

From the Executive Director Where Our Story Begins

Does anyone else find it challenging to find the “right” words when reflecting on a major milestone – like when toasting a couple on their anniversary or thanking people for coming to your birthday party? I suspect many of us struggle with the same issue: Trying to keep it short and sweet, yet wanting to cover every meaningful memory, to tell all the great stories, and to thoughtfully acknowledge every person in the room.

I’m feeling a bit that way today, as I consider how to welcome all of you to Room In The Inn’s 40th year. How do I adequately capture all that we’re grateful for here? How can I articulate all there is to look forward to? How will I decide which stories to keep and which to tell?

Well, that’s where I’m reminded and humbled, thankfully, that it’s not about me. Collectively, we are the keeper of the stories.

As we’re reminded when we pick up Charlie’s memoir, *The Kingdom of the Poor* (out in paperback soon!), we ALL have a story. We all have the capacity for good and something to contribute. From day one, this perspective has meant that the invitation to Room In The Inn has been open to all. Our doors swing wide open for guests and volunteers with no prerequisites.

We have a lot of ways of describing this inclusive community. Over the course of 40 years, we’ve talked about the “power of one,” reminded people “do you know how good you are?” and, of course, proclaimed “love your neighbor, y’all” every chance we could. No matter how you’re called in—what invitation you respond to or what keeps you connected to our community—once we know you, you are in: The Inn Crowd.

This issue of our seasonal newsletter beautifully reminds us of Room In The Inn’s origins, and it’s a moving collection of memories and stories from the past 40 years. And truly, this is just a sampling!

The stories of winter shelter, of dayroom hospitality, of creative expression, of life-saving connections, and life-giving communion meals: they are as numerous and unique as the individuals who broken bread, literally and figuratively, together over the past 40 years.

There’s a brief invitation within this newsletter inviting readers—you!—to share your stories. We want to hear from you. And as always, there are



no prerequisites. Whether you’ve known us for one day or thousands, we value you and your story. And, with your permission, we intend to share stories via our social media and website over the coming months. Just as readers of Charlie’s memoir have been grateful for and moved by his storytelling, there are many more stories just as worthy. We want to hear yours; we believe Charlie would, too.

In this issue and throughout the year ahead, you’ll hear the stories that are our foundation – from our origin and early days, through decades of opportunity and challenge, growth and collaboration with the larger Nashville community. Today, we are as committed as ever to loving our neighbors and welcoming more people in. We are grateful that we can continue to be a part of shaping and sharing life stories, and we look forward to all the new beginnings yet to come.

Rachel Hester

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Nashville, TN
Permit No. 4717

Campus for Human Development
P.O. Box 25309
Nashville, TN 37202-5309

The First Night

Forty winters ago, Room In The Inn started with just a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Read below as our founding director Charles Strobel recounts the story of that first night of hospitality, which changed his life forever and became the beginning of Room In The Inn.

FROM THE KINGDOM OF THE POOR:

BY THE WINTER OF 1985, I had been the pastor of Holy Name for eight years and was hoping for many more. In 1983, my propensity to pass out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches had morphed into Holy Name’s Loaves and Fishes Community Meal. I was also working with houses of worship of all denominations throughout East Nashville, an outgrowth of my interest in ecumenism, to take care of the most destitute among our congregations.

But one night changed everything. As I looked out my second-story bedroom window in the rectory, which was beside the church, I saw a disturbing scene. A number of cars were parked in the church parking lot, and I could tell people were bedding down in them even as the temperature was dropping below freezing.

I was compelled to do something. I went down and invited everyone inside to spend the night in our church cafeteria.

I didn’t think too long about it, probably because I knew I would talk myself out of it. As the pastor, I knew the consequences of such a decision were far greater than simply giving a dozen men one night’s lodging. What would I do the next night when they returned? And the next night and the next night and the next? One simple decision could become a lifetime commitment. And did I even have the right to do it? What would the parishioners say? Or the bishop? Or the neighbors?

Yet I decided it was the only thing to do. Like Scarlett O’Hara, I found myself saying, “I’ll worry about that tomorrow.”

What was on my mind in the moment was more critical. Before my very eyes were people at risk of freezing to death. It made a difference that they were just outside, underneath my window. There were others down the street on the riverbanks, in the city’s vacated buildings, or hovering over the sidewalk grates, but I could not see them. Somehow, it’s different when suffering people aren’t right before us. It’s easier to think they’re someone else’s problem. But that night these human beings were no one’s problem but mine.



