



*A refuge for unborn-newborn babies  
and little children who will die and  
those who love them*

## SPRING/SUMMER 2022 NEWSLETTER

### Editorial

It's spring and as I type, we are having uncharacteristically gorgeous days in early March. There is so much giddy, growing life all around, it's hard to hold this alongside the knowledge of our own mortality, and that of those whom we love. I watch my own four young children, absorbed in the joys of their spring, and I think back to their sister who never saw a spring, at least not one that we shared with her. I remember that first spring after she died, with particular acuity - the strong sunlight, frail lambs, the birdsong. Springtime: blessing or cross - both, perhaps, at one and the same time.

Long ago, I came across a beautiful little poem by William Wordsworth, which has always stayed with me, and has always seemed to me to be especially apt when remembering our babies, undistinguished in the eyes of the world. In the poem, he mourns the loss of a hidden soul, a girl called Lucy, who dwelt among 'untrodden ways,' but whose beauty was as:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
-Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

He continues to sound out the paradox of exquisite personal loss - how the world goes on as before, but not for him, not ever quite the same.

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

The difference to me: each one of us can say that. This season's issue and next, we will hear from four faithful servants of Alexandra's House, Helen Panebianco, Diane Cheek, and Amy and Tim Reynolds, who have entered into those untrodden ways, who have sat with those who have lost much, who have seen things half hidden from the eye, and have gently helped transform mourning into hopefulness.

Thank you to all our families, volunteers, benefactors and friends for who you are and what you do.

Hilary Stroh / Patti Lewis.

## Helen Panebianco's Story

**As a Catholic convert, you've worked in a variety of missions. Tell us about how you met George and your time in Puerto Rico.**

A very outgoing George and I, a much more reserved Helen, met in Connecticut at a prayer group. Some years after that initial encounter, I converted to Catholicism and George, this big, playful, but deeply devoted Catholic, became my Godfather! We were known as a brother and sister-in-Christ for many years and were sent to a Benedictine monastery and school in Puerto Rico, George as teacher and I as manager of the bookstore. I created a nook where students could relax and find solace while listening to Gregorian Chant. At first, they were unsure about this haven but many students started flocking there!



George and I would go to the 6 am Monastery Mass every day (which no Gringos ever attended) and found that the priests and brothers didn't know what to do with us. Also, many of our neighbors felt the same, but over time, things changed and we had many, many amazing experiences during the two years we were in Puerto Rico.

**The Mass is clearly very dear to you, which reminds me of the endearing story you tell about your 5 year old grandson, Morgan, who is actually a Mormon. Might you share it with us please?**

Of course. Once when he came to visit KC, we brought him to mass and seeing the corpus of Christ, he said out loud, "Get him down, he hurts". The priest saying the Mass proclaimed: "Well, that took care of my homily!"

**So your life took you eventually to the heart of the US, to Kansas City. Tell us about how your life rebegan there.**

We were sent to El Paso, Texas where we became involved with Our Father's House and started a company to retrieve tax credits for hiring people with disabilities and ex-offenders. We then moved to Kansas City, intending to open more offices around the country, but when the business fell through, we turned to Our Lord for guidance.

I went to work as a legal secretary and George sold insurance. All this time, he and I still lived as brother and sister, but then George proposed, and we got married August 20, 1988!



A friend, Mark Dary, who was discerning the priesthood, allowed us to rent his 1908 Hyde Park home and said, if he did become a priest, we could buy it. He did, in fact, become Fr. Mark Dary, but unexpectedly died soon after, and, incredibly, left us his magnificent home as an inheritance. We were so blessed.

**You also found a new home in your parish. And it was through parish life that you met Patti.**

We first attended St. James Church but when it stopped offering daily Mass, we moved to Redemptorist. It was at a brunch nearby that we first met Patti.

Our friendship grew easily and deeply. We often prayed together and socialized regularly by going to movies, sharing pizza nights, and spending hours in meaningful conversation. All along, Patti expected she would get married and have children. Unknown to us, however, at the same time, Our Awesome Lord was silently planting His unique ministry, Alexandra's House. Patti's newborn niece, Alexandra, born unexpectedly in 1994, lived for 45 days, and then died from a lethal disorder. At that time, there was no outreach or support to help families through these sad and difficult times. Little did Patti know, this little girl's birth and death would change her life and dramatically alter her dreams for her own family.

**So you were there, as a friend, even before Alexandra's birth and death. Tell us about the beginnings of this new mission alongside your friend.**

A small group of women attended a Marian retreat in Colorado Springs, feeling that we were prompted to serve in some way, even that we were called to develop a community. As time evolved, those who had families and were working continued serving those callings, which unexpectedly, left Patti alone, to take the reins for this new ministry. George and I remained on the Board of Directors while legally founding Alexandra's House. I was able to use my legal knowledge to help us file our papers and achieve nonprofit status.

Many wonderful, wonderful years since have been spent being devoted to and working for Alexandra's



House. We went to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Xochimilco, Mexico City together, and there had a very beautiful encounter.

**In your own inimitable words, you consider yourself a 'jack of all trades and master of none' at Alexandra's House! I think you've mastered so much, most of all the art of relating to our families at such a deep level.**

The reasoning behind this saying is when you need something to be done, you do it yourself!

I consider it an honor to offer prayers and outreach to families who want to continue their pregnancies, even after being told of their baby's fatal anomalies. Although most of "our" babies die while still in the womb, families have had a few minutes, a few hours, days, and some weeks or months, to share and love together.

I believe that our "mission" is to walk with them through the sadness and difficult times to a place of healing and where a family finds, eventually, greater meaning in their own existence through these bittersweet experiences of family life.

