



Project Hope

An Interview With Margaret A. Leonard

MARGARET A. LEONARD, a member of the Little Sisters of the Assumption, is the executive director of Project Hope, a shelter for homeless families in the Dorchester section of Boston, Mass. The interview took place at Project Hope on July 29, 1996. The interviewer was George M. Anderson, S.J., associate editor of AMERICA.

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HOW LONG have the Little Sisters of the Assumption been working in the Dorchester area of Boston?

We came here to Dorchester almost 50 years ago, in 1947, to live among poor families and help them with health and education needs. That's the charism of our order, which was founded in 1865 in Paris during the industrial revolution. When we arrived in Dorchester, it was populated mostly by immigrants from Ireland, Germany and Italy. If there was illness in a family, we'd step in to provide health services in their own homes.

But in the 1960's the neighborhood changed greatly. The whites moved out and it became multicultural and multilingual, with Puerto Ricans, Haitians, African Americans, Cape Verdeans and Latin Americans. They needed more help dealing with the complexities of the social service system, so we changed our approach as the needs of the families around us changed. Adaptability is part of our charism, and since we've never been tied to maintaining institutions, we've been able to change with the times.

What form did these changing needs primarily take?

Housing became the main problem. The housing stock had deteriorated, and no major efforts were being made by either the state or the Federal Government to build new housing. To make matters worse there was a lot of arson, sometimes by absentee landlords themselves in order to collect insurance claims. Almost every night in the 1970's there was another house on fire. Even the houses across the street from us burned. The neighborhood looked like a scene from Vietnam, where the war was going on at the time.

PHOTO PAT CURRAN

What happened then?

That was in 1985, by which time I was here as director. We felt that to embark on such a big undertaking, we needed further training in community development. So one of the S.N.D. sisters enrolled in the University of New Hampshire weekend degree program to get a master's in community economic development. Through contacts she made during her studies, we got in touch with a Connecticut group, Coopportunity Inc., that had developed small-scale limited equity co-ops in Hartford and trained people to build sweat equity and ultimately to manage their own co-ops. This became our outlook too, not just to build housing but to provide training for the people who would live in it so that they could manage and control it themselves.

What was the next step?

The next step was to begin a capital campaign. We raised one million dollars in nine months because the idea really sold. Everybody supported us, including banks. Then, as the actual building of the eight two-and-three bedroom units got underway, we reached out for a diversified group of families who went through an

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intensive training program that included the sweat equity component.

To be eligible, they had to be low-income families (\$10,000 to \$25,000). The families living there now are involved in some of our programs, and we go to their annual financial meetings. The fact that we own the 99-year ground lease serves as a protection against gentrification.

While walking around the neighborhood, I noticed a lot of other similar new housing. Is there a connection?

There are over 300 units of new housing in the neighborhood, and it's all connected with the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, of which we're a part. Our eight units were one of the first projects of the initiative, which began in the mid-1980's and became a model of pilot ventures for community development throughout the country—rebuilding neighborhoods through the initiative of their own residents. □

Were you here in Dorchester then?

No. I was provincial superior of the U.S. Province of our congregation and was living in New York City. But the sisters working here approached me and said, "What shall we do? We live in this big convent, and the people have no place to go because their houses are in bad condition or are burned down. We should either open up our house to the people or sell it and move elsewhere."

So during Holy Week, we went through a discernment process with a Jesuit, Father Ed Brady, and the result was a decision to share the convent with homeless families. We came up with the acronym HOPE—House Open, People Enter. That's how Project Hope was begun in 1980. The sisters got jobs in the community to support themselves and then came home at night to help with the homeless families here. We soon became one of the first neighborhood-based family shelters in Massachusetts to receive funding. The state, though, saw it as an emergency situation and failed to understand the structural nature of homelessness—that it has to do with inadequate income and rising housing costs. In the Boston area as a whole, gentrification was becoming another factor in making affordable housing hard to find, especially for a family on public assistance.

Apart from this failure in understanding, was the state supportive?

At the beginning, yes. Michael Dukakis was Governor of Massachusetts, and he made family homelessness a human services priority. Through the state legislature, housing subsidies were provided, and homeless families were also prioritized for Federal Section 8 certificates. This meant that many families could find places to live. Women and their children staying with us at Project Hope were usually able to move into subsidized housing within two or three months, after which we provided follow-up programs and ongoing support. So, as long as money was more readily available from the state, there was a constructive response to homeless families.

