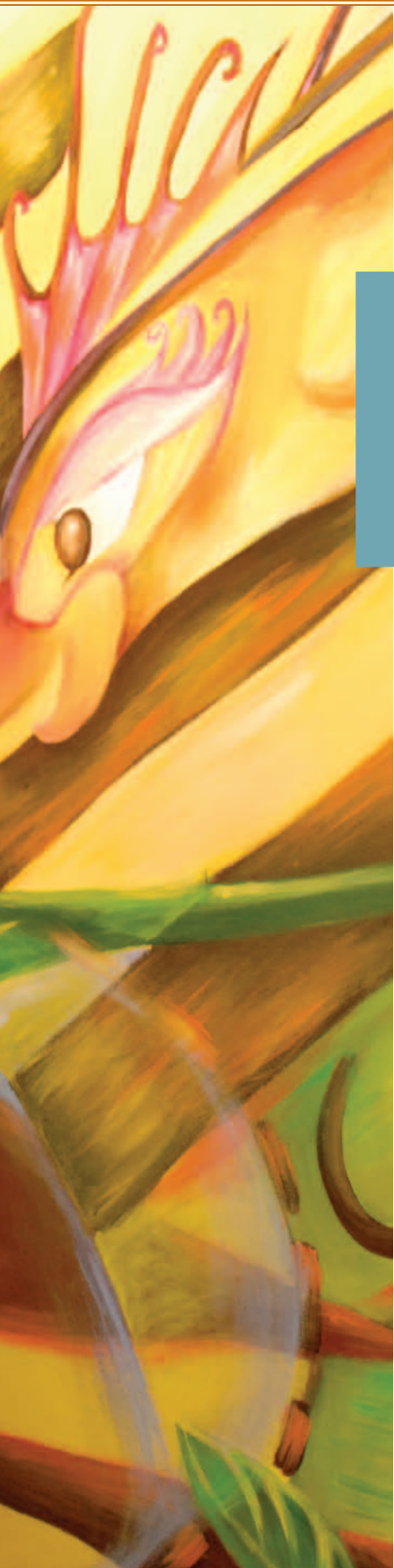


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What HOPE Looks Like

BY ELIZABETH WALKER

*S*ister Margaret Leonard, LSA, CE'64, sees hope when a homeless family finally has keys to an apartment to call home. Or when a single mother gets a job that enables her to support her family. More often, the Little Sister of the Assumption sees deprivation, depression and domestic violence before she sees hope.

Sr. Margaret, one of Assumption's first female graduates, has been working for more than four decades to improve society "one person, one family, one community at a time." This year she received, on behalf of Project HOPE, the 2007 Award for Excellence in Community Development from the Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation. It is one among a litany of awards that she has received for the commitment, care and respect that distinguish her enduring efforts to end homelessness. In addition to co-chairing the Mayor's Homeless Planning Committee, she is on the board of directors of Pernet Family Health Services, Inc. of Worcester, which is sponsored by the Little Sisters of the Assumption. Also, she actively serves on several other boards and advisory committees focused on the welfare of homeless and at-risk families.

An Everett (MA) native, Sr. Margaret entered the order of the Little Sisters of the Assumption (LSA) in 1957. As a young nun, she was sent to Harlem to work in one of New York City's grittiest neighborhoods. By 1974, she was named the U.S. Provincial for her order, while also working with LSA Family Services in East Harlem. A decade later, she came to Dorchester (MA), where the Little Sisters have had a presence for more than half a century. The late Richard Cardinal Cushing invited the congregation to move to Dorchester in 1947 to work with immigrant families. As the neighborhood changed, the congregation changed its focus from

health services to helping families deal with the complexities of the social services system. Executive director of Project HOPE since 1985, Sr. Margaret is still challenged every day by the same overriding problem—finding affordable housing for homeless families.

“How do you really address poverty without changing the policies that perpetuate it?” Sr. Margaret asked. “This is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Boston. It had a lot of vacant land and used to be a dumping ground. At one time, it had 12 transfer (trash) stations. We are one of the founding members of the Dudley (Roxbury) Neighborhood Initiative, which organized the neighborhood and bought back the land. People recognized their rights and responsibilities. We now have more affordable housing than any other neighborhood this close to Boston. Today, this neighborhood is a miracle.”

Project “House Open, People Enter”

With a hopeful name in a hopeless place, Project HOPE was launched 25 years ago when the Little Sisters of the Assumption in Dorchester opened its convent doors to homeless women with children. It became one of the first shelters in the state to welcome and work to preserve families. Project HOPE, which partners with Boston-area families to move them up and out of homelessness and poverty, also leads joint efforts to prevent homelessness in the first place. The multi-service agency provides low-income mothers with access to education, jobs, housing and emergency services. Project HOPE fosters their personal transformation and works toward broader systems change.

“Project HOPE is about helping people to see themselves differently,” Sr. Margaret said. “Hope begins with people transforming their vision of themselves. They often have low self-esteem and feel like failures. We look with them at the causes of their homelessness. Once you have a roof over your head and stable housing, you can have a vision that you can change the community to help the world become more just and loving—as Fr. d’Alzon would say, ‘the reign of God today.’”

“Changing the world”

Sr. Margaret has ties to Assumption College that extend beyond her bachelor’s degree. She enrolled in undergraduate day classes through Assumption’s St. Augustine Institute, which was phased out several years later. At that time, the student body was still all male. Nursing students were the only females in day classes.

