



KATHLEEN MURPHY

Looking back at a year like no other

So much has changed over the past year.

We are all reflecting on it this week, I'd assume. Social media memories from a year ago today are popping up on our feed, reminding us what we were doing during our last normal week of life. Before the words "quarantine," "coronavirus" and "social distancing" were part of our everyday language.

My Facebook feed shows that this week last year, I went in for my first day at a part-time job, then never went back when the store closed for the first wave of quarantines. The schools closed the following week, on March 18, which I know for certain because I optimistically blocked off only three weeks in my online calendar. Apparently, I thought I'd be back to teaching in person by the first week of April.

My calendar looks fairly bleak after mid-March, filled with little more than Zoom meetings and reminders to call students I could not see in person. My first medical televisit happened remarkably quick — the first week of May.

I guess, looking back over the past year, I'm mostly struck by how quickly we adapted to this new way of life. There were hiccups, of course. Not everyone got on board with the idea of quarantining. But overall, our lives changed in a dramatic fashion. Looking back at the newspaper pages of March 2020, the stories that graced good ole' section C changed almost overnight. Stories at the beginning of the month focused on resource fairs at the Dr. Robert Powless Cultural Center and movie screenings at Zinema 2. Nary a mask nor a socially distanced person in sight. I can barely imagine this reality anymore.

By the end of March and further into spring, the reports focused

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Photos by Jed Carlson / jcarlson@superiortelegram.com

Stephanie Breitzmann stands in the Ruth House sanctuary. This is where she sleeps for now. Breitzmann has struggled with addiction, and she said attending recovery meetings, serving others and the support of the Ruth House has changed her life.

'A safe, sober place of hope'

Superior volunteers keep the Ruth House running

By Melinda Lavine
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Stephanie Breitzmann walked through the old church that is now the Ruth House. A row of cots rested against the sanctuary wall.

The Superior woman recalled when they stored beds in the corner stacked several feet high.

This is where she sleeps.

Instead of a cot, Breitzmann prefers to use the chairs. With enough blankets, it feels like a bed, she said.

Breitzmann is a volunteer and a resident of the Ruth House, an offshoot of Walking Victorious Ministries, at 632 Grand Ave. in Superior. At the volunteer-run facility, people experiencing homelessness can eat, wash clothes or shower seven days a week.

By day, you can find assistance earning a GED, finding employment or housing and more. And by night, people experiencing homelessness can sleep in the warming center when temperatures are below 30, or if they're members of the housing program.

"Some are here for a season, a week or two. Some over a year," said Pastor Jack Swonger, co-founder of the Ruth House.

They've had hundreds come through since they opened more than two years ago as the first overnight warming center in Douglas County.

They receive people exiting incarceration, treatment centers or just from the streets.

Many come from poor circumstances rather than because of something they did wrong, Swonger said.

And the Ruth House goals are set. "The No. 1 here is a safe, sober environment for people that are trying to get it right," said house manager and program coordinator Christyna Foster.

All their services are sustained through donations and their 15 regular volunteers. No one is paid. "Our blessings come from the community we serve," Swonger said.

Before coming to the Ruth House, Breitzmann was a meth and heroin intravenous drug user.

"I had a completely normal life before. I was married, I had a house, a good job, and I fell to almost having nothing," she said.

In November 2019, she had nowhere to go and walked 2 miles to the Ruth House with two backpacks full of clothes.

Breitzmann recalled feeling nervous because she didn't have a relationship with God, and she knew the Ruth House was a nondenominational, Christian-based ministry.

Upon arrival, though, she met only acceptance and welcoming.

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David "Doc" Zeledon unfolds a cot in the Ruth House sanctuary in Superior. The women sleep in the sanctuary, and the men sleep in the dining area. Before becoming the warming house manager, Zeledon slept at the Ruth House after serving a 17-year prison sentence. With the support from the Ruth House services, he now has an apartment and a job.



James "Jay" Keller, 26 (left) and Matthew Daniels, 21, proudly hold up the General Education Development certificates they earned with the support of the Ruth House in Superior. They said they had also recently applied to carpentry apprenticeships. "There's so much love in this house. It's unending," Daniels said.

Indoor plants need careful transition

Q: Last fall, I decided to bring a large pot of mixed flowers indoors for the winter hoping to return it to my porch as soon as the temperatures are high enough to do so. Can I place the pot outdoors as soon as it's warm enough, or is there a process for doing this?

A: First, congratulations on getting your plants through the winter, and yes, there is a process.

Reintroducing your flowers to their summer environment will be determined by the types of flowers, grasses, and/or vines growing in your potted arrangement.

Depending on how or where you overwintered your plants, now is another

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opportunity to inspect for insects and examine root systems, especially if you have multiple plants growing in one container. Sticky substances, webs, wilting leaves, and brown spots are signs of scale, aphids or spider mites.

Aphids and spider mites can be removed with a spray of water or treated with insecticidal soap or horticultural oil. The soap or oil works only if it comes in contact with the bodies of pests, so it's not as

effective with scale insects, as they spend much of the year hiding under the scales they build on plants.

You have to get them in the brief period when they're moving around, before they build new scales. Scale is difficult to eradicate, especially indoors where the insects don't have natural predators, so if the plants are heavily infested, it might be best to just get rid of them and start over.



Getty Images

Grouped plantings are also at risk for overcrowding, especially as we move into the new growing season. This is the time to divide or separate plants so they have plenty of room to grow during the summer months ahead, and while you're at it be sure to trim away any dead leaves and roots that can serve as a source of unwanted fungal growth.