But when Massachusetts entered into a recession, that progressive and humane public policy addressing homelessness was taken apart piece by piece. The justification for cuts and changes was to blame the families for their own homelessness—to make distinctions between the "worthy" and the "unworthy" poor. We were confronted with a backlash against homeless families. It was another case of blaming the victim, which happens so often in this country.

As part of the backlash, the Department of Transitional Assistance—the state's welfare department—redefined its criteria for eligibility. It was a strategy to reduce hotel and motel costs and, generally, to keep people out of family shelters. As a result, more mothers and their children were denied shelter of any kind and had to live in overcrowded conditions with friends or relatives, or even in hospital waiting rooms. Sometimes it meant that children were placed in foster care while the parents stay in single shelters.

So the welfare changes have had a harsh impact?

Welfare reform in Massachusetts has been draconian. The number of families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children has been cut dramatically, from approximately 120,000 to about 85,000. Children born to mothers on welfare are now no longer entitled to be included in their mothers' grants. The grants themselves are already significantly below the poverty level. In addition, women in educational programs that are specifically geared to helping them become independent are being forced to leave these programs and go into workfare—working for the grants they receive.

We are preparing a video on welfare reform that focuses on the lives of three women who stayed with us when they were homeless. Now they're all working and off welfare. What homeless mothers need is education, jobs that pay a liveable family wage, affordable housing, child care and health care. We need to listen to their voices, their stories about what real welfare reform means.

What has been the impact of the welfare changes on Project Hope?

Before the changes, our doors were open to any homeless family, and to a degree they still are. But now families have to be approved first by the Department of Transitional Assistance to stay here. We have eight rooms for families that we contract for with the D.T.A., but there are also two that we

call community rooms, where we can put others up in emergency situations, whether they were approved by the D.T.A. or not. So even with the cutbacks, we've been able to maintain a certain flexibility.

Do you do advocacy work in the area of welfare changes?

Definitely. We work with several agencies in an effort to change the D.T.A. regulations for homeless families, like the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, Greater Boston Legal Services and Massachusetts Law Reform. I spend half my time doing advocacy work of one kind or another, much of it at the State House, which fortunately is close by in downtown Boston.

What happens once a family is here?

We have our own day care, and we help the older children get into school. The main focus for the mothers revolves around finding subsidized housing. There's no way that a mother with children on A.F.D.C. can afford market rent. A two-bedroom apartment in the Boston area costs approximately \$700 a month, but the entire A.F.D.C. check for a family of three, including the portion for housing, is \$579 a month. But it can take a long time to find subsidized housing; there's a huge waiting list. That's one reason why the average length of stay here is now seven to eight months. The process is also very complicated. The state runs 270

