3]

Meanwhile, in Peru…

Meanwhile, over in the birthplace of the potato—Peru—the International Potato Center (Centro Internacional de la Papa, or CIP) based in Lima, works tirelessly to ensure the potato takes its place in history. Its goal: To cultivate "climate-smart varieties that mature quickly, resist many pests and diseases, and tolerate heat, drought or soil salinity to provide more nutritious food and better incomes in extreme climates." By securing the largest gene bank in the world of potato, CIP is currently working on establishing varieties resistant to common diseases that wreck crops including late blight and potato purple top.

According to its website, the center's mission is to deliver "innovative science-based solutions to enhance access to affordable nutritious food, foster inclusive sustainable business and employment growth, and drive climate resilience of root and tuber agri-food systems."[4]

In other words, the folks at CIP really like potatoes. And their research proves it. Since 1971, CIP has focused on innovations in food security utilizing cultivation of potato, sweet potato and Andean roots and tubers.

A farmer harvesting potatoes. Originating from Peru, these vegetables serve as a food staple throughout the world. Photo by Getty Images.

CIP currently has a research presence in more than 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

It's all in their genes.

CIP houses a gene bank of potato germplasm—genetic resources such as seeds, tissues and DNA sequences, which are collected, archived and available to researchers, plant breeders and farmers. Leaving nothing to chance, a back-up collection of all seeds is currently stored at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault located in Norway, while backups of CIP's in vitro potato and sweet potato collections are stored at the Embrapa Cenargen in Brasilia, Brazil,[5] and at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Cali, Colombia, respectively.[6]

The organization's collection works to ensure "that crop plants which may contain genes to resist disease, provide enhanced nutrition, or survive in changing or harsh environments do not become endangered or extinct over time." By using next-generation technologies, researchers are developing climate-smart varieties that resist many pests and diseases, tolerate heat, drought and soil salinity.

Researchers are also creating potato varieties that mature quickly, making them a beneficial and hardy crop in off seasons. Early maturing varieties can be harvested in three months, making them readily available when grain crops are still green. Also, potato greens can be eaten at two months, making them a valuable nutrient source when food becomes scarce between plantings.

CIP's gene bank's goal is to "ensure that the genetic resources that underpin our food supply are both secure in the long term for future generations and available in the short term for use by farmers, plant breeders and researchers."

Smallholder farmers, who currently provide one-third of the potato production worldwide, can request plantlets through the gene bank's distribution program. Once developed, these cuttings will have the same characteristics as the mother plant, so the growth and life cycle continue allowing the farmers independence, crop sustainability, and an income and food source for their family.

Looking for ways of long-term preservation, CIP scientists have become world leaders in cryopreservation techniques. Clonally propagated plant materials are stored in the vapor or liquid phase of liquid nitrogen at -196°C, which allows physiological, chemical and metabolic activities to slow. With their research practices, potato germplasm could potentially remain viable for centuries.[7]

The Powerhouse Potato

According to CIP, the potato "is the third most important food crop in the world after rice and wheat in terms of human consumption." With nutrient deficient diets threatening two billion lives each day, CIP and CGIAR[8] Research Centers are developing biofortified, iron-rich potato varieties to fight the leading cause of physical and cognitive impairment in children as well as a leading risk of maternal and child mortality—anemia.

CGIAR reported:

> *In what was the first human study of iron absorption in potato, iron-deficient women of reproductive age in Peru's Huancavelica region ate 500 grams of potato a day for two weeks. Whereas people absorb 2-10 percent of the iron available in most vegetables, pulses and other crops, researchers found—via red blood cell analysis—that these women absorbed as much as 29 percent of the iron in the potatoes they consumed.*[9]

For the past 20 years, CGIAR's research in biofortification—the "process of breeding that increases vitamin and nutrient content in food crops"—has proven itself as a "sustainable and cost-effective way to boost both nutritional security and farmer livelihoods, especially in areas where most families lack access to diverse diets, supplements or fortified foods."[10]

Early maturing varieties can be harvested in three months, making them readily available when grain crops are still green.

Research shows that biofortified potatoes save lives. Distribution is currently under evaluation in not only Peru, but also in Ethiopia, India and Rwanda.