TOP: Father Charles at Holy Name Catholic Church in East Nashville, where he was pastor from 1977 to 1987.
MIDDLE: View from the rectory at Holy Name Catholic Church, where Charlie invited the first guests to spend the night in the church cafeteria.
BOTTOM: Holy Name parishioners serving guests during the winter of 1985-1986.



Room In The Inn has grown from humble beginnings to a full campus filled with opportunities for connection and human development.
TOP: The first stand-alone Room In The Inn location in downtown Nashville, taken in 1995.
BOTTOM: Our current Room In The Inn campus in downtown Nashville, built in 2010.

I had room and I invited them in. And they stayed the winter. They also brought others with them. And we just took every day as it came. To use Mama’s expression, which I found myself doing all the time, we “put the big pot in the little pot!”

Within a week, other groups began to help. A friend from the Salvation Army arranged for cots, blankets, and some staff; a number of church groups from around East Nashville brought in food every evening; and some of our parishioners began helping regularly.

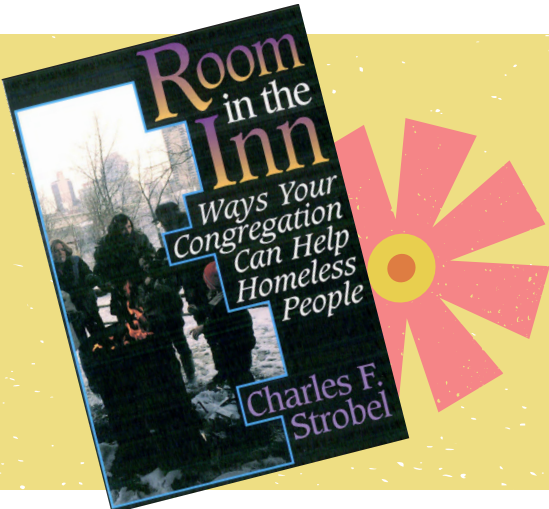
By the spring of 1986, there were enough people involved in Holy Name’s “shelter” to keep it running year-round.

Those last months of 1985 into the first months of 1986, we helped a small number of unhoused people each night in East Nashville. Still, huge crowds remained out in the cold across the city. It occurred to me that if additional churches were to open their doors in a collaborative effort, we could have a much bigger impact. Nashville is known as “the city of steeples.” We had the capacity if we joined together in offering hospitality. Just as we had done at Holy Name, each house of worship could create, within its own facility, a small shelter for twelve to fifteen people. By doing so, congregations would be putting into practice the words they preached.

It seemed like a workable idea and a simple one at that. It would be cost effective and yet could have a lasting impact on the lives of so many. I imagined what would happen if people of faith put their minds and hearts into it. Maybe some of the people they served would even be able to get off the streets permanently.

Thus began Room In The Inn.

If you or someone you know wants some more tangible advice for how to love the neighbors experiencing homelessness in your city, check out Charles Strobel’s first book at our website: roomintheinn.org/shop. Featured on the cover is Michael “Bear” Hodges, who was among those first guests that freezing cold night in 1985.



And More People Joined In

“We’re not asking congregations to share the burden, we’re asking them to share the blessing.”

- JIM OLIVE, ROOM IN THE INN’S FIRST BOARD PRESIDENT

Charlie knew that if he could just offer what he had—an empty building and some peanut butter sandwiches—and shelter his neighbors through the winter, surely others could do the same. Four congregations came together in the winter of 1986, and by March of the next year, 31 were helping to shelter their neighbors.

The beginning looks different for everyone. Deby Samuels, one of our longtime volunteers and second board president, said of those early days, “Room In The Inn wasn’t appreciated by everyone.” But for those who were looking for ways to help, she said the program made it easy:

It was interesting how Room In The Inn opened doors to people who didn’t know how to impact homelessness, and now this gave them the way. If you were not real comfortable going out on the streets and meeting people, you were very comfortable

coming to your own congregation, fixing food, being hospitable, and offering your heart to people.

Shortly after Charlie started welcoming individuals into Holy Name for the night, Deby heard about Room In The Inn from a colleague and led the charge to get her congregation involved.