### **Tell us something that you think is really special and distinctive about the House.**

Alexandra's House has many beautiful statues, paintings and stained glass windows. Most of them have been discarded and donated by others because of their imperfections like a broken finger, toe, nose, ankle, holes in the canvas, or fading colors. They are lovingly rescued by Alexandra's House because our calling is to take what the world rejects.

### **What else in the House would strike a first-time visitor?**

Perhaps the most moving part of Alexandra's House is the Holy Steps where upon their walls many of our babies' photos are displayed and revered. As visitors ascend the stairs, they simply stand and gaze at our babies' pictures, getting lost in the stories they have come to share.

Moreover, I think it's very meaningful that each and every baby has their name forever written in our Book of Life. When I was outside my home



one day, I saw my neighbor and asked when their baby was due. He said that they had just lost their baby a few weeks previously. I proceeded to tell him about Alexandra's House and our Book of Life and wondered if they had named their baby, which they had. With smiles and many thanks, he and his wife again thanked us for having their son's name placed in our Book of Life.

### **And George himself, who sadly passed away in 2020 having suffered from Parkinson's disease, is still very much present in Alexandra's House.**

He loved painting in his youth (and again in his later years). After his death in 2020, it was decided that the picture he painted, at age 27, of St. Paul (one of Patti's favorite saints), should permanently reside at Alexandra's House.

### **You must have so many cherished stories of the people you've encountered, and the stories you've shared.**

When people are touring Alexandra's House, I always tell the story of one of our babies whose brain was outside her skull and the doctors put her brain inside her head, closed her skull, and wouldn't speculate about the length of her life. However, Our Lord had other plans as her intellect is normal and she recently celebrated her 18th birthday!

Another time a family along with the grandfather came to visit. While the couple walked away to talk with Patti, the grandfather sat with me. All of a sudden, he broke down and shared that Alexandra's House was the best thing that happened to the family when they lost their baby. He felt there was so much love and caring being presented to the whole family during this sad and difficult time. He wanted us to know how it helped so many, and in so many ways!

As we always say, beyond the unanswered questions, the pain and sorrow, above it all, love remains. It is the single, most important thing. Love. Love one another as I have loved you.



### **Diane - you've served the house for nearly 20 years. That's a long time!**

Wow! Being asked to write for the newsletter has made me realize what a journey my time with Alexandra's House has been. From God placing the idea in my heart to getting started volunteering there almost 20 years ago, it's been one of the most sincere and humbling things I've done. The families we meet and walk along beside have touched me for all these years and continue to do so.

### **So what's the backstory? How did you get involved?**

Over 20 years ago, there was an article in the Kansas City Star about Patti Lewis and a picture of her with a mother and baby in a hospital bed. At the time I was a Pediatric Speech Pathologist, working with families of young children who had speech questions and issues. I was finishing raising my own family of three boys who were all teenagers or young men. I wasn't really looking for something else to do or be involved with. The article described what Alexandra's House was becoming, and who Patti was. I remember turning to my husband Jerry and telling him "I'm supposed to help." I also remember thinking "how am I going to help these precious families?" Although professionally I had worked with families of young children, I had no background or training in families with infant loss or hospice. But the "nudge" was strong.

### **Did you follow that nudge?**

As we often do, I placed that nudge aside and continued routines of everyday life. A few years passed. That nudge? It never really came off my shoulder. That tap tap tap from God saying "Remember? I want you to follow my prompt." I called Patti Lewis, told her who I was, and said "I don't know how, but I'm supposed to be a part of Alexandra's House." I didn't know how

I should help; I just knew I was supposed to. Patti said "Great! I'll see you tomorrow down here at the house." I rang the doorbell and as any of you who know Patti, her arms opened and brought me in.

### **And that was just the beginning...**

For the first few years I got to understand what the ministry was about. I did different jobs and tasks in the house to help: cleaning bathrooms, the yard, helping in the office... whatever needed to be done. At one point a few years in, Patti asked me to go with her to see a family at a doctor's appointment. I finally got the face-to-face opportunity to see what our families are really about. I think that visit with Patti assured both Patti and myself that I was willing and anxious to help these families in a deeper way. I got to follow that family through their pregnancy. I was at the birth of their child. I was at the loss of their child. I saw the process of what families go through and how they deal with life and loss and grief. It was, and continues to be an amazing example of families loving their child so much.

### **Are there any particularly special moments?**

It's hard to pick one particular family, event, or birth that is most special. Each one is so uniquely different, and yet with so many of the same emotions and care. From sitting with a mom at the grave of their baby, planting a bush or flower in the backyard that will be their remembrance, to watching each family uniquely honor their baby in their way. The siblings holding their baby brother or sister. Being invited to future births of healthy babies and being able to celebrate with those families. Sitting in the waiting room and holding the hand of a grandparent whose grandbaby is being born. Crying right along beside each family. It is an honor to be included in these babies' lives and one that I don't take lightly. I ask so often that God will just give me the words and ability to offer the comfort, support, and care that I can.

### **You've grown so much and given so much...**

A lot has happened over the years. I've learned a lot, but I've mostly been humbled by the people... the moms... the dads... the grandparents... the babies... the siblings. I thank God that He placed that nudge in my heart all those years ago. And that He didn't release it until I listened to that small still voice telling me to contact Patti. He took it from there and I am forever grateful. These are amazing brave people and I am honored that God urged me to answer His nudge to walk along beside them in the hard times of their life.

Today Alexandra's House continues to be a source of support, information and care for families and their babies. Thank you God for this.



***Alexandra's House***

[www.alexandrashouse.com](http://www.alexandrashouse.com)

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