Hugo Campos, CIP's Deputy Director General for Research shares, "With an effective diffusion strategy, iron-rich potatoes will make an important contribution to reducing the currently unacceptable levels of anemia globally. In the long run, this could improve the health of smallholder families, enhance productivity and incomes, and decrease illness and associated expenses."

The United Nation's General Assembly designated May 30th of each year as the International Day of Potato to "raise awareness of the multiple nutritional, economic, environmental and cultural values of the potato and its

Please see "Potato" on page 11.

The 'Great Hunger': The Irish Potato Famine

by Dawn Michelle Michals

The Irish Potato Famine, sometimes known as "the Great Famine or "the Great Hunger," is often referred to by the Irish as *Drochshaol*, which literally means "the bad life" and is loosely used to mean "the hard times." The famine decimated Ireland from 1845 to 1852, creating starvation, disease and a historical social crisis that forever changed Ireland's society and history.

The culprit? Potato pathogen *Phytophthora infestans*, the causal agent of potato late blight, which the International Potato Center (CIP) in Peru [see the main story on page 8] works so hard to eliminate.

Experts believe the blight arrived in Europe in 1844. The strain—known as HERB-1—made its way from the Toluca Valley in Mexico, then up through the Americas, and finally hit Europe, causing the first infected crops in 1845. The first deaths by starvation were recorded in 1846. It's estimated that 1 million people died during the years of the famine, and another million fled the country—effectively decreasing the population by 20 to 25 percent. Some towns registered decreases of up to 67 percent of their populations.

Starvation and hunger-related diseases, as usual, targeted those less fortunate. The two most prolific killers—fever and diphtheria—were followed by dysentery, cholera, smallpox and influenza. Although solid records are scarce, census information shows that the population decreased from 8,175,124 in 1841 to a low of 6,552,385 by 1851. At normal population growth rates, the country should have been at more than 9 million persons had the blight never occurred.

Ironically, Ireland's population growth from 2 million in 1700 to well over 8 million by 1841 contributed to its dependence on the potato. More people meant a greater segmentation of available land. As landholding sizes decreased, families looked for crops that produced quick growth in relatively small spaces; thus the potato became a primary food source for one in three Irish people by 1800. In addition, monoculture and a lack of genetic variability in potato plants increased vulnerability to disease.

A famine seemed inevitable.

Also as usual, economic injustice exacerbated the situation for low-income farmers. Absentee landlordism also contributed to poverty and a growing rate of homelessness among already impoverished farmers. When workhouses wouldn't accept tenants who lived on more than a quarter acre of land, nefarious landlords and their middlemen talked countless numbers of tenants into surrendering their properties in order to receive aid.

Meanwhile, workhouses were not able to take in the large influx of people in need, so a vast majority of those evicted from the land, both voluntarily and involuntarily, had nowhere to go. Overcrowding in workhouses, soup kitchens and other aid agencies caused the rampant spread of illness, thus contributing to the enormous death toll of the famine.

Later, in 1879, when potato late blight again hit the country, landlord and tenant rules had so vastly changed—thanks to the work of the political organization the Irish National Land League—that deaths attributed to the famine were greatly reduced.

"Emigrants Leave Ireland" by Henry Doyle, London Illustrated Times, 1868.

In an effort to help, donations flooded into Ireland from around the world. It is estimated that more than £1.5 million was raised, with £856,500 coming from outside of Ireland. Both religious and non-religious organizations contributed, with Great Britian and the United States of America being the top two contributors. Donations came in from countries as far away as Venezuela, South America, Mexico and Australia.

The *Phytophthora infestans* pathogen is still at work today and is considered the plant pathogen with the greatest impact on humanity. Potato late blight still "remains a major threat to food security and carries a global cost conservatively estimated at more

than $6 billion per year," according to *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS).[1]

The effects of Ireland's "Great Hunger" continue as the Irish Potato Famine forever changed the country's demographic, political, and cultural landscape to this day.

