



Simon Star

Living and working with London's street homeless

An Update



These are hectic and exciting times for the Simon Community! Over the last few months all of our regular full-time volunteers have moved on, leaving the running of Simon's outreach and residential work in the hands of our trusty and hard-working part-time volunteers. We owe them a great debt of thanks for pulling together in such style at a difficult time. Perhaps it is our combined efforts during these testing times that have drawn us all closer together, and restored a sense of Community. But things are looking up. Jo Nurse, the new Community Manager, joined us in February. Jo has had a great deal of experience running projects for the street homeless. We look forward to seeing this reflected in improved outreach and residential services. And we welcomed two full-time, live-in volunteers, Aurelie and Radu.

Simon has been in a state of retrenchment for the last six months, and we have used this time to reconsider the value of our work, and to ensure that the small resources we do have are put to the best use. We have decided to continue, reviewing what we do and trimming the budget, in order to ensure that our work is sustainable. This simpler, leaner Community model will focus on the key areas of outreach and campaigning, with a small amount of room for residential work. We continue to look into the possibility of a merger, should our current plan to make Simon financially sustainable fail. The end-of-year accounts will show how successful we have been.

Our soup-runs, tea-runs and street-work have continued to reach out to over five hundred people a week on the streets. This vital work has continued to be sustained by you: our generous donors! Simon's school talks continue to prompt generous donations of food and clothing. In February we received 2000+ cans of food and masses of blankets from Yately School in Hampshire. We send our thanks to them and everyone else who has ensured that our work has continued through the winter.

Finally, some sad news. Pat Donnelly, long-time Community member, has passed away. We first knew Pat at the old night-shelter, where he would stay for a week every so often - before returning to the street. Over a number of years he moved inside and became more involved with the Community, and was a long-term resident at both St. Joe's and Anton Street. He helped out on countless early morning tea-runs (while all the workers slept!), and was a vocal Community meeting attendee. Just before Pat died, Viola, another resident, left a note for him on the desk at St. Joe's, detailing a phone message she had taken for him. At the top it read "To lovely Pat". He will be greatly missed. Elsewhere in this issue, we have included the sermon from Pat's funeral.

Steve Barnes, *worker and trustee*
and **John Yeudall**, *chair*

The Wednesday Soup Run



We pack the sandwiches like toddlers playing. Tip the whole delivery out onto the floor then we get on our hands and knees, examining them like new toys, looking at the fillings in wonder. What have Prêt come up with this week?

Then fling them madly into the boxes. One for meat, one for fish, one for vegetarian. We drive like lunatics. Roaring down the road, the radio blaring, the van bumping around, jerking over potholes, our heads bobbing, the soup sloshing around in the urns at the back. Our voices high, excited at the prospect of a night on the soup run, feeding the hungry, seeing our friends, each other. Marie breezing through red lights, Jay shouting in mad Cockney "Put your foot dahn Marie!" everyone laughing, gaily encouraging. "Come on Marie! Go, go, go!"

But we park like pensioners. Roll the van tentatively to a halt, because we're surrounded by people before we've even stopped. Their big bodies clamour around the van, hugging it like a mother, slapping it on the back like an old friend, cramming us in, blocking out the light. They are hungry, they are thirsty, they want sandwiches and tea, they want company and news and we're happy to oblige if they'd only move back so we can get out!

We chat like old ladies, gossiping with the regulars who tell us about their week, what they've been up to, their new projects. Someone's making a film on a computer, someone's learning Russian, someone's been making poems out of pictures and wants to show us. And we tell them about our weeks, about college or work, about where we went and who we saw.

And we chat to each other, about our boyfriends and girlfriends, TV shows, films, restaurants, bars and we laugh about our office jobs which seem ridiculous and pointless on a Wednesday night.

We sell like used-car salesmen. Nobody is ever sure what's in the Prêt sandwiches, so we have to be convincing. "It's duck I think" when it could be anything, really. "Of course the soup's delicious, what do you think we are?!" when we haven't even tasted it, when we know there's enough pepper in there to flatten a horse. Still we ladle it out gamely, and it splashes everywhere up our arms on our coats, crusty war medals, badges of honour that we wear home with the pride of the weary.

