

Victory Housing honors its founding father, Msgr. Kuehner, with a day of service

By Mark Zimmermann
Catholic Standard

Like volunteers from local churches, schools, businesses and organizations do every day of the year, 11 staff members from the corporate offices of Victory Housing arrived at the So Others Might Eat dining room at 71 O Street, NW, in Washington to serve lunch to homeless and poor guests.

But on Aug. 3 they had come not just to serve, but to honor their agency's founding father, Msgr. Ralph Kuehner, on their first annual Kuehner Day of Service. In 1979, Msgr. Kuehner had worked with parishioners to found Victory Housing, an agency of the Archdiocese of Washington that provides affordable housing for low- and moderate-income senior citizens and families.

The soft-spoken priest who turned 93 in April was ordained to the priesthood 67 years ago in 1950. After ordination, he taught Scripture in college and the seminary for 17 years. Then he dedicated his life and work to bringing the Gospel message to the streets.

The Victory Housing staff chose to volunteer at SOME because Msgr. Kuehner in 1970 had also cofounded that outreach, working with other religious and community leaders. From its humble beginnings as a soup kitchen in a church basement, SOME remains an interfaith and community-based organization serving the city's poor, but now in addition to providing breakfasts and lunches 365 days a year, it also offers a range of comprehensive services including housing, employment, addiction recovery programs, and medical and dental clinics.

The volunteers from Victory Housing wore matching light blue T-shirts depicting their agency's logo on the front – a dove with an olive branch, flying past a silhouette of a home – and on the back were the words, “doing SOME good.”

“My feeling about SOME and Victory Housing is we're both serving this continuum of need,” said Leila Finucane, who this year became the

new president and chief executive officer of Victory Housing, Inc., after earlier serving as the director of the Department of Housing and Community Development for Washington, D.C., and later working with non-profits across the country to develop affordable housing.

The day of service, she said, gave her staff the chance to experience a different perspective, as they met and served the poor and saw how SOME helps people in emergency situations. Victory Housing's work in providing affordable housing is likewise critical to people's quality of life, she added.

“We're all part of the safety net,” Finucane said.

Later that afternoon, the Victory Housing staff members piled into their agency's van and rode to Sacred Heart Home in Hyattsville, where they visited with Msgr. Kuehner, who now lives at the long-term care residence operated by the Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate.

The priest sat in a wheelchair in a parlor as he held court with the Victory Housing workers, who greeted him with hugs and presented him with the T-shirt especially designed for that day, which he immediately put on. One of the sisters noted, “It looks like you belong to the group.”

“I should. I started it. I'm responsible!” Msgr. Kuehner said, smiling.

SOME began humbly, as an effort to feed and help the city's poor, he said. “We started in '70 and haven't missed a day since,” he said.

Victory Housing's name came from Our Lady of Victory Parish in Washington, where Msgr. Kuehner was pastor from 1973-83, and then served for seven years as pastor of St. Ambrose in Cheverly. The priest said he was inspired to start Victory Housing after an elderly parishioner was forced out of her apartment as a result of condominium conversion, and died of a heart attack in the midst of that situation.

“I thought we should do more for the elderly,” he said.

The priest, who grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, confessed that “I didn't have skills for housing. I felt bad



CS PHOTO BY MICHAEL HOYT

After serving lunch to homeless guests at SOME on Aug. 3, staff members of Victory Housing visited Msgr. Ralph Kuehner (center) at Sacred Heart Home in Hyattsville, on the first annual Kuehner Day of Service to honor their founder, who also helped found SOME.

saying that, (since) my father was a carpenter.”

But when he saw people needed help, as in the case of Victory Housing, he worked with others to try to meet that need. He later helped found the Welcome Home reentry program now operated by Catholic Charities, in which mentors from local parishes help formerly incarcerated people build new lives, and Rosaria Communities, which helps develop housing for people with developmental disabilities. The priest also joined religious leaders in founding the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, which now includes 11 different religious communities that dialogue and work together to promote peace and serve those in need.

