

Old doors at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul open new lives in Detroit

A Walking Spirit in the world

by Herb Gunn

For more than a decade, Monica mingled with the wrong people in Detroit—a lifestyle of homelessness that led her into a daily crack habit and jail.

Now, two years after walking away from both, she still keeps company with some of the same unsavory influences on her life. But those once-a-week encounters have totally changed, and so has Maureen Maniece, who has reclaimed her given name and reclaimed her former life.

In the late 1990s, Maniece walked out on her family, her husband, and two young children, and fell into a web of empty relationships and drugs in Detroit's Cass Corridor. Halfway through her decade of despair, she was befriended and taken in by John Seltzer, who himself was familiar with stretches of homelessness and poor decisions. Initially, however, his support and what became an ongoing prayer vigil for his companion wasn't enough to break her addiction to cocaine and its 30-day spells of half-awake wandering and full-blown carelessness.

But he kept praying.

"I didn't like the situation she was living in, so I just tucked her under my wings and asked God to help her," Seltzer said. "The Lord was telling me that he was going to save her from the abuse of drugs. I went down to the Detroit River and I prayed late at night for her."

Years earlier, determined to turn his own life around, Seltzer approached the front doors of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul and found them locked. The locked doors on the Woodward Avenue Church struck him as odd, he recalled, but "something just said 'you need to just go in there; you're going to find yourself in there. Just go in.'"

So he did—and because Seltzer began to spend so much time in the building, Dean Stephen Bancroft offered him a job keeping watch over the Cathedral so that the church doors could stay open during the days.



John Seltzer and Maureen Maniece coordinate the Breakfast Ministry at the Cathedral.

When he met Maniece, Seltzer tried to coax her to the Cathedral, too, but she wasn't interested in anything related to the church at the time. In fact, her indifference toward anything that didn't lead to her next drug buy only changed when the police knocked on their door. Maniece was arrested and incarcerated for lack of child support. She went to jail for 90 days.

While in jail, Maniece started bargaining with God, promising to turn her life around when she got out. As soon as she was released, she accepted Seltzer's pleas to go to the cathedral. In fact, Maniece started spending hours inside—just sitting, sometimes praying.

"I had 75 bucks in my account at the jail," she said. "I went straight home and I've been doing good ever since. I don't hang around with 'people' [and] I don't associate myself with the area that I used to. It changed my life. I just started coming here, volunteering. I really feel that the church saved my life. This is where I came when I didn't have nowhere else to go.

"I knew that if I didn't come to church, I would just go back and hang with the wrong people, and I didn't want to do that. So I just came here and it really made a difference. I might not have wanted to come, but I just kept coming. I just kept coming. I didn't want to use drugs no more."

"After she got out of jail, she made a dramatic change," said

Seltzer, who noted that Maniece seldom returned to the Cass Corridor, even though it is only blocks from where they live. She even refuses to cash a check near the area.

"She went back down there once to show everybody how clean she was. They looked at her and didn't even know who she was. She was like a walking spirit between all the ones using drugs," Seltzer said.

Soon after getting out of jail, Maniece got her food handlers card and a job in the kitchen of Chrysler Elementary School. She and Seltzer began to attend, and now coordinate the Sunday morning breakfast ministry that feeds between 100-200 people.

"I already know most of the people that we serve breakfast to because I was them. I was homeless; I was 'in the world,'" as Maniece describes her former life on the street.

Maniece has also become one of a dozen or two regular participants in the Sunday morning 12-step class that was formerly called Alcoholics for Christ. In fact, she recently assumed the leadership role in the group, which voted to change the name to Of Christ and Sobriety.

"I know everybody. When they see me, they say 'that's Monica,'" she explained. "It happens every Sunday. Somebody I know when I was 'in the world' sees me. When they see me and how I changed my life, then maybe they will change theirs."