We say goodbye like the Waltons. Windows rolled down, Marie honking the horn, all of us screaming "byeeeee" like madmen, alarmed pedestrians jumping, our delighted screams hitting them like bullets, they look at us scornfully, and then with surprise, as our manic waving continues unabated and our cries sing out "see you next week!"

Gill Wyness

Co-worker

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**E-mail:
info@simoncommunity.org.uk**

Working The Streets



"Yes, but do you really still want to be on the streets when you are 50?"

"Yes, but not all hostels are like the one you were in previously."

"Yes, but you might receive an ASBO if you continue to beg and sleep here."

"Yes, but...." is the language of those with an agenda, in this case, that of Westminster Council's homelessness policy, and the words are spoken by an outreach worker ultimately accountable to the same Council. Their outreach work is fundamentally different to that of the Simon Community.

From the beginning, outreach work has been central to the Community, with workers going out on skid row at night befriending those excluded, forgotten and struggling. Going out on the street with little more than compassion and a willingness to listen. In addition to soup and tea runs, Simon Community volunteers are still out on the street every night of the week with coffee, sandwiches and tobacco. The aim of this so-called 'street work' is simply just being there, talking with people who have just bedded down in a doorway or are waiting on a bench before unrolling their sleeping bag, simply acknowledging the importance and worth of the person.

Yet recently I had a much more uncomfortable experience. This was during another type of street work, when I joined an official

Westminster outreach team for the night. Previously known as CAT-workers, these teams go out in the late hours to try to connect rough sleepers to the official Westminster homelessness services and to identify 'new' and vulnerable people sleeping on the borough's streets. Tied in closely with Westminster Council's homeless strategy and targets, their job is very directly focused on 'getting people off the streets'.

Whilst I partnered one of these outreach workers on a shift, the policy's impact on the worker's contact with homeless people became strikingly clear. Conversation was concentrated on assessing people's willingness to engage with homelessness services, such as day centres or, more specifically, their desire to enter a hostel. Unlike the Community's street work, there was hardly any time for informal chat and listening. In the Westminster outreach work there seemed little space for the person as the person, which is so central to the Simon Community ethos.

The Westminster outreach workers I came in contact with on that shift and elsewhere have spoken of their genuine concern for the homeless people they work for. But they are limited by targets, resources and, indeed, the Westminster political agenda. They cannot provide what our Community street work can: time and unconditional friendship. We can reach out to the person - without the "yes, but...."

Marika van Harskamp
Co-worker

Why I'm Joining The Simon Community...

I've been in London 10 years and had always wanted to volunteer to do soup runs. I've volunteered once a year for the last five years, helping to build shelters, but always felt I wasn't really involved in reaching people. Life has a habit of getting in the way of plans and it was only by chance through Bloomberg's Christmas volunteer programme that I was introduced to the Simon Community.

I wasn't quite sure what to expect. How was I supposed to act? What would the dedicated volunteers think of us tourist volunteers? How would I deal with tough situations that might occur?

Very soon this all became irrelevant as Jon C shared his thoughts on homelessness and Paul handed me a perfect cuppa. I felt the warmth of the Simon Community, which is a unique, bravely independent and special group.

Community is something we lack in most of our lives these days and this seems to be a pure example of a force for good that achieves it.

On the run my emotions yo-yoed between hope and despair, sadness and smiles and inadequacy and action. Being surrounded by a group of people striving to and making a difference was an uplifting feeling. Meeting individuals from all walks of life, listening to them and getting some understanding of their lives made me want to do more. However small my part was on the night, I felt I helped to make a little bit of a difference.

This is why I'm now volunteering, and I look forward to working with Tara, Paul, Dave & Jon, who all inspired me to get involved.

Grant Coombe
Co-worker

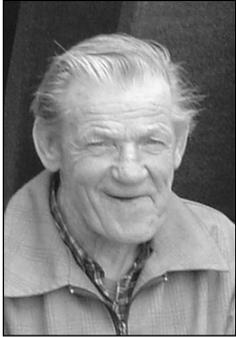
Join In: The Community Needs You!

We now have our open community meetings every second and last Wednesday of the month at 6pm at St. Joseph's House, 129 Malden Road, NW5.

Please come along and join in!



Pat Donnelly



This article is based on the sermon given at the funeral of Pat Donnelly, known to me – and to most or all of us till recently – as Pat McCann. Pat died of a heart attack on the 46 bus, just outside St Dominic’s Church. So the last

things he saw would have been the Simon Community, the Westport Arms and Peggy’s flat above where the Simon Charity shop was – all the places that meant most to him, in a way, a summary of recent years of his life. Not a bad way to go.