–Dawn Michelle Michals is the pen name of Chelle Morton Nering, a freelance writer and social media specialist living in Waco, TX. She is an award-winning reporter for Hunger News & Hope *and serves on the HNH editorial team. Our readers will have also seen her work under the name Chelle Samaniego.*

Endnote

1. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* is a peer-reviewed journal. (www.pnas.org)

Sources: "The Irish potato famine pathogen *Phytophthora infestans* originated in central Mexico rather than the Andes," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (www.pnas.org); This Great Calamity by Christine Kinealy (1994); The Irish Potato Famine by Joseph R. O'Neill (2009); Humanitarianism in the Modern World, Cambridge University Press (2020).

Potato,

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contribution as an invaluable food resource and as a generator of income for rural families and producers."

So, the next time you look at that loaded baked potato on your dinner plate, maybe you'll see it in a whole new light. With recent discoveries and innovative research practices, this lowly root vegetable is not only delicious, it has now become a life saver.

–See Dawn Michelle Michals' bio above.

Endnotes

1. United Nations General Assembly (www.un.org), Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), www.fao.org.
2. Kew Gardens (Royal Botanic Gardens), London, kew.org.
3. "All Hail the Noble Potato," Devex newswire, May 30, 2024.
4. Centro Internacional de la Papa (CIP).
5. Embrapa Cenargan, Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), Brasilia, Brazil, www.gbif.org.
6. https://alliancebiodiversityciat.org
7. CIP.
8. According to CIP, the International Potato Center (https://cipotato.org) is one of 13 non-profit research centers and alliances that constitute CGIAR (https://cgiar.org), the world's largest agricultural research for development organization. CGIAR works with more than 3,000 partners in nearly 90 countries around the world. Those 13 centers are home to more than 9,000 scientists, development professionals and other staff. Together, they are working to transform food, land and water systems through three "Action Areas": 1) Systems Transformation, 2) Resilient Agrifood Systems; and 3) Genetic Innovation. CGIAR is thereby catalyzing improvements in five "Impact Areas": 1) nutrition, health and food security; 2) poverty reduction, livelihoods and jobs; 3) gender equality, youth and social inclusion; 4) climate adaptation and mitigation; and 5) environmental health and biodiversity.
9. CGIAR.
10. Ibid.

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are to everything around us." As the SCRAP Collective builds a community around agriculture, food security, health, and climate change mitigation, not only do they make connections with the Earth, but they build connections between the people who live on it.[18]

–Grace Sincleair, a native of Salado, TX, and a Baylor University Professional Writing student, is the summer 2024 Seeds of Hope editorial intern.

Endnotes

1. Press Release, SCRAP Collective, 20 April 2023.
2. Kourtney David, "Regenerative agriculture and compost projects sprout around Waco," *Waco Tribune-Herald,* 22 November 2023.
3. Press Release, 20 April 2023.
4. From author's interview with Emily Hills.
5. Susan Bean Aycock, "Cultivating Change," *Wacoan*, May 2023.
6. "Urban Reap," Mission Waco Mission World, missionwaco.org/urban-reap/.
7. Emily Hills interview.
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10. Emily Hills interview.
11. Kourtney David.
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Three Countries Facing Severe Humanitarian Crisis in 2024

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND—Although people constantly face crises, three countries are currently in the midst of extreme ones. The data cannot be ignored. According to CARE International, these countries will require extra help from humanitarians around the world.

1. Armed groups in **Sudan** began fighting one another in April 2023. This caused the largest displacement crisis in the world, with more than 6 million people displaced and seeking safety. This includes the 1.2 million people who fled the country, 3 million of whom are children. Some 42 percent of the population of Sudan faces severe food insecurity. This displacement crisis is particularly concerning for women and girls, who constantly face abduction and gender-based violence.

2. **Haiti's** current crisis has a heavy impact on its healthcare system. With a cholera outbreak impacting 5 million people, access to medical care is a vital necessity. The country is burdened by political unrest, gang violence (including the murder of aid workers), fuel blockages and power supply issues. These realities keep vulnerable populations from accessing the healthcare they need. Specifically, they cause barriers to affording medical care and receiving the transportation necessary for people to get to treatment centers. Additionally, 38 percent of the population lives in a food crisis, and 195,000 people are displaced internally.