Once you have created the best possible environment for your plants, remember

to be patient with their transition back outside. Begin increasing your plants' exposure to the sun indoors such as in a sunroom or sheltered porch. Transition your plants to their outside environment when nighttime temperatures are consistently above 45°. During the day, initially place the plants in a shaded area, with shelter from both sun and wind. Gradually increase sun exposure, starting with no more than ten minutes for the first three days. A little patience goes a long way.

There's more information at extension.umn.edu.

Written by U of M Extension Master Gardeners in St. Louis County. Send questions to features@duluthnews.com.

HOPE

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She was surrounded by people who had dealt with addiction or incarceration, including the leadership. She felt free from judgment, and the environment helped bridge a gap.

"Before I was here ... I wanted to die. I've tried to OD multiple times and didn't succeed. Obviously, God had another plan for me," she said. "When I found this place, I felt at home."

Breizmann attends recovery meetings at the house and focuses on serving God and giving back to the community.

As the overnight monitor for women, she's the point person responsible for helping check in and set them up at the warming center.

During the day, she helps clean the kitchen, prepare and serve meals, process donations and more. Volunteering "definitely helps me stay sober," she said.

Breizmann is committed to staying at the Ruth House until June 1.

As part of the housing program, she works 30 hours a week, and 80% of her paycheck goes into a savings account, which is helping her save for an apartment and helps teach her accountability.

She is also reconnecting with her parents and trying to re-establish a relationship with her daughter. There are rough days, she said, but she is able to move forward today.

For some, the Ruth House is a soup kitchen; for others, it's a place to get help for education.

"This place saved my life," Breizmann said. "It gave me the family I didn't have at the time. It gave me sober friends. It gave me the support I needed to move forward."

"It's a safe, sober place of hope."

Last week, Breizmann and the Ruth House night manager, David "Doc"

MORE INFO

walkingvictorious.net/
ruth-house-twin-ports

Zeledon, stood in the dining area, which turns into the men's sleeping quarters at night. (The women sleep upstairs in the sanctuary.) Three guests came in after 9 p.m.

Michael Staples, 23, has been sleeping at the Ruth House for a couple days. He heard about it through longtime friend Matthew Daniels, 21, who was also in tow. Daniels had been there for two months, along with James "Jay" Keller, 26.

"I was on the road to straight death," Keller said. "I was shooting up drugs. ... All I could do was sell drugs, and nobody cared about me. But I came here, and they gave me a second chance. They believed in me."

Keller and Daniels had recently earned their GEDs and applied to carpentry apprenticeships with the help of the Ruth House.

"There's so much love in this house. It's unending," said Daniels, who wore a Nintendo blanket like a cape.

The three retrieved plastic bags containing their pillows, sleeping bags and blankets for the night from an outdoor storage area. Staples held up a bag, double-checking his name was written on it.

Zeledon explained that people who come and are not sober may get a pass to stay on their first night because they don't know the rules. If he or Breizmann suspect someone is not sober, he administers a urinalysis to ensure they maintain a safe space for those trying to "get it right," he said.

Zeledon knows what that's like firsthand.

Before the Ruth House, Zeledon served a 17-year prison sentence for murder. After his Dec. 31, 2019, release, he waited at the Duluth Transit Authority, looking to



Michael Staples, 23, unfolds a sleeping bag in the dining area of Superior's Ruth House. Staples had been sleeping there for a couple days. Superior's volunteer-led ministry is a place offering employment and education assistance by day, and a warming center by night when temperatures are below 30.



James "Jay" Keller, 26, unfolds a cot to prepare for bed at the Ruth House in Superior. "Some are here for a season, a week or two. Some over a year," said Pastor Jack Swonger, co-founder of the Ruth House. They've had hundreds come through since they opened more than two years ago as the first overnight warming center in Douglas County.

go anywhere but here. After more than three decades in and out of incarceration, he was ready to start over.

"Every time I walked out of prison, whether it was the Hell's Angels that was waiting for me or that old club, The Brotherhood, I basically was putting one foot in prison the minute I threw my leg over that bicycle and rode off with them," he said.

Zeledon met a young man at the DTA who asked if he needed somewhere to sleep. The man called Pastor Swonger.

When they met, Zeledon described Swonger's talk as "a hug and a slap in the face."

It was the "unvarnished truth" Zeledon needed to hear, and he has been living or volunteering at the Ruth House since.

The folks at the Ruth House helped him get his driver's license. He slept there for six months before getting an apartment close by.

He became the warming house manager, and is Breizmann's counterpart in the evenings.

Along with checking people in and filling out paperwork, he helps keep the place safe at night. After he leaves at 10 p.m., calls are forwarded to his phone, and he handles

police-administered drop-offs after hours. It's a change going from feeling guarded to being the guard, he said.

They don't have safety concerns overnight; the biggest elephant they encounter is addiction.

"People are with you for a while, and you think they're getting it right, and then you lose them again," he said. "It hurts a lot, but you have to harden your heart a little bit and understand that your job is to be there when they come back."

Zeledon recently accepted a position as a lay pastor, and is working on becoming an ordained minister, at the encouragement of Ruth House leadership.

"I was looking for someplace where me, with all my warts, would fit in. ... Where I wouldn't be judged and I'd be accepted for who I was as well as who I had been," Zeledon said, "and that's the Ruth House in a nutshell."



Stephanie Breizmann hugs James "Jay" Keller in the Ruth House dining area. Keller has been staying at the house for two months.

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