



## The Father McKenna Center Summer Newsletter

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### Finding Hope in the Heat - Summer at the Center

It has been a busy start to the summer at the McKenna Center! Every day we serve over 150 meals, provide showers and laundry services for 20 men, facilitate as many as two dozen case management meetings, and serve as a sanctuary from the elements where men can catch their breath and cool down from the summer heat. In May, we welcomed over 500 individual guests!

In the afternoons, the Food Pantry continues to supply more than 35 families a day with supplemental groceries, with our selection bolstered by regular donations from local business partners such as Food Rescue US, Giant, Great Harvest Bread Co., Panera, and Safeway. This support helps ensure our patrons are able to make full, nutritious meals for themselves and their families.



*A volunteer helps a food pantry patron select items*

Our weeks also feature lively and interesting programming options – Little Friends for Peace joins us twice a week, and our Catholic Charities-designed financial literacy course continues to be both popular and successful. As the first 10-week class wraps up, we're excited to continue the course and expand the offering to more of our day program and food pantry clients! Your continued support allows us to make a positive impact on the lives of our neighbors who are struggling with homelessness and experiencing food insecurity, continuing the work of Fr. McKenna and meeting our community with grace, love, and generosity.

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### SAVE THE DATE: 9th Annual Walk for McKenna

### Saturday, Sept. 27th, 2025

The Walk for McKenna, our annual fundraising 5k, is back for its 9th year this September. Check-in will begin at 8:30am, with the walk beginning at 9:30. Last



year, we set an attendance record with more than 400 people walking, while raising over \$100,000 for the Center!

Click the links below to register today!

**Individual  
Registration**

**Sponsor  
Registration**

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## **Interview with Merwyn DeMello: Service, Peace, and the Power of Showing Up**

Merwyn DeMello's journey to the Father McKenna Center is anything but conventional. Born in Kenya with Indian ancestry, and Catholic by faith, Merwyn has lived and worked across the globe — from Afghanistan to several countries across Africa — serving communities scarred by war, conflict, and displacement. His professional background in peacebuilding, restorative justice, trauma, and healing reflects a life devoted to service and human dignity.

In 2020, after years of international work, Merwyn returned to the U.S. and found himself reconnecting with community and faith through the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker and Holy Redeemer Church on New York Avenue NW in Washington, D.C. It was through these connections that he first heard about the Father McKenna Center.



*Merwyn volunteering in the kitchen*

### **A Relationship Begins with a Snack and a Smile**

Merwyn's first encounter with the Center was at its annual Lessons and Carols event. Arriving early, he came down for a snack and met Russell, the kitchen manager. The two shared a laugh and conversation over an extra serving of food. That moment might be considered small and spontaneous to many, sparked a relationship that would continue to grow in depth and meaning.

Through Russell, Merwyn connected with MJ Park, who facilitates Peace Circles at the Center on Tuesdays and Thursdays. With his rich background in restorative work, Merwyn began co-facilitating the Peace Circles and staying for lunch, building deeper bonds with the men who come through the Center's doors. *"Some of the greatest moments in my life are when I've been*

*truly listened to. Listening allows for reflection. And in the same way, we walk with others during moments of overwhelm—not to fix them, but simply to accompany them.”*

## Community and Connection in the Kitchen

But Merwyn felt that attending a single event wasn’t enough. Soon after, he began volunteering in the kitchen to help prepare lunch, weaving himself more fully into the daily rhythm of the Center.

One morning, Merwyn came in early and met Russell, Don, James, and Carmen, the backbone of the kitchen team. *“Every day I come in here, with all the fun and jokes, the radio blaring, and people yelling over it—it’s chaos, but it’s beautiful. I feel like I’m gaining another level of awareness and relationship every day.”*

## Extending the Circle Beyond The McKenna Center

The connections formed at the McKenna Center extend outside of the wall. Merwyn recounted being on a bus when a man approached him with a warm, “Hey man, how are you?” The man had remembered him from the Center.