3. The **Democratic Republic of the Congo's** (DRC) humanitarian crisis is multi-layered. As a result of battles over natural resources, land and influence, more than 6 million people are displaced and others are left in vulnerable positions. The DRC also has refugees from other countries and has been hit by numerous recent epidemics. As a result, the DRC is a highly dangerous place. A specific concern in the DRC is maternal healthcare. Many people cannot access the care they need, causing high infant and maternal mortality rates. Women also face gender-based violence that places their health and safety in a precarious position.

Source: CARE Staff, "Three humanitarian crises you should know about in 2024," CARE, December 29, 2023.

Spending for Humanitarian Aid Struggles to Match the Pace of Crisis

ROME, ITALY—In 2023, the humanitarian sector, specifically of the United Nations, struggled to meet the needs of people around the world. The UN's plans required $56.7 billion to complete, but they only received $19.9 billion in donations, a mere 35 percent of the cost. This was such a large gap that UN Secretary-General António Guterres called 2023 "the worst funding shortfall for humanitarian operations in years."

However, the problem was not that there was a drastic drop in funding. In fact, with the exception of 2022, more money was spent on providing humanitarian aid than any prior year. Instead, there was such a large increase in humanitarian need that humanitarian aid groups like the UN simply could not keep up.

These needs arise from several areas. First, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to linger and hurt economies around the world. Secondly, an increase in war and conflicts increased inflation and economic instability. Finally, climate change continues to cause more disasters; the UN Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) stated that climate change-related disasters are almost three times as common today as they were a decade ago.

However, there are a few other factors to consider alongside the data. First, this data does not include humanitarian aid spending outside of the United Nations. Additionally, these numbers were compiled before the conclusion of 2023, meaning that some funds were not counted at the time the data was published.

Despite the large number of dollars spent for humanitarian aid in 2023, it was still a drop from the amount of money spent in 2022. There are also some concrete reasons for this. One reason is that the United Nations asked for more money than previously, and that money is often difficult for nations to give. Cuts in humanitarian aid funding were seen across several countries, including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and other European nations. Furthermore, humanitarian aid frequently gets entangled with political issues, making it hard to send money with any speed or agreement. Domestic issues also keep nations from sending money out to countries in need.

2024 may also be a year of struggle for humanitarian causes. As of February 2024, total humanitarian aid funds were 35 percent lower than they were in February 2023. Similarly, February 2024 Global Humanitarian Overview funds are 30 percent lower than February 2023. Several specific programs face a decrease in funding as well.

Despite this, there is still hope. The overall amount of money needed for worldwide humanitarian causes fell to $46.4 billion for 2024, a $10.3 billion drop from 2023. There is also the potential that the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may decrease as time goes on. For now, humanitarian aid groups must work to match the pace of the global humanitarian crisis.

—Compiled by Grace Sincleair. Sources: David Ainsworth, "Why was 2023 such a bad year for humanitarian spending?," Devex Newswire, December 14, 2023. "Global Humanitarian Overview 2024, February Update (Snapshot as of February 29, 2024)." Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 11, 2024.

Wheat Production & the Russo-Ukrainian War

BOSTON, MA—In October 2023, the success of the wheat industry was surprisingly high in both Russia and Ukraine. Russia saw a 20 percent increase in wheat harvest from the 2022/2023 year. Ukraine was able to match 2022/2023's wheat production level in spite of the impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Black Sea wheat exports were predicted to reach record highs in the 2023/2024 year. This prediction proved to be accurate, and records were once again reached. Russia exported 53.5 billion metric tons of wheat, and Ukraine exported 17.5 billion metric tons.

However, both Russia and Ukraine are predicted to face a drop in wheat production in the 2024/2025 year. Russia will still be the top wheat producer in the world, but its exports are forecasted to drop 1.5 million metric tons. Ukraine is predicted to see a larger drop in exports of 3.5 billion metric tons.

The Russo-Ukrainian war also caused problems outside of the wheat industry that will impact the food security and economic security of many Ukrainians. Typically, Ukraine is the world's largest producer of sunflower oil and meal. It also exports a large quantity of corn. However, due to a lack of electric power, Ukraine cannot process the sunflower seeds to make the oil or meal. Other farmers have left the corn industry to produce sunflowers, which is a lower-value crop.

