

2023 Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Award

by Joseph Makley, OFS
National Animator, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

Our JPIC award recipient for 2023 is Steve Wasko, OFS. Steve is a member of St. Bonaventure Fraternity, in the Divine Mercy region.

He is founder and executive director of the St. Suzanne Cody Rouge Community Resource Center, which is a faith based non-profit in Detroit.



Steve Wasko, OFS

What follows is a brief interview with Steve:

Steve, you gave us a compelling story about how a project in a parish served the greater community. Could you expand on that for the members who were not present?

After many years of service to the local community, our Catholic elementary school at the parish I have been worshipping at since birth, St. Suzanne Our Lady Gate of Heaven in northwest Detroit, closed in 2002. Like many urban parishes, we felt compelled to quickly fill what would be an empty building and so we leased the entire facility to one, and then another, charter school. Great income for the parish! But nothing to do with mission, which in our case called for our church to respond to the needs of both our faith community and neighboring community. Rather than continue this practice, we chose to find a sustainable solution to building a full-service community resource center, which occurred in several iterations but became a reality in its present form in 2018. Our focus is intensely neighborhood-centric, with leadership, board members, staff and providers based in the immediate community and, vitally important services based on what the community has stated it needs. With a mission to Empower Children, Families and Youth with Hope, we host programs ranging from early childhood to senior citizens. We are an enduring Catholic presence and truly the center of the community.

You've led a life of service in both public and Catholic education and bring significant experience and knowledge to your work. What advice can you give to those of us wanting to energize parish connections to our communities?

As professed Secular Franciscans, Article 13 of our Rule calls on us to serve with a gentle and courteous spirit and accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an Image of Christ, and to place ourselves joyfully on an equal basis with all people. A program focused on Black Catholic spirituality that some of us have become involved with through Loyola Marymount University teaches us that proximity to those we serve makes the credible difference in understanding and responding faithfully in dialogue, service, and faith. The work we are doing, more so than simple service at a charity, forces the parish to be directly involved and working in conjunction with the community. Our pastor at the time we reorganized, the wise and gentle Fr. Vic Clore, noted that we would step into the role of landlord and 'convener.' Some of us ran with that. As a convener, we can help to organize disparate elements in synergy. We can help to marshal services that the community has enunciated its needs and desires. And, you realize, we can be picky and choosy; we can settle only on quality. We can create and sustain connections that lead to brotherhood.

Frankly, at the parish and even at the diocesan level, that can be messy and sometimes confusing. Sometimes we take a step backward. But it is worth the effort.

As you spoke to us in St Louis, I kept thinking of Paragraph thirteen of our Rule: “A sense of community will make them joyful...” Can you say how you became aware of your vocation as a secular Franciscan?

Article 18 also calls for us to respect all creatures, animate and inanimate, which bear the imprint of the Most High. At the Center we have infused sustainability, innovation, partnerships, and green thinking - more so than the typical social service agency. We’ve created these amazing rain gardens and natural habitats on our urban grounds that process rainwater, reduce costs, attract pollinators and have also served as the basis for authentic semester long education programs for youth and adults. The rain gardens remind me daily of the kind and gentle reverence Francis had for all of God’s creation...the same call that Pope Francis speaks about in *Laudato Si’*...the same spirit I sensed when Father David Preuss, OFM Cap pointed out the longtime fraternity gathering each month at the Solanus Casey Center back in 2018. With my brothers in Christ, Joe and Joshua, we took the journey to profession in 2020.

What keeps you going?

I think we’re on to something here. Last year the Catholic Foundation of Michigan named us the top awardee and the Spirit of Innovation. They provided a grant to seed additional community resource centers tied to parishes in the City of Detroit. There is a cohort of four that have been meeting; one has approval from the Archdiocese to proceed. I am really energized by our churches taking a leadership role in resilient communities. Regrettably, this has not always been the case. We have a pastoral letter in Detroit, *Unleash the Gospel*. This is real, tangible work toward that.



The site photo is one of the eight rain gardens at St. Suzanne Our Lady Gate of Heaven parish in Detroit, MI. The individuals are Storm Water Specialists - adults in the neighboring community who became certified for employment maintaining green stormwater infrastructure as a result of educational programs here.

Pictured are: (front to back): Adele Hawkins, Regina Pendleton, Trista Hill.