*A Gonzaga student connects with guests during lunch*

*“It wasn’t shameful—it was welcoming. The kind of thing that only happens because you show up consistently. It’s not just about two hours a month. It’s about being present, week after week.”*

That moment on the bus was more than a passing encounter—it was a reflection of the bonds built through time and trust. At the Center, service becomes relationship, and presence becomes impact.

## The Spirit of Shared Humanity

At the heart of Merwyn’s philosophy is a Southern African concept known as Ubuntu: If you are well, I am well. Having facilitated restorative justice circles in schools, universities, and communities, he sees this wisdom echoed in the work at the McKenna Center. *“Throughout my life,”* he shared, *“I’ve come to know myself better because of the people around me—especially those who have endured hardship, whether living on the streets or surviving conflict and war.”*

*“Our wellness is tied to one another. Mental, emotional, physical—it’s all connected. Nothing happens in isolation. When someone feels hunger, or loneliness, it touches all of us. It’s not just about feeding someone; it’s about recognizing their dignity in that moment.”*

## The McKenna Center - A Springboard for Peace

For Merwyn, the McKenna Center is more than a volunteer site—it’s a springboard for the deeper peace work he continues to do elsewhere. It’s a place where listening, presence, and relationships take precedence over programs and quick fixes.

*“The most powerful thing we can do,”* he said, *“is to show up. To make eye contact. To share a joke. To eat a meal. These simple gestures, done consistently, are how we build a better world.”* For Merwyn and so many others, these interactions show that dignity is affirmed not through grand gestures, but through small, repeated acts of connection, demonstrating the foundation of the Father McKenna Center as a space where people can be seen, heard, and met with compassion.



## Fostering Empathy Through Immersion

Throughout June, we welcomed student groups from Gonzaga College High School (Washington, DC), St. Joseph's Preparatory School (Philadelphia, PA), and Connelly School of the Holy Child (Potomac, MD) for four weeks of immersion service. Students distributed clothing, served meals,



*St. Joseph's Prep students serve lunch to Day Program guests*

and guided families through the food pantry, as well as supporting staff members in cooking meals, cleaning the communal spaces, and making food deliveries. The students say that immersion shifted their perspective, helping them reflect on their privilege and cultivate empathy and compassion for those they served. Andrew (SJP '26) noted that engaging with guests and seeing the joy they brought to the center ***"gave [him] the inspiration to just go that extra mile."*** Similarly, Luciana (HC '27) shared her experience helping a client select clothes for a job interview, a unique personal interaction with a guest.

Students also became more informed about the root causes of homelessness and poverty. Bradan (SJP '26) observed that in many instances, ***"it's not their fault that they ended up in the situation"*** as they have often ***"gotten unlucky or [had] something bad happen to them that wasn't in their control."*** Students learned that homelessness is not a reflection of a person's character, but an indication of a larger issue requiring systemic action. Taylor, (HC '27) found it ***"fulfilling to sit down with a lot of the guys here and listen to their stories and personal experiences. I've never been able to have those types of conversations before, and I gained a new sense of perspective in hearing them."***

As the students reflected on their week, it was clear that the experience sparked a lasting sense of purpose and a desire to stay involved in their own communities. The immersion experience laid a strong foundation of service in these students, and gave them a greater understanding of systemic poverty that will continue to shape their interactions with the world around them.

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## REMINDER: Celebrating Cortez McDaniel's Retirement

**Saturday, July 19th, 2025, 4:00-6:00pm**



We hope to see you on Saturday, July 19th, when the McKenna Center community will gather to celebrate the retirement of longtime Director of Services Cortez McDaniel. A core part of our operations for almost 20 years, Cortez made a lasting impact on the lives of every person he worked with while at the Center.

Click the link below to RSVP today!

[RSVP Here](#)

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