I was so impressed with the way Room In The Inn brought things together in Nashville. I think Room In The Inn was the first, and maybe the only at that point, group where people of different faith backgrounds came together for something. They didn’t sit there and talk about whether we’re going to pray this way, or do music that way – they just came together and said we’re going to take care of people.

Deby served at her congregation as an INNkeeper – staying the night with unhoused guests. She reflected on her first night:

I do remember from that first year, that first night I stayed over. It’s a little bit noisy, it smells different from your own bedroom, and you can’t sleep. But I remember walking into my house after—this memory is so strong—walking into my house and

smelling the sweet smell of lemon oil polish, and the contrast between scents. It stayed with me. In fact, I even went back and did a little bit of a study in Scripture about when we mention scent and how scent is part of spirituality—from incense, from putting perfume on Jesus’ feet—and it gave me chills. I still remember that.

How did you first get involved with Room In The Inn? What was your first experience like? Whether offering or seeking shelter, the first night can be exciting and challenging. As we reflect on 40 years of Room In The Inn, we invite you to be part of the INN Crowd Archive! Share your stories and photos with us by emailing volunteer@roomintheinn.org.

Room In The Inn worked in ways perhaps no one anticipated. One longtime volunteer from The Temple shared this in the winter of 1987:

"The Harpeth Hills Church of Christ will take the homeless that were to stay at the Temple tonight, which is the last night of our Hanukkah celebration. We will take them on Thursday night, Christmas Eve, which was the Harpeth Hills night so the Harpeth Hills people can stay home with their families."

- PHYLLIS FRANK, VOLUNTEER

Shelter for homeless is urgently needed

To the Editor:

This is an urgent call to every member of Nashville's 850 churches and synagogues.

Winter is here. It is cold now. Freezing. Programs promised last spring to shelter homeless people during cold weather have not been delivered by the committees involved. We have to punt. Again.

A few organizations and individuals are scurrying about to shelter men, women and children. The problem is serious. Each year, fingers and toes are lost to frostbite. Fragile bodies become inflamed with fever and are weakened by exposure.

Being cold is unpleasant. Ask any minister or rabbi. They recall the scowls and complaints on those mornings when a malfunctioning heating system leaves sanctuaries without heat. Our spirit seldom warms to worship in the cold. Sleeping in the cold can remove the spirit altogether.

This is not to suggest that Nashville's congregations are uncaring. People do care, but many may believe that the city's 1,200 homeless people are being adequately cared for by the handful of shelters now in operation. That is not the case.

You are needed. Our city must have more emergency shelters, now. Your commitment to establish a shelter in your church would require space for 20

Letters to The Editor

to 30 people, some organization, a few rules, and about five volunteers.

As you consider the possibility, there are some misconceptions to dispel:

1. Shelters are not brothels. You set your own rules. Men and women sleep separately. Children are supervised.

2. Guests are not unruly. People who have been on their feet all day do not want to stay up all night. They want to sleep. Morning comes at 5:30 a.m.

3. Shelters are not barrooms. No alcohol, drugs or even smoking are permitted.

4. Shelters do not take up needed space. Church buildings are among the most unused spaces in our city between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. Disease is not rampant. The common cold and other weather-related illnesses are present, yes. But hospitals are full of people who are more seriously ill, and every church seeks to visit them.

Several interesting and positive things happen when small shelters are created. People are not warehoused. Inspiration and hope are offered. Understanding begins to replace false impressions. You are not alone. Those who have organized and run other shelters are ready to help you.

Time is short. It's cold outside. Call 256-7256 between 9 a.m. and 12 noon, Monday through Friday, Nov. 17 through Nov. 21. We'll help you begin organizing. Immediately.

The Rev. Charles F. Strobel
Pastor
Holy Name Catholic Church

Clean water bill veto 'not such a tragedy'

To the Editor:

You recently published a story, written by Alan Bostick which quoted Sen. Jim Sasser as lamenting the fact that President Ronald Reagan vetoed the clean water bill, thereby depriving Tennessee of some \$17.5 million.

Tennesseans will remember that in order for \$17.5 million to be "returned" to Tennessee, approximately \$35 million in taxes must first be extracted from the pockets of Tennesseans, sent to Washington, and filtered through the hands of federal bureaucrats who skim off at least 50%.

Remembering these hard facts of life, perhaps Tennessee taxpayers will find the President's veto to be not such a tragedy after all.

