



L'Arche: Creating Communities

By Tanya Katnic

During his tenure as a philosophy and theology student at the Institut Catholique in Paris in 1950, Jean Vanier met Father Thomas Philippe, a Dominican priest and professor who was to become Vanier's spiritual mentor and friend.

By then a commissioned naval officer, Vanier resigned from the Navy and joined Father Philippe, who had become chaplain to a small institution for men with developmental disabilities in Trosly-Breuil, France. In 1964, Vanier decided to settle in Trosly to live with people with disabilities. He bought a small house and named it "L'Arche," the French word for arc.

Now 130 L'Arche communities—family-like homes where adults with and without disabilities share their lives—have put down roots in 33 countries around the world. One of these is L'Arche Wavecrest, the sole L'Arche community in California.

The community was founded by Karen Carr in Fullerton in 2004, after she spent five years in France, researching L'Arche and working under the guidance of Vanier. Five core members (those with developmental disabilities) live with three assistants (those who see to the core members' needs) at L'Arche Wavecrest, which is now located in Orange.

The decision to move from Fullerton was a tough one, says L'Arche Wavecrest Executive Director/Community Leader David Martinson. "When the lease was up and we couldn't renew, we decided to purchase a house," he recalls. "It took a leap of faith, but we raised \$200,000 in three months for the down payment."

The core members at Abraham House—the L'Arche Wavecrest home—enjoy active lives. Four of them attend Hope University in Anaheim—a fine arts-infused day program for adults with developmental disabilities—and work at Orange County Arc, which provides vocational training, employment, and placement in community-based jobs. One member works independently in the dining room of a nursing home.

"L'Arche is an organization that is based on relationships, and in those relationships there is community," says Martinson. "Our goal is to create community—not only with our core

members, but with our assistants and directors.

"What we have found is that core members have been marginalized before they come to Abraham House, and made fun of because of their disabilities," he continues. "They come here with their deep hurts and sorrow, but they also bring such tremendous joy.

"They do not have any barriers. They are just open to love you."

Vanier's vision was even broader than that. Community and commitment are central to

L'Arche—core members may stay for life if they wish—and that can lead to growth and development, often in surprising ways. "When you start living with people with disabilities," Vanier once said, "you begin to discover many things about yourself. To be human is to be bonded together, each with our own strengths and weaknesses, because we need each other."

In reaching out to others, Vanier believes, "...we become the face of Jesus, the hands of Jesus, the heart of Jesus.

"The mystery of Christ is to change us, to become Jesus to the world."

L'Arche helps assistants and core members do exactly that—and to teach the rest of us besides. As Pope John Paul II once said, "Since its beginnings, L'Arche has grown to become a dynamic and providential sign of the civilization of love." **o.c.c.**

Information; larcheusa.org/larche-wavecrest.html.