“I was sent to Assumption to get a degree and become a social worker,” said Sr. Margaret, who later earned a master’s in social work at Fordham University. “Sr. Maureen O’Keefe was there with me. Because we were sisters, we were allowed to go to class with the men. We became like counselors. I think the young men felt safe talking to us because we wore habits. The old Assumptionists were wonderful mentors. When I think of the formation of my own mind, I think of Dr. George Doyle in economics, and of Dr. Raymond Marion, both wonderful professors. Dr. Marion taught me to look at the world through an organized framework. I

“I have learned to look at the world through the basement window, through the lives of people at the bottom.”

—Sister Margaret Leonard, LSA, CE’64

received an excellent education at Assumption. I graduated in 1964 and (Senator) Teddy Kennedy spoke at our graduation.”

Her congregation, the Little Sisters of the Assumption, co-founded in 1865 in Paris by Father Etienne (Stephen) Pernet, an Augustinian of the Assumption, and Antoinette Fage (later Mother Marie de Jesus), began as a community of women religious responding to social needs accelerated by industrialization. In 1891, the LSA brought its mission of social services and spiritual care to the U.S. to improve the lives of the poor and suffering.

“The Little Sisters of the Assumption has a mission that takes contemplation and puts it into action—not just living among the poor, but changing the world.” Sr. Margaret said.

Hope is “green”

If hope has a color, it is green. In October 2006, Project HOPE celebrated the completion and occupancy of its new environmentally-friendly, four-story multi-service community center on Dudley Street in Roxbury. Certified as Roxbury’s first “green” building, the new center is LEED® Silver Certified by the U.S. Green Building Council. The new 18,000-square-foot community center was built utilizing energy-efficient systems, environmentally-focused materials, and with an objective to recycle more than 75 percent of construction waste. It is home to adult education programs, workforce development and housing services for the community. The size alone enables Project HOPE to serve many more families, while expanding the breadth and depth of its current services and programs. A *Boston Globe* article described Project HOPE’s new headquarters as “full of doors to life-changing opportunities.” In addition to its new site, Project HOPE’s original Magnolia Street facility, the former convent just a few blocks away, remains home to the family shelter, child care center and food pantry.

“This building is focused on the solution,” Sr. Margaret said. “It is a true community center. There is always something going on here. Everyone is welcome.”

Sr. Margaret marked two milestones in 2007—the 50th anniversary of her entry into the convent and a momentous birthday. Her birthday celebration in July, which was held in the new center, included 100 well-wishers, a look-a-like troupe of dancing “Sr. Margarets” and a visit from Boston Mayor Thomas Menino. In addition to throwing the surprise party, Sr. Margaret’s staff gave



Sr. Margaret discusses program evaluations with student-entrepreneurs enrolled in Project HOPE's Family Child Care Business Enterprise.

“Hope begins with people transforming their vision of themselves.”

—Sister Margaret Leonard, LSA, CE'64

her a personalized action figure whose glasses, shoulder bag and sensible shoes made it an identical mini-twin for her. While her action figure sits silently on her desk, Sr. Margaret is in perpetual motion, engaging with clients and staff, some of whom first came to Project HOPE as clients. She is highly involved in the educational and outreach programs that take place throughout the building. From Sr. Margaret's fourth-floor office, the sounds of the lively street below are often drowned out by the sirens on the emergency vehicles that race through the neighborhood almost continuously. While the storefronts and dilapidated houses below offer a real-time view of the community center's immediate neighborhood, it is on the skyline in the distance, from where Boston's policymakers do business, that Sr. Margaret also keeps her eyes trained.

Movers, shakers and policymakers

It came as no surprise to those who know Sr. Margaret that Mayor Menino wanted to come to her surprise birthday celebration, rather than just send an official card as requested. Sr. Margaret knows almost everyone. Not only does she know the state's movers and shakers, she knows how to put together an effective coalition, and when and whom to call when it is time to influence a change in policy, an ordinance or a vote that stands in the way of moving

disadvantaged people into affordable, stable housing. Author and philanthropist Peter Karoff, who interviewed Sr. Margaret for his book, *The World We Want: From Vision to Solution-Conversations to Engage the Citizen Within*, puts it this way, “She can get you to throw up your hands and surrender faster than anyone I know.”

“People in Massachusetts don't have to be homeless,” Sr. Margaret said. “I grew up in Everett and Chelsea in a loving comfortable family. Somewhere I got the idea that all families did not have the same experience. When homelessness became a political agenda in the 1980s, we formed partnerships to create solutions. That's where I cut my teeth. When I returned (to the Boston area), I realized that my people, the family and friends I grew up with, had positions in the Statehouse. I asked my sister to get me a meeting with a legislator she knew and went on from there. Here in Boston, you can be invested at the neighborhood level, and also connected with officials at city and state government, corporations, foundations and faith-based groups. It's easier to get things done.”

You can get those things done in Boston, if you have the focus, energy, vision, organizational skills and sense of humor that Sr. Margaret brings to moving the issue of homelessness and its causes front and center in the public discourse.

“Our commitment to work on solutions to poverty and family homelessness caused us to forge partnerships in the public and private arenas,” Sr. Margaret said. “Project HOPE and our Dudley Street neighborhood have been blessed with such partnerships over the last 20 years. The outcome has been significant. Our once declining neighborhood is now in a process of revitalization. And now homelessness is a central issue at both the city and state levels, engaging the legislature, the administration and an array of private partners in a coordinated effort to end homelessness. Project HOPE is a partner in all of these efforts.” ❖