Thomas L. Cummings Jr.
P. O. Box 23194 37202



LEFT: The late Jim Olive was President of Room In The Inn's first Board of Directors. He volunteered for the winter shelter program with Jackson Park Church of Christ. He is pictured here speaking at the ribbon cutting of our building in 2010.

RIGHT: Deby Samuels (pictured at right) was on the original Steering Committee of Room In The Inn and has been a member of our community ever since - serving as Board President, as a volunteer in the Winter Shelter program, in our Foot Clinic, and with our annual More Than a Toy program. We are so grateful that she got involved all those years ago.



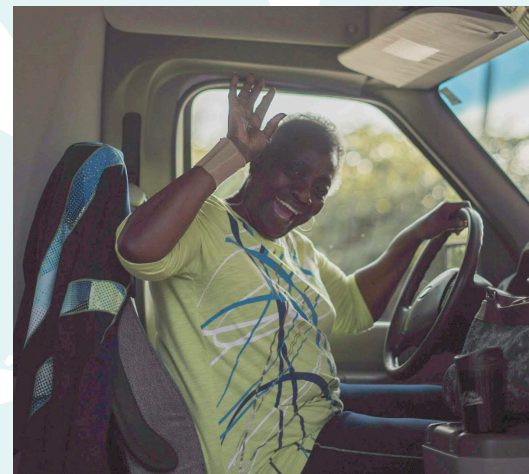
TOP: Charles Strobel wrote this letter to the editor in the winter of 1986 urging more congregations to join the fold.

LEFT: Room In The Inn's first staff: Tommy Hester, Madeleine DeMoss, and Sister Andrea Vaughan, D.C.

RIGHT: This photo is from our Executive Director Rachel Hester's very first week as a member of the staff, a couple years after she began volunteering in 1989.



And We Continued to Grow



"Room In The Inn may be safe and warm, clean and quiet, dependable and secure. But most importantly, it is loving hospitality - found in the sharing, the laughter, the tears, the memories, the hopes, and all those of the moments that bring us into communion with each other and with God."

- CHARLIE STROBEL, ROOM IN THE INN FOUNDER



"Hospitality is really an old Jewish idea. The peddler passing through the Eastern European shtetl was asked to spend the Sabbath. At Passover, we state, 'Let all who are hungry come and eat,' in inviting guests to our Seder table. Job, it is said, built his house with four doors, one on each side, so that the poor would not be troubled to go all around the house to enter. And, of course, we can go back 5,000 years to Abraham, our patriarch, who invited strangers into his tent and waited on them as they ate.

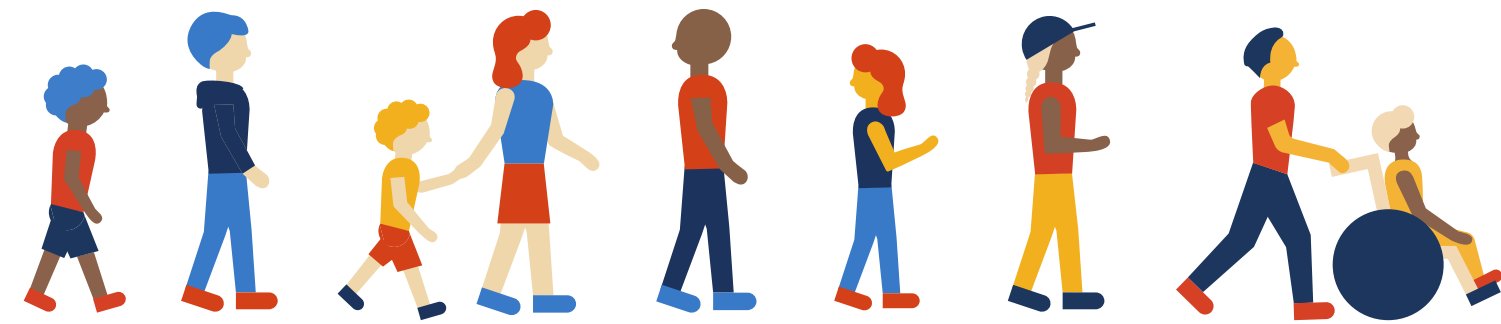
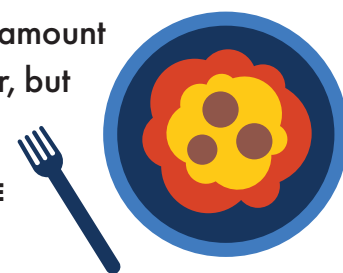
How fitting, then, that Jewish congregations participate in a program to shelter the homeless, to provide a little hospitality. Maybe once in a while we can think of 'Room in the Inn,' with the obvious Christian connotation the name carries, as 'Room in the Tent,' and think of Abraham."

