

"The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him." - Luke 1: 49-50

THE MAGAZINE
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OUR LADY OF FATIMA

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WINNING

Facing a life-altering challenge, Susie D'Aurora says: "I have peace, even though I don't have all the answers."

THE PRIESTHOOD

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It took a
lifetime, but
**LEROY FINALLY
FOUND A family**

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It took a lifetime, but
LEROY FINALLY
FOUND A family

Vicki and Deacon Steve Washek, along with Leroy Hammond, enjoy a few moments together after supper.



Cover story

Story by Anne-Marie Welsh

Photos by Mark Fainstein

Leroy Hammond will celebrate his 80th birthday in November. No doubt there will be cake, testimonials, cards and gifts. But when the day ends and the revelers have gone their separate ways, Leroy will continue celebrating, quietly, in his heart.

After living in institutions and group homes — and even experiencing what it's like to rent his own apartment — he has, at last, come home to the situation for which he has always yearned.

When Leroy — his friends call him Lee — was born in 1937, doctors could not see beyond the mental and physical challenges he would endure as the result of a brain injury at birth. His parents followed the advice of professionals and placed him in what was then called the Erie Infants Home, mere weeks after he was born. When he aged out of that facility, he went into foster care, and then, at age 5, to Polk State School. That is the last written record of any involvement with his family.

Lee lived at Polk during a time when people believed such care was in the best interest of everyone involved. History records it as an era most would rather forget. Lee, who spent 30 years there, concurs. Suffice it to say, the under-staffed, government-run facility referred to its residents as “inmates.”

But just as God accompanied the Israelites during their 40-year ordeal, he was present to Lee, who made the decision to become Catholic during that time. In 1972, Lee moved to a residence founded by the late Dr. Gertrude Barber, who was



garnering national attention for the new approach she was pioneering in northwest Pennsylvania for people she lovingly described as “exceptional.”

Even as Lee thrived in the new setting, he caught wind of another possibility: the L’Arche Community. Founded in France in 1964 when Jean Vanier invited two men to move out of an asylum and into his home, L’Arche expanded into the United States in 1972. In fact, the first L’Arche in the nation was established in Erie by Father George Strohmeier, who recently retired from Gannon University, and the late Sister Barbara Karsznia.

“What was clear ... from the very

beginning was the aspect of ‘living with’ people who have [intellectual disabilities], a desire to create family with them,” Vanier wrote in his book, *An Ark for the Poor: The Story of L’Arche* (Novalis, 2012). Lee knew this shared life, rooted in spirituality, was for him. It took time and perseverance, but he had enough of both. In 1976, he moved into his first L’Arche home.

While Lee was making strides, two students at Gannon University were about to encounter L’Arche in different ways. Vicki Keller was employed as a work-study student in Father George’s office. Steve Washek was assigned to Father George for academic advising.

One day, as Vicki was helping to prepare for a gathering of eight L’Arche communities from the United States and Canada, Father George extended a simple invitation. Vanier would be speaking that day.

“You should come hear Jean,” he said. Vicki accepted. She enjoys the fact that her real introduction to L’Arche came from its founder. She swipes a joke the Jesuits use, acknowledging that from that moment on, she was “ruined for life.” At the end of her senior year, she moved into a L’Arche house.

Meanwhile, Father George asked Steve if he would consider working at L’Arche as an activity aide.



The Washeks have known Leroy since their earliest experiences with L'Arche. About four years ago, Deacon Steve and Vicki began to think about the possibility of participating in L'Arche's "family living" arrangement, whereby a member moves into the home of an employee.

experience this with my family.”

Soon Steve was spending his Wednesdays at the roller rink or swimming at the YMCA with L'Arche members.

“I was drawn in and I really liked it,” he says. It wasn't long before he not only moved in, but also began taking classes to become Catholic.

Vicki and Steve got to know each other at the gatherings for Mass, lunch and meetings of L'Arche house assistants.

They married in 1983, and began “living out,” as they call it, remaining involved with L'Arche, but residing in their own home. For more than 30 years, as they raised their three children, either Vicki or Steve has been employed by L'Arche in some capacity. Currently, Vicki is the executive director/community leader of L'Arche Erie, while Steve serves as vice national leader of L'Arche USA, traveling to the 17 communities in the United States on a regular basis. In 2004, Steve was ordained to the permanent diaconate.

The Washeks have known Lee since their earliest experiences with L'Arche. About four years ago, Deacon Steve and Vicki had a casual conversation about the possibility of participating in L'Arche's “family living” arrangement, whereby a member moves into the home of an employee.

Just about that time, Lee was becoming unhappy with his living situation. No longer able to live independently due to his age, he had moved to a L'Arche home in Lake City. But he missed being able to participate

in the activities he enjoyed in Erie.