What made Pat the man we knew? It seems few of us know much about Pat’s early life. I think I’ve known Pat getting on for ten years, but he was a very private man. We know he came over from Ireland as a young man, and that he was homeless on the street for some years. Whatever else was true, his life must have been tough and rough on him. My guess is that his drinking was usually an attempt to cover up some of the pain. But the pain didn’t stop him loving and caring. Since we’ve known him at ‘Simon’, he grew to love the trips back to Ireland, to Cork, and he loved to tell stories and sing, especially the old Irish rebel songs. Maybe he even loved the Simon Community! And he cared for Peggy and his other friends.

The Bible reading we heard at Pat’s funeral was Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes. And it seems to me that it reflects a lot of what made Pat the man he was. “Happy – or blessed are the poor in spirit” – and Pat was ‘poor in spirit’, a humble man, as well as

poor in fact. My prayer is that he is happy now. “Blessed the gentle – and Pat was quiet and gentle, “A true gentleman, always reliable” as Peggy and another friend described him – at least when his money had run out. “Blessed those who mourn” – those who mourn for the good that is lost, those who have compassion – that is, they “suffer with” others. This too seems to me to have been true of Pat. “Blessed those who hunger and thirst for what is right”. Pat cared about right and wrong, about the many injustices he must have seen in his life. “Blessed the merciful.” Pat was not judgmental, probably because of what he’d been through in his own life. “Blessed the pure in heart – they shall see God.” And I believe that Pat like most of us, had his own way of seeking and seeing God, in his heart. “Blessed the peacemakers” – well, Pat’s care for those less fortunate than himself, with all the work he put in at Simon House, and 129 and elsewhere over his years with ‘Simon’, certainly must have brought some peace into the lives of so many who suffered the reality and the effects of homelessness. “Blessed are those persecuted in the cause of right” – well, I guess in his life Pat got the rough end of the stick plenty, just trying to survive and not do wrong.

Pat was someone whose life counted for little in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God he is blessed. He counted for a lot in our eyes too I think. He is one of those of whom Jesus said, “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The little ones, the last who shall be first.

(Fr) **Martin Newell** cp
Trustee

A Lenten Appeal



I've been coming to the house in Malden Road for years now. Always warmer inside than out (in many ways), always enthusiastic and a certain offer of a cup of tea.

This, I thought, was the heart of the Community. Not so it seems, this year has proved to me that the Community is one that goes out into the streets with the same warmth, enthusiasm and offer of tea!

The outreach work of the Community involves being out on the streets of London 365 days of the year, something that few, if any, other organisations manage. Last year, as a Community, we carried out:

- 110 evening soup runs and 115 early morning tea runs
- 104 street cafes
- 260 street work shifts

But our outreach programme is about much more than tea. Our food and drink represent the 'table' around which we meet as a Community. Our outreach represents something constant to people for whom life and relationships can be chaotic, unreliable and disappointing. Just a few weeks ago, heavy traffic slowed us down on a soup run and we arrived 15 minutes late. I overheard a conversation: "I almost left, thought they wouldn't come. Glad I didn't."

That's why this Lent we are asking you to help us continue our outreach programme. Give your time: the Simon Community is always looking for committed co-workers to be a part of Community life and work. You might help with the day-to-day work of the Community through outreach work or the running of our house of hospitality. We are

particularly looking for people with skills such as driving, first aid or nursing, cooking, and DIY. But above all, we're looking for enthusiasm and commitment.

Give your money: As a point of principle and independence, we have never accepted government funding. This means we rely on donations from people like you. A gift, no matter how small, will help us continue our outreach. Clothes, sleeping bags, toiletries and tinned food are always welcome, too. Or perhaps you could encourage your employers to adopt us as one of 'their' charities.

Give your voice: We recently headed off a proposed bill to ban the distribution of food to homeless people on the streets of London. We need your voice to keep this kind of work and message going. Why not invite us to speak at your school, church or business? Or why not join us to represent the Community on these visits?

This Lent, please help us.