- RHONDA CASS ROTH, QUOTED IN THE NASHVILLE BANNER, NOVEMBER 3, 1987



"I've seen the program do a tremendous amount of good, not only for the guests we shelter, but for the host congregations as well."

- JIM OLIVE, QUOTED IN THE NASHVILLE BANNER, SEPTEMBER 28, 1987



"When we turn out the lights and we leave, to see them sleeping peacefully is the most wonderful feeling."

- MARY, VOLUNTEER AT CATHEDRAL OF THE INCARNATION, PICTURED ABOVE

"It saved me... Many cold nights I was on that street. If it wasn't for Winter Shelter, I probably wouldn't even be here right now." "At my age, I didn't know what kindness means, you know, the real meaning of kindness. But I've been in churches that, these people make me feel like family. It's so beautiful... At Room In The Inn, I can say there's hope."

- VARIOUS ROOM IN THE INN COMMUNITY MEMBERS

"...When you get down to it, it's us. It's not us and them. It's we—together... Your goal for this is to help one person for one night, one time, one meal, one conversation... to provide this quality care and quality experience for people."

- SARAH WILLIAMS, CO-COORDINATED SHELTER AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY IN THE 2018-19 SEASON & WORKED ON THE ROOM IN THE INN STAFF FOR SEVERAL YEARS



Together with your partnership and generosity, we have made all this and more possible in our Winter Shelter program over the past 40 years:

Over **950,000 beds** provided

Over **1.9 million meals** shared

Hundreds of congregations sheltering their neighbors

Thousands of neighbors impacted, both housed and unhoused

Countless moments of growth, discovery, and connection

If you would like to join in for our 40th winter season, reach out at shelter@roomintheinn.org.

Beginnings for Others, Too

The powerful simplicity of offering hospitality to our neighbors is a concept that spreads far beyond Nashville! Read below the story of Rev. Lisa Anderson, who was inspired by Charles Strobel and Room In The Inn's programming in Nashville and created Room In The Inn-Memphis, which now partners with more than 50 congregations throughout Memphis.

I became part of a little rag-tag congregation in Memphis looking for ways to offer hospitality to people who didn't have a place to sleep. In our city, we learned that there were places for shelter that charged people money to sleep. They could not go there unless they had their six dollars or their ten dollars, and there were very few places for women and children who were unsheltered, and we started looking for ways that we could impact that. I just said, I know a guy that has this modeled in Nashville, and they just let people sleep in churches. My congregation did not even ask me another question. They said, "Well, we can do that." So we did. For three years, one night a week, we would bring people into our church.

Then we started noticing that other people were noticing what we were doing and wanted to be part of that. I decided I should



Lisa Anderson (third from right) visiting Nashville's Room In the Inn in 2017 with team members from Room In The Inn - Memphis.

probably go back and see those people in Nashville again. So we made a trip, sat with Charlie and Rachel, and experienced this hospitality and generosity of how to be in this kind of relationship with people and how to do that in an organized way... a way that offers other people the ability to be part of what we know is right, and what we want to do, and how we live out our faith in the congregations. Charlie came to Memphis twice and talked to groups of people about what it would look like for Memphis to do this.

The last time that he was here to talk to a group, we walked to the parking lot to his car afterwards and it was just the two of us. He put a hand on each one of my shoulders, and he said, **"Lisa, don't start this unless you're going to do it the rest of your life."** And that's the sentence that I have always remembered because what he was saying to me was what happened to him. That once you begin in these relationships, once you begin this kind of ministry, it is your life – everything that you do, the air you breathe, the songs you listen to, the people that you love.

Now, we have a campus that has recuperative care. We also have a family shelter because that is a critical need for us in Memphis. And then dozens of congregations from all of those different denominations that can't agree on which side of the street to build a church, but Room In The Inn is non-negotiable. We all do Room In The Inn, and we all do it the same way. So that's what Charlie taught me. It's been the best part of my life for sure.

