Rebecca and Mark
Community members at L’Arche Heartland, Overland Park KS
Interview by Chhaya Kolavalli at L’Arche Heartland, Overland Park KS
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Original recorded interview length: 0:20:32
Transcribed by Chhaya Kolavalli

Note: Interview questions are written in bold, respondent’s answers are in regular font. Interviewees requested to remain anonymous, so pseudonyms are used here.

Abstract: In this interview, two members of a L’Arche intentional community in Overland Park, Kansas, describe life within community. They talk about the mission statement of L’Arche—which includes sharing life with adults with disabilities—and briefly outline the founding of the movement. This transcript includes a description of a typical day within this community, and a brief discussion of the difficulties they faced when trying to integrate into the broader Overland Park community.

So, background information—if you could give me your name, date of birth, place of birth, something about where you grew up?

Rebecca: So my name is Rebecca, and I am 29. And I was born in Illinois, outside of Chicago.

Did you go to college?

Rebecca: Yeah, I went to Creighton University in Omaha, and I studied social work.

What faith tradition were you raised in? Was your family religious?

Rebecca: Yeah, I was raised Catholic, and I am still marginally Catholic (laughs).

Can you explain what you mean by marginally Catholic?

Rebecca: Yeah, so that’s the tradition that I feel most comfortable in—knowing the songs and the prayers. But I have a wife, which makes me a little marginal in the Catholic church, so I’m not like a participating member. I don’t tithe. It’s a deep part of my faith, but I don’t feel connected to all facets of what the Catholic church is. And I think, here’s Mark—

(Mark enters the room and joins the interview)

So, if you could give me your name, your date of birth, where you were born, maybe something about what your hometown was like?

Mark: Alright, um, Mark, I’m 32 years old, I’m 33 in September. My hometown is Manhattan, Kansas—K-State! I like my hometown a lot.
Were you raised in a religious family?

Mark: I was raised in a religious family, yes.

What faith would you say you were raised in?

Mark: Methodist.

Would you still define yourself as Methodist today?

Mark: Yes.

So I don’t know much about L’Arche, but I do know that it’s a pretty big tradition within intentional communities. Can you tell me more about what L’Arche is?

Rebecca: When did it start? What year are we celebrating?

Mark: 7.

Rebecca: No, what year of L’Arche altogether?

Mark: 27?

Rebecca: No, this is it’s fiftieth anniversary. So 50 years ago, who started it?

Mark: Jean Vanier.

Rebecca: Jean Vanier, in France. He was visiting folks with disabilities who lived in institutions—which in France, everyone who had a disability lived in institutions. They were kind of cast away from their houses and their families, and he said “I think that these people would do really well in a house.” So he invited three people to stay with him, and he just really enjoyed it. And so then it spread. So now I think—do you know how many communities there are, Mark?

Mark: I think there’s like 100—

Rebecca: I think they’re in like 37 countries.

So is this defined as a Christian intentional community?

Rebecca: Um, I think the mission statement says that we’re ecumenical, but it started as a Catholic organization. The co-founder was a Catholic priest. So, still lots of connections—based on the community, and probably the country for sure. I think ecumenical.
So specifically about this community you guys live in—can you give me some more information? How many people live here?

Mark: 16 core members.

Rebecca: 16 core members, and there’s usually six or seven live-in staff, and then six or seven staff who are kind of respite for the live-in staff. So that’s a mix of staff. Yeah.

Do people of all faith live in this community?

Mark: Yeah.

Rebecca: Yeah, we’re mostly Christian, some Catholics, some Lutherans, some Methodists. I think that’s pretty universal for L’Arche, worldwide. We encourage people and want people to have a faith tradition, we want that to be a part of our lives together. But it’s not a specific—I think that in general I would guess that when you’re working and living with adults with disabilities, you kind of find a lot of those different faith tradition rules and regimens, those fall away. The faith that we practice is a lot simpler.

Can you run me through a typical week or a typical day here?

Rebecca: Do you want to do your typical day, Mark?

Mark: Yeah. Well we get up at like eight I think, and I have to be at work at nine or ten o’clock in the morning.