In addition, in July 2023, Russia withdrew from a deal in which Ukraine was permitted to export grain using the Black Sea. This caused Ukraine to look for new ways to trade, and farmers are finding that they

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Manfred Richter

cannot export their products. Farmers are also struggling to afford the supplies they need to farm, such as seeds and fertilizers. Thus, despite what seemed to be profitable beginnings, Ukraine may face challenging times regarding wheat production.

—Sources: Laurent Belsie, "How world averted a grain shortage," The Christian Science Monitor Daily, *October 12, 2023. "Grain: World Markets and Trade," United States Department of Agriculture, May 2024.*

Climate-Change Resilient Coffee Plants Keep Farmers Afloat During Hot, Dry Times

ZIROBWE, UGANDA—Most of the coffee people drink comes in two varieties: Arabica and robusta. The problem is that climate change puts these two varieties at risk. They are unable to stand up against heat, drought and pests.

However, coffee growers in Uganda, one of the world's largest coffee exporters, are relying more on a native variety of coffee, called Liberica excelsa, that can withstand these things. Farmers grew it in small amounts previously, and it was mixed in with robusta when sold. However, with climate change increasingly becoming a problem, many farmers are looking to make Liberica excelsa their main crop.

In addition to being climate-change resistant, Liberica excelsa may be able to bring in higher profits for farmers than robusta. It is of a higher quality, has a heavier aroma, and is lower in caffeine than robusta—and thus it can be sold for higher prices. The beans also make tasty coffee. Dr. Aaron Davis, coffee scientist from the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew, England, stated that the coffee from Liberica excelsa beans was "smooth," "very soft," and "easy drinking." Liberica excelsa is an excellent choice to keep people caffeinated and keep farmers financially stable in a world that is warming up.

–Source: Somini Segupta, "What climate change could mean for the coffee you drink: As global warming threatens the two main varieties, coffee growers in Uganda are betting on a type that can stand up to heat, drought, and pests," The New York Times, *April 28, 2023.*

Above: A farmer picks coffee beans from a tree.

Biden's Two New Immigration Policies

WASHINGTON, DC and EAGLE PASS, TX–On June 4, US President Joe Biden passed an executive order to limit the number of migrants crossing the Texas-Mexico border. This order was to take effect the next day. The order would mostly suspend entry into the country, except for permanent US citizens and unaccompanied children. The limitations will be lifted if the average of migrant encounters at official ports is less than 1,500 for seven days in a row. They will be put back in place if this average reaches 2,500.

The policy received mixed reactions from officials of both political parties, all levels of government, and the many migrant-related organizations in Texas. While some see glimmers of hope in the executive order, most find problems with Biden's method or his timing, and see the potential for serious negative consequences as a result.

Those in favor of migrant rights and advocacy quickly showed their distaste for the order. They do not want to cause more difficulties for those who have fled terror and made the dangerous journey north. The legal immigration process is already challenging, and some asylum-seekers have to wait more than eight months to get a required appointment with US officials. Additionally, some claim that the executive order degrades the dignity of the people seeing asylum.

Another complaint is how this policy is implemented just a few months before election season. Some government officials see it as a political move rather than real concern for any of the people involved. They wonder why Biden did not enforce any laws regarding immigration earlier in his term.

Some, however, view the policy in a more positive light. For example, US Representative Colin Allred believes that it could relieve the communities along the border of what they have been going through. Others feel hopeful that something is being done about the

Getty Images

border crisis. However, most believe that this is not the time or the way to solve the problems in South Texas.

On June 18, President Biden announced a second immigration policy. This policy will make citizenship easier to attain for some unauthorized immigrants.

Under the current immigration system, unauthorized immigrants face the possibility of being forced to leave the country for an indefinite period while they work to attain citizenship. This is simply not an option for many married unauthorized immigrants. However, "noncitizen spouses" make up less than five percent of the unauthorized immigrant population, so it would have a limited effect.

This new system will have the form of "parole in place." Parole is an alternative way for immigrants to enter the United States; they receive temporary permission to stay in the country. Under parole in place, unauthorized immigrants who married US citizens and have lived in the United States for at least ten years with no national security concerns or criminal records would have an easier time gaining their citizenship. They would also be allowed to work in the United States for three years and have deportation protection after being approved by the Department of Homeland Security. After five years, those with green cards can apply for citizenship. This process is expected to begin this summer.