Partnerships – like the joint efforts among the archdiocese, state and local governments, area businesses and private individuals – have proven to be “absolutely essential” for Victory Housing and other outreach programs that he helped start, Msgr. Kuehner said. “I’ve been amazed how people are willing to help.”

The veteran priest added,

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CS PHOTO BY JACLYN LIPPELMANN

During Victory Housing’s first annual Kuehner Day of Service on Aug. 3, staff members John Spencer and Jeff Blackwell prepare bag lunches for the poor at SOME. Msgr. Ralph Kuehner, a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington, helped found Victory Housing and SOME.

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"My best quality is perseverance. I never give up." Describing the development of Victory Housing, he said, "I kept pushing. I was always glad things worked out."

Finucane described to the priest how that agency he founded continues to reflect those qualities that he demonstrated. "We're persevering and not giving up," she said, later adding, "We completely rely on partnerships."

Victory Housing operates six assisted living residences for the frail elderly, 20 apartment communities for independent seniors, and four apartment communities for low- and moderate-income families. Those properties throughout Washington and surrounding Maryland have a total of 2,175 units.

Msgr. Kuehner, after being told that a Japanese delegation had recently visited the agency's Victory Tower senior apartments in Takoma Park, noted that over the years, a number of dioceses across the United States conferred with the Archdiocese of Washington about its affordable housing outreach.

"What's new at Victory Housing?" Msgr. Kuehner asked his visitors, who told him that the agency is now developing the 105-unit Victory Crossing senior apartments in the White Oak area of Silver Spring, slated to open in spring 2018.

Msgr. Kuehner celebrates Masses at Sacred Heart Home, and continues to write a Scripture reflection for the bulletins at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Derwood, where he was in residence for many years. In recent years, he has written a book of meditations on Jesus's words from the cross, and a reflection on Old Testament prophets and how their messages are relevant today. The title of the priest's autobiography, *Why a Servant Church?*, reflects the teaching of Scripture and work for social justice that have marked his priesthood.

"Christ said, 'I've come not to be served, but to serve,'" Msgr. Kuehner noted, saying that provides a guide for how the Church and individual Christians should serve others.

Sister Irene Dunn, a Sister of St. Joseph who serves as Victory Housing's vice president for assisted living, said their agency's founder has exemplified that in his life and work. "He lives the Scriptures. He doesn't just write about them. He lives them."

Earlier that day, she had joined her Victory Housing colleagues in helping to carry out the vision of her agency's founder. At SOME, she served mashed potatoes to guests.

That day, Caryn Daniel, Victory Housing's office manager, helped wash dishes at SOME's kitchen. "I think what most affected me as I was looking at people (was) the cross section and diversity, how hunger and poverty affects this broad spectrum of people. Some were homeless, and some were working poor," she said.

Timur Ryspekov, the agency's senior asset manager, served coffee to the guests at SOME and helped set the tables. What moved him most, he said, was "everyone getting together as a group and doing something simple to help people, just serving lunch. You can see the impact."

Michelle Limeres, Victory Housing's controller, said that during their time serving at SOME, a colleague noted that the outreach program's staff and volunteers seemed to have an "aura of kindness" like that they had experienced in their own work – a quality that many would say that Msgr. Kuehner exemplifies.

Later that day, as the Victory Housing workers visited with their founder and then offered him more hugs and words of gratitude as they left, Jeff Blackwell – the agency's vice president for real estate development – told the priest, "Thank you for the inspiration." He later explained that he admires the priest's "love for people, no matter who they are or where they come from."

Msgr. Kuehner thanked the Victory Housing staff for their visit, and for serving at SOME on a day named in his honor. The feelings of gratitude were mutual. John Spencer, Victory Housing's senior vice president, told the priest, "We thank you every day for the gift of Victory Housing, and what we get to do to help so many people."