Rebecca: So almost everyone goes to work.

Mark: Work all day. Then I come home and usually we—tonight we have something called prayer night, which is ecumenical thing I guess. And tomorrow we can do whatever we want. We’re going swimming tomorrow night.

Rebecca: So all of the core members work during the day at Sheltered Workshops, or out in the community, but the majority work at Sheltered Workshops, where they’re doing kind of different jobs. Mark works a lot at a consignment shop—

Mark: It’s not. Donation shop.

Rebecca: —donation shop. Or George has a contract to mow lawns. So, different things like that. And then everyone comes home around three and has time to relax. The afternoons are variety activities. So once a week all the houses get together and share a meal and prayer time. There’s different special Olympic sports in the afternoons and evenings—like bowling, Mark’s a bowler—or we’ll go to the gym
together. Once a week we’ll usually have a fun activity that we’ll all do together, and then houses have their own kind of routines—like they’ll go swimming or to QuickTrip, stuff like that.

**What’s the best part of living in community? What does it add to your faith or your life?**

Mark: You get to know ‘em as family, and not just as individuals.

Rebecca: Yeah, I think for me I’ve always wanted to be with communities because they help me grow and they challenge me. I can’t go days without doing my dishes because my community will tell me (laughs). “Rebecca, you need to do your dishes!” And they help keep me accountable, because as an individual I might say “It’d be great if you prayed everyday,” but a community might support me in actually setting up a schedule and holding me accountable to it, so it helps me grow in that way.

**Is there anything tough about living in community?**

Mark: Fighting. Well we don’t fight with each other, really, just kind or arguments arise and you have to just go with it.

Rebecca: I would say, I mean similar to Mark, my biggest challenge is when there’s different view points involved—people think differently and you have to work it out. Because we aren’t family members who have known each other for years and years, we’re still having to figure all that out. And we all come from different places and have different experiences, so we do think differently and it takes longer to resolve conflict or difference of opinion.

**Are there any other L’Arche communities in Kansas?**

Rebecca: No.

Mark: No, just the one in Overland Park.

**Who founded this one?**

Rebecca: Um, two nuns and a woman—so Sister Cristella, and Sister Lucy, and a woman named Lisa. And they’re all still alive and involved in the community, but they really really like to tell the story about when they started L’Arche. They had heard about L’Arche and wanted to start this community, and this community in particular was very resistant to having adults with disabilities in their neighborhood. This was in the ‘80s.

**Really?**
Rebecca: Yeah, 'cus you have to set it up as a group home, so you have to get approval from city council. I don't know if that's still the case, but that's how it was in the ‘80s. So it's kind of a special provision, it's not like you go buy a house, and you're a single-family household. But people didn't want people who are different from them in their neighborhood. So it took them six years of like convincing and talking to people to have a house here.

**Wow, that's crazy. On a different note, do y'all engage in any gardening or simple living practices?**

Rebecca: Mhm, both of our houses have gardens.

Mark: We have a garden that we've had for a year or so now.

Rebecca: This is the second year. And my house has had a garden for like the last decade. What are you growing in your garden?


Rebecca: We're growing one or two of the vegetables we eat a week—for the whole house.

**Why'd you decide to start gardens?**

Mark: We felt it was a good idea for our community. For our community to get together and join in community.

Rebecca: I think that our house decided to do it, and I continued to do it, because it's a really neat way to involve people of different abilities. Because almost everyone can water, almost everyone can put a seed in the ground. And that excitement and joy when you see things growing—it also helps us eat healthier when we’re excited about watching things grow, and then bringing them inside and eating them. So that's another part of it for us.

Mark: It's like creation—

Rebecca: Care for creation. I think people are questioning food sources, where we get our food from, how things are grown, and just kind of wanting to do that a little differently. It's something that's easy, if you have land. It's a part of—you may have a range of frustrations about how the world is, and food might be one of them, and it's something tangible that you can take action, by growing your own. So I think that's a big part of it.

**That's all I have, anything else to add? Is there stuff that's important about this community that you’d like to share?**
Mark: We’re a family. I guess.

Thank you! That’s it.