American response to the newest policy is also divided along party lines. Some believe it will be a great solution to keep families together and help the people who have been contributing to American society without being official, legal citizens. However, others worry about national security and that this kind of policy will encourage more and more people to come to the US illegally. Others also see it as a political move to gain favor before the coming election. Although this is the second of Biden's two immigration policies in the same month, until this point he has not been very focused on the issue. People wonder why he is suddenly making these changes.

This policy will not be the absolute solution to immigration for these people. They will still have to go through a long process. However, it gives them a boost to achieving legal status and will free them from the fear of being forced to leave.

—Sources: For the June 4 announcement: Alejandro Serrano and Matthew Choi, "'Why now?':Biden's new immigration policy to limit asylum seekers faces quick criticism in Texas," The Texas Tribune, *June 4. For the June 18 announcement: Sarah Matusek and Caitlin Babcock, "Biden's immigration announcement explained in three questions,"* The Christian Science Monitor Daily, *June 18.*

One Hundred Years of Native American Citizenship, but Many More Years of Hardship

DALLAS, TX—This June 2 marks 100 years since Native Americans were officially granted American citizenship. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 states:

> *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States be, and they are hereby, declared to be citizens of the United States: Provided, That the granting of such citizenship shall not in any manner impair or otherwise affect the right of any Indian to tribal or other property.*

Some Native Americans today feel frustrated and saddened by the 100th anniversary of this act, because it reminds them of all that they endured at the hands of white Americans and the battles they continue to fight in modern American society. 1924 is not that long

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ago; it took a very long time for the United States to recognize Native Americans as citizens. Prior to the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, there were some ways that Native Americans could become American citizens, but this did not really solve the conflict between Native Americans and white Americans. Furthermore, this act did not grant all rights of citizenship, such as voting. These were not settled for another 40 years. To this day, Native Americans struggle with voting rights. While this act is worth celebrating, it is also important to remember the difficulties that lay behind it.

-Source: Mariah Humphries, "Native history moment—100 years of 'citizenship,'" Fellowship Southwest, *June 6, 2024.*

Study Shows Half of US Military Bases Are in 'Health Care Deserts'

WASHINGTON, DC—A recent Nation Public Radio analysis showed that half of active-duty military installations are within health professional shortage areas (HPSA)—places federally recognized as lacking medical resources and colloquially known as "health care deserts." In these areas it is hard to find primary care, maternity care, mental health care or some combination of the three. Overall, one-third of United States military personnel and their families are located in some form of a health care desert. This is especially problematic because, unlike civilians, military families have no choice of where they live.

In the past, US troops and their families were given quality health insurance called Tricare. However, downsizing occurred—and too much of it, according to the Pentagon. Now, when asked to find health care centers away from military bases, people in the military struggle to find hospitals that will take Tricare insurance. Even in areas that are not designated as health care deserts, some hospitals cannot afford to accept it.

The lack of health care and the struggles with insurance could have severe repercussions. First, it will deter people from joining the military or staying in it. Recruitment is already lagging, and families do not want to be put in places where they cannot find health care. Secondly, the poor health care and insurance options may cause US Troops to be less fit and healthy, which could be costly in the event of war. Additionally, there could be fewer doctors, nurses and battlefield medics trained for combat situations.

–Source: Quil Lawrence and Brent Jones, "Half of US military bases in the country are in 'health care deserts,'" National Public Radio, *June 17, 2024.*

Sophia Theological Seminary and Sophia Farms Find Success in Building Relationships

CHARLOTTE, NC—The people behind Sophia Theological Seminary and Sophia Farms want to change the definition of success in the Church and in agriculture. The basic concept is that students at the seminary will also work at the farm to produce revenue for the seminary. However, the values behind this method delve much deeper.

Traditionally, success in these areas is measured in numbers—how many pounds of food did you produce? How many people are sitting in the pews on Sunday morning? However, numbers do not mean much when mass-produced food lacks nutrition and flavor. When people have a bad aftertaste from an experience with an antagonistic Christian, the number of people attending Church does not make much difference. If Christians do not stop and do anything to help the immigrants who harvest the crops for poor pay, then what is the point of drawing people to a worship service? Sophia Theological Seminary and Sophia Farms asked these questions and wanted to make a change.

