



-Skyfemme

Washington, D.C.

Their prayers may be silent, but their presence in D.C. resonates.

Just three tree-lined blocks east of the Capitol, a three-story brick and copper rowhouse sits with a “war is not the answer” sign staked in the front garden.

The William Penn House, as it is identified on the black plaque above the limestone steps, is a Quaker center for exploring and making visible the faith’s testimonies of simplicity, truth, community, equality, and peace.

Oh, and the place offers cheap accommodations to young travelers like me.

As I walked from Union Station among all the D.C.ites – they toting serious briefcases, I a back pack and a bike – my mind dwelled on the question, How do these Quakers make visible their testimonies?

“We tend to be very activist in our faith,” explained Byron Sandford, Executive Director of the William Penn House.

We sat in the living room, furnished with mismatched couches and lined with bookshelves flush with offerings on the death penalty, environment, poverty and spirituality.

I saw a bit of simplicity and truth in that room.



“We were formed in 1966 to have a Quaker presence on Capitol Hill,” Sandford continued.

You might be wondering whether the Quakers are just another religious lobby, like the United Methodist Board of Church and Society or the American Atheist Lobby.

Sure, the Quakers want to change the government, but as Sandford noted, “As a 501c3 organization we’re limited on lobbying, so what we do is provide a comfortable and safe environment so other people can do that.”

Because of their hospitality and open door to non-Quakers, there is equal opportunity to experience downtown D.C., as a tourist, a student or a bearer of social change.

“My first month here was the inauguration of ‘George the Second,’ ” Sanford volunteered. “In the house that weekend, half the people were here to celebrate and half were here to protest it. So it brings people together in an environment that is safe.”

But William Penn House provides more than just a place to bunk down. It also provides educational programming for children and adults.

The programs consist of both work camps and seminars, together totaling more than 50 per year. The work camps place volunteers in soup kitchens, shelters and home rehabilitations.

Sitting on the couch in a floral dress and tennis shoes, Bernadette Odyniec, The William House Program and Grants Coordinator, said: “The work camps are service learning. So kids go out and do service and then do reflections on that.”

In the hostel, they have created quite a welcoming community. And with the work camps, they bring that community to the public.

“That’s a lot of who we are. We do things by building community,” Odyniec said simply.

One program in particular struck me as an effort to meld two communities and encourage a feeling of equality.

The organization is planning a work camp for the fall, Stanford said, “where we combine a suburban Quaker school with an inner-city D.C. school, working on homes to foster communication, overcome racism, and stereotypes.”

As for the seminars, they are created by the House staff and include speakers and discussions on topics such as social justice and peace.

One such program, the Teachers for Peace seminar, focuses on how to bring peace and social change to the classroom.

As Odyniec describes it, “I think of it as a sandwich model. We start with sort of the practical, How do you bring this into your classroom? And then we have a day of speakers to open up people’s ideas about what peacemaking might look like. And then we end again with, Okay, how do we bring this into the classroom?”

So after my fourth and final day at the William Penn House, the answer to my question — How do these Quakers make visible their testimonies? – was firmly planted in my mind.



Simply put, the folks there do their best to do the right thing. And that's all you can ask for.

Sandford phrased it more eloquently: "If the rest of the world is walking this way and you're walking this way, that's okay."

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