During a phone call with Deacon Steve, Lee broke down in tears.

“It was hard for you,” Vicki says to Lee, who nods as they recount the story. After that conversation, the Washeks decided to consider family living with Lee in mind.

There was paperwork to get through. Their home would need to be made handicap-accessible. There was the reaction of other community members to weigh. But, one by one, each hurdle was cleared.

What was it like the day Lee moved in?

“My family took a picture of me in the driveway when Lee arrived,” Deacon Steve says. “They know I'm kind of particular when it comes to the house, and here was Lee with two pick-up trucks, a moving van and the wheelchair van with him in it. That was an adjustment.”

Deacon Steve, Vicki and Lee do not sugarcoat the realities. There were many logistics to confront in the beginning. Where to park the power chair? How many of Lee's pictures to hang on the walls? How to get rid of mud on the wheelchair when it's rainy outside? As with any family, they have to work through challenges. Almost all of their family gatherings now have to be held at the Washeks' house, due to Lee's accessibility needs. Lee has to be intentional about finding the privacy he needs. Daily life takes more planning.

“If I have an evening activity during the winter, and it's snowing outside,

Steve declined, telling Father George he wouldn't be good “with those people.”

When he ran into a friend and told him what had happened, the friend offered a different perspective.

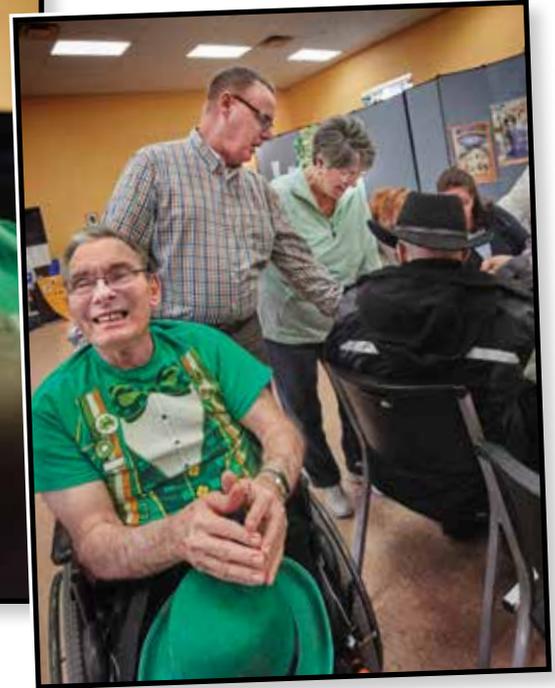
“I heard it's a really cool place,” he told Steve. “Go back and tell him you'll do it!”

Steve took the advice, and signed on for a dinner of “tube steaks” (hotdogs) — followed by a house meeting.

“What I discovered was that people were really honest with each other. They allowed themselves to be vulnerable,” he says. “People talked about slamming doors or feeling hurt, and then they apologized and found reconciliation. I remember thinking, ‘I don't even



Deacon Steve accepts the prayers and blessings of the L'Arche community in Erie as he prepares for a business trip.



Lee always enters into the spirit of the moment, as he did at a St. Patrick's Day gathering for worship and dinner.

I have to factor in a stop at home to clear the driveway so Lee will have access when he's dropped off after volunteering at the hospital," Deacon Steve says.

But the issues pale when compared to the big picture.

"I felt good (when I moved in)," Lee says. "My heart was beating. I was excited. I felt at home."

As they talk over the commitment they've made to each other, Lee, Vicki and Steve clearly enjoy the chance to reminisce. There's a fair amount of cajoling.

(Lee reminds Vicki he won't need a chair when he's in heaven. "I'll be doing the polka up there!" he exclaims. Says Steve: "As long as I don't have to dance it with you!")

"We do laugh a lot. One joy is that it's like having a grandpa living with us," Steve says.

Vicki especially cherishes their nighttime ritual.

"The last thing you say after we help you get into

bed each night is, 'Who are we praying for?'" she says to Lee. "Then you start the list and remember everyone you've promised to pray for. You've strengthened my faith."

Lee's life is full. People at the hospital where he sells newspapers three days a week refer to him as "the mayor." On Tuesdays, he attends the rehearsals of a group of banjo players. He stays in touch with friends through social media. He creates framed artwork with religious icons.

But the difference now is what happens at the end of the day. On any given evening, after supper and coffee, Lee heads to the family room to watch David Muir deliver the evening news on ABC.

In his home.

With his family. †



Lee and Vicki teamed up to offer the intercessions at a Mass celebrating the 30th anniversary of the diocesan Office of Disabilities last summer.



Lee met with the pastor and attended Mass at St. George Parish in Erie as he considered moving in with the Washeks. Once he joined the parish, he became a Eucharistic minister.