Sophia Farms hopes to teach people to develop relationships with the earth, rather than just exploiting it to produce the highest yield. Sophia Theological Seminary hopes to reverse the negative effects of the Church seeking power and restore nurturing relationships between people. The journey towards this change will likely be challenging; however, it is needed to stop the current trajectory of the agriculture business as well as the modern Church.

–Source: Neil Zahradka, "New Frontiers in Theological Education," Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, *June 4, 2024.*

Newsfront entries were compiled by Grace Sincleair, a native of Salado, TX, and a Baylor University Professional Writing student. Grace is the summer 2024 Seeds of Hope intern.

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What We Do While We're Waiting for the World to Change:

A Review of Rough Sleepers

by Charley Garrison

Rough Sleepers:
Dr. Jim O'Connell's Urgent Mission to Bring Healing to Homeless People
by Tracy Kidder
2023, Random House, 299 pages

This book, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder, is more than just a biography; it's an inspiration. In today's chaotic news environment littered with reports of street violence, political corruption and oppression of marginalized populations, it's nice to know there are still heroes in this world working to make it a better place in which to live—people who make us want to do the same.

Is Dr. Jim O'Connell a saint with a heart for the unlovable discards of society? Or is he just someone with really lousy personal boundaries? Or maybe a little of both? Readers will have to decide for themselves after reading his story.

For 40 years, Dr. O'Connell has served the homeless population of Boston, with a focus on "rough sleepers," the folks who live outdoors, sometimes sleeping on park benches, sometimes under bridges, sometimes in alleys—anywhere they can find shelter.

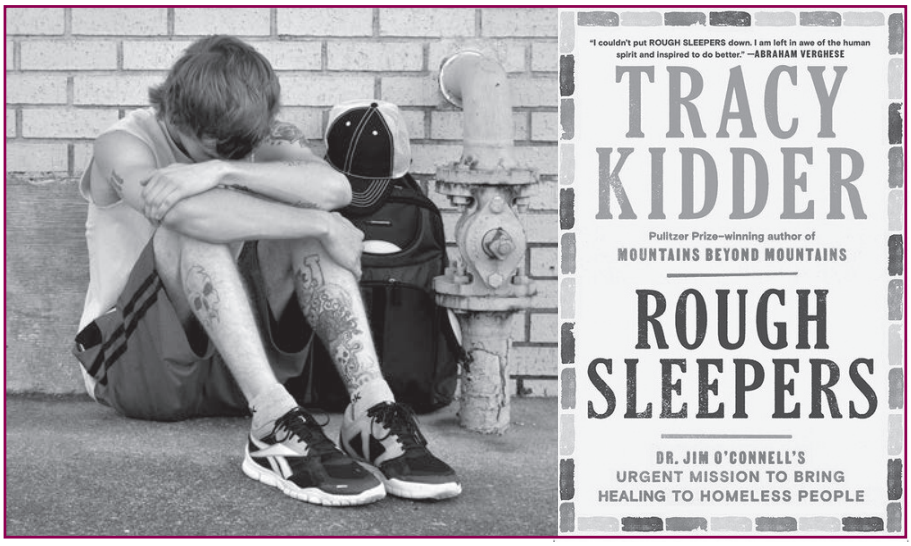

Photo by LeAnne Kerr

Riding through Boston in a van at nighttime, Dr. O'Connell and his team check up on these people, dispensing sandwiches, hot chocolate, blankets, socks and underwear. O'Connell has developed a trust relationship with the unhoused community, built on compassion and respect that allows him to examine the patients on the street, maybe dispense minor medicine, and—if needed and they are agreeable—transport them to hospital emergency rooms or homeless shelters.

Is Dr. Jim O'Connell a saint with a heart for the unlovable discards of society? Or is he just someone with really lousy personal boundaries? Or maybe a little of both?

Serving as a street doctor to rough sleepers wasn't what O'Connell had always dreamed of, however. "I didn't pick it," he says, "but I lucked into the best job I can imagine." In 1985, O'Connell's work began in an outreach van. And although that has evolved into the Boston Healthcare for the Homeless, providing health care to thousands of homeless and formerly homeless people, he still regularly goes out in the van.

