
LeBaron: Remembering Starcross' selfless good works

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In this business, we get questions. Once in a while, we can even answer them. Several recent queries have been generated by references in this newspaper to a small ecumenical community known as Starcross. It may be time to tell that story one more time.

It's an unusual name — combining the Easter cross, and the Christmas star, representing both suffering and hope. And it is an unusual endeavor.

For nearly half a century, Tolbert McCarroll (Brother Toby), Mary Martha Aggeler (Sister Marti) and Julian DeRossi (Sister Julie) have rushed in where angels fear to tread.

Their association began in the 1960s in San Francisco, part and parcel of the Humanist Potential movement. Brother Toby, a writer and former attorney who had earned his street credentials as an organizing activist in the South, was director of an institute where Sister Marti visited as a UC student writing a sociology paper. Sister Julie, too, was one of many young people who came to observe and to learn.

The three found they had mutual goals. They took monastic vows and, as Starcross, bought a house on Masonic Avenue where they began work with at-risk children.

By 1976, Starcross had outgrown its quarters and decided that the country would be a better place for the street kids they cared for. They sold the San Francisco house and bought the old Patchett Ranch in Annapolis, a historic site with a classic old house and barn and an aging orchard of mountain apples.

They brought with them a group of youngsters to raise safely, off the mean city streets.

There were 19 of them in all. To say it was nonprofit is an understatement. Somebody gave them a cow. They planted a huge garden. Brother Toby was writing magazine articles and books. There was some money for the youngsters placed there by the courts, from caring individuals who learned of their mission, from Bay Area organizations who voted some support and from the Christmas trees they planted to sell, along with the wreaths they made, at Christmastime.

Then came the 1980s and the AIDS epidemic — and chapter two of the Starcross story. At risk now were babies born to mothers with AIDS or HIV. The fears and misunderstandings of the early days of the epidemic meant that many institutions would not accept these infants. Bay Area case workers knew of Starcross and called upon them to step up.

It was a tough time. The spread of AIDS was still a mystery to the public. The rural fire department came forth to state that it would not answer calls to resuscitate the babies. There was concern voiced about diapers disposed of in the local dump.

Starcross persisted. They acquired a big old house in Santa Rosa, on Cherry Street, so the babies could be close to medical help. They named it Morning Glory House. Of the original six babies (there were more to come), two died within two years. Some lived on into their teens, requiring specialized care. If there were no families, they became family, several officially, by adoption.

Then the world came to Starcross in dramatic fashion.

Word of their work had spread quickly and, in 1990, Brother Toby was invited to visit Romania by international organizations that were discovering the extent of the AIDS epidemic in that country, recently freed from Communism and the horrific Ceausescu regime.

Followed by TV cameras from ABC News, Brother Toby visited orphanages filled with AIDS and HIV children. In one, he came upon an emaciated, pale child who held up her arms to him in her crib and he picked her up and she hugged him.

The cameras caught it all. And that meeting with Dana-Rica became the salient feature of a Peter Jennings special on Romania and the epidemic.

With the continued interest from national TV — a couple of specials, one filmed at Annapolis — there was financial support from all over the world for the Morning Glory project. Never had the community enjoyed such success.

There was too much of it, they decided. After two years, Brother Toby famously announced, “being a saint is hard work.” House of Hope, the collective name given to the small “households” for the orphans that Starcross had established, incorporated as a separate nonprofit, run by volunteers who had stepped forward for the Romanian crisis.

Morning Glory House in Santa Rosa was sold and the three stalwarts in the Starcross community retired to Annapolis to raise their adopted family — and await the next challenge.

It came in 1997, from Kampala, the capital of Uganda, where a seminary student who was struggling to help children who had lost their families to AIDS heard of Starcross and House of Hope. He wrote asking for American pen pals. He got Sister Julie.

One visit convinced her this had to be a Starcross project. She set about finding sponsors, telling the stories of what she had seen in the small villages around Kampala — children living in the streets, collecting rubbish, eating only when food could be found, facing grim futures.

Her plan was to link these orphans with sponsors across the U.S. and Europe. In the '90s, a \$500 contribution would keep a child in boarding school for a year. She found many people willing to make a difference.

Like all the other Starcross ventures, it not only succeeded through some perilous political times in Uganda, it outgrew the Annapolis community.

Now incorporated separately as Starcross Kin Worldwide, with Sister Julie as CEO, it supports 15 children in primary school, 40 more in high school, college or vocational training. All of them have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

There is also a network of 100 or more graduates of the Ugandan House of Hope. Julie is proud to recite their success.

Many are nurses, teachers and mechanics. Two are in medical school. One young woman has a master's degree in statistics. Another became the leading news anchor on Ugandan TV. There is a young man with a degree in computer science who lectures all over Africa. Another is a software engineer. Still another, a sign language interpreter.

Many of them are married with children. One man, the first of the college graduates, set up a school in his village. The program draws global support, with many volunteers from the United Kingdom and Australia.

Former students and volunteers are working to eliminate mother-to-baby HIV transfer. "Millie the midwife and Alex the social worker," as Julie calls them, "go around on a motor scooter administering a rapid test to find if a pregnant woman is positive. If so, they get her on meds so she can deliver a negative baby."

Knowing the statistics, knowing where Uganda has been, this is a huge step forward.

Julie's job now? "I just go around and ask for money," she says.

She also makes the prize-winning olive oil from the Starcross grove, which, with the annual Christmas wreath sale, helps support the community and its global partners.

The ranch is part of WWOOF, the Worldwide Organization of Organic Farmers, and draws young people from all over the world to help with farm projects.

Their current challenge is sanctuary — trying to protect the property for the future as an island of peacefulness in a troubled world.

So you want a simple answer to the question: What is Starcross? I guess it would be that it is three people and their extended family, tucked away in the northwest corner of Sonoma County, saving the world in small segments.