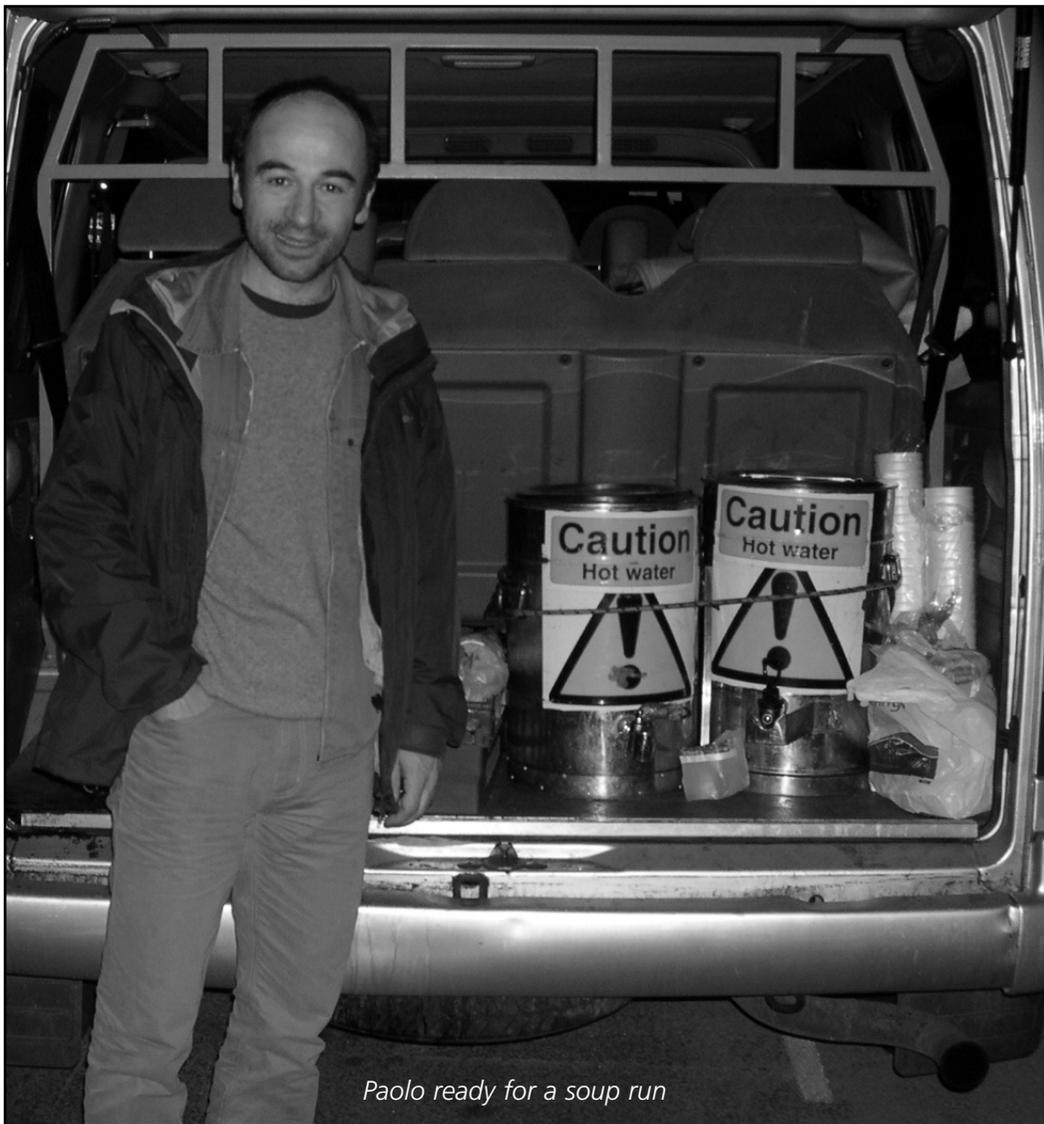
Dave Clark
Co-worker

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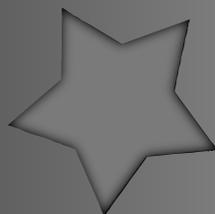




Paolo ready for a soup run

Our next headcount
will take place in early April

**We need as many helpers as possible.
If you'd like to take part, please e-mail:
info@simoncommunity.org.uk**



Please complete this form and return it with your donation to:
The Simon Community,
St. Joseph's House,
129 Malden Road,
London, NW5 4HS

Alternatively you can make a secure donation online via our website,
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