The reader is introduced to the shockingly high death rate of rough sleepers (*eight* times higher than other homeless people of the same age group), as well as the complexity of the problem of homelessness due to weaknesses in the sectors of our infrastructure that include the health care system, the housing system, the welfare system, the educational system, the legal system and the corrections system.

But what makes this book important are the stories of people. There is the story of O'Connell's mentor, Barbara McInnis, a lay Franciscan who taught him how to put away his stethoscope, listen to patients and soak their feet. And the reader is introduced to team members, like Becki Tachick, the case manager "adept with paperwork and patients;" to the recovery coach Mike Jellison, former drug addict and alcoholic; and to Kevin Sullivan, the team's younger doctor.

The reader is also offered portraits of some of the rough sleepers: to John Cotrone, to BJ, to Elizabeth, to former professors Harrison and David, and to the seemingly indomitable character of Tony Colombo, an ex-convict with a personality as large as his physical frame. A mountain of a man, Tony acted as a protector of the weaker members of the rough sleeper community and a mediator when fights broke out among them.

So is Dr. O'Connell's work a job or is it a calling? When Tony asked him about his belief in God "because there's no way you're doing all this and you don't believe in God," Dr. O'Connell's response was typically humble in his belief that he isn't on an errand from God, but has found "meaning and even joy in his job because of the people that both he and Tony tried to help." For O'Connell, when he tried to sit with Tony and others and to deal with the bad things that happened to everyone all the time, it created "a large group of friends."

What the author manages to do with this book is put a face to homelessness—something that Dr. O'Connell has been doing for the last 40 years, while working to make their lives better. "This is what we do," he says, "while we wait for the world to change."

–Charley Garrison is the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in Waco, TX. In addition to his writings that have been published in Sacred Seasons *and* Hunger News & Hope*, he has been involved with the Seeds ministry in various ways for many years.*

art by Curtis Cannon

Hunger News & Hope

is published quarterly by Seeds of Hope Publishers, in partnership with the following groups:

• Alliance of Baptists
• Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

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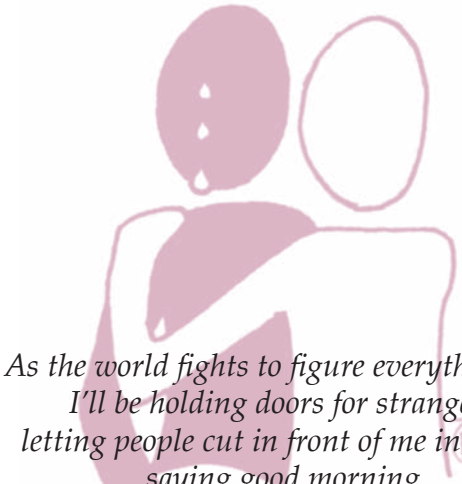

art by Rebecca S. Ward

As the world fights to figure everything out,
I'll be holding doors for strangers,
letting people cut in front of me in traffic,
saying good morning,
keeping babies entertained in grocery lines,
stopping to talk to someone who is lonely,
tipping generously,
waving at police,
sharing food,
giving children a thumbs-up,
being patient with sales clerks,
smiling at passersby,
and buying a stranger a cup of coffee.
WHY? Because I will not stand
to live in a world where love is invisible.
Join me in showing kindness, understanding, and judging less.
Be kind to a stranger,
give grace to friends who are having a bad day,
be forgiving with yourself.
If you can't find kindness, BE kindness.
–Lorraine DiDio

Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry people in God's world, and acting on the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. The group seeks out people of faith who feel called to care for poor and vulnerable people; and to affirm, enable and empower a variety of responses to the problems of poverty.

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ISSN 0194-4495. Seeds of Hope, Inc., holds the 501(c)3 nonprofit tax status.

Seeds also produces *Sacred Seasons*, a series of worship materials for Advent, Lent and an annual Hunger Emphasis—with an attitude "toward justice, peace and food security for all of God's children." These include litanies, sermons, children's and youth activities, bulletin art and drama.