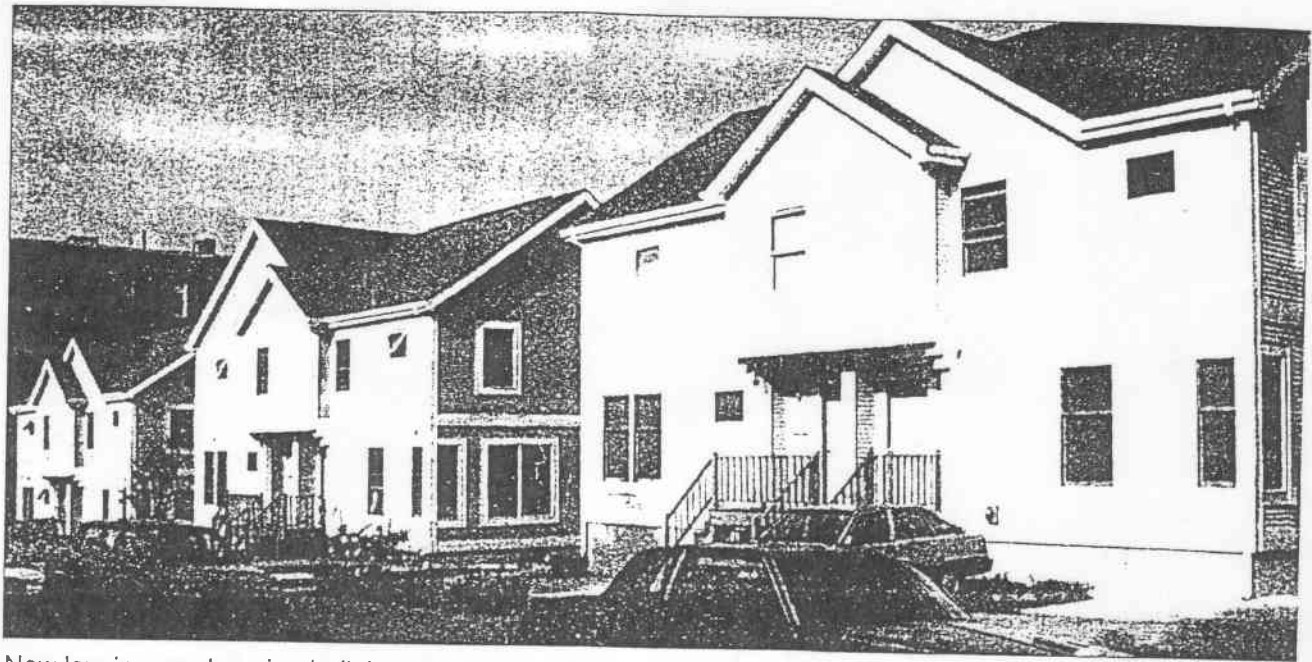


PHOTO: MARGARET LEONARD, L.S.A.

New low-income housing built in 1991 through Project Hope's Magnolia Street Cooperative Housing project.

separate housing departments, and each has a separate application, so a woman applying has to fill out several of them. We have a housing advocate here who works with the women throughout the process.

Staying at Project Hope for as long as they do, do the women form a kind of community among themselves?

Yes, though this is difficult, given their diverse cultural backgrounds. A number of Ethiopian women have been here, for instance, as well as Latin Americans and African Americans and Cape Verdeans. But they all help. Someone will cook lunch for the rest: they take turns.

Working with the women as a group is a priority. We try to empower these women, because we recognize that the women who are with us should be participants in shaping their own destinies and not have things imposed on them from outside. Any programs we create, therefore, have their active involvement. It's important that victims of poverty and oppression and homelessness not internalize their situation in such a way as to blame themselves. Instead, the thrust is for them to understand the causes and forces behind the situation and to act with us as advocates for change at the level of cause.

What kinds of programs do you focus on?

Educational programs of various kinds. The only way for a woman to get off welfare is by acquiring the basic education and skills she needs to get a good job. That's what prompted us to start our adult literacy center here five years ago. We found that a number of the women who had been with us and then moved into permanent housing were dropping out of the programs they had enrolled in after leaving here. They would come back as part of our consumer advisory board or our board of directors and say, "We want educational programs here at Project Hope that respond to the women's needs before they go into subsidized housing."

Sister Noel Doyle is in charge of the adult literacy center. She's a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur. The background of her congregation is in education, so she brings the expertise of her congregation to us in a way that complements the thrust of the Little Sisters of the Assumption—that is, being present to the people who are the poorest. It was a collaborative joining of the strengths of our individual congregations that allowed us to create something unique, with all of us committed to the larger goal of empowering women.

What about job availability for women here and elsewhere in the area?

Everyone is talking about ending welfare as we know it and about new employment opportunities. But where are the jobs? Creating opportunities for education and jobs that pay a family wage is critical. We have several new initiatives to address this issue. For example, along with other shelters here in Dorchester and in the adjacent communities of Roxbury and Mattapan, and in collaboration with the Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development, we're going to begin a new initiative in February 1997. It will bring a course on economic literacy into the shelters and provide support and advocacy around education, jobs and business development, not just for homeless women but for low-income women in general.

In collaboration with the Women's Institute, we are providing weekly business opportunity programs at Project Hope. Here in our own neighborhood, too, we're doing a feasibility study around family day care. If the results of the study indicate it, we will train women to develop their own small businesses as family day care providers, who could then create a supportive network among themselves.

In January we will begin a program with the College of Public and Community Service at the University of Massachusetts involving 12 scholarships for low-income women, as well as credit-bearing internships in the field of community development.

Does the staff consist entirely of religious women?

No. Five formerly homeless women who were here as residents of Project Hope are now full-time staff members. Rosa, a Honduran who came to us as a homeless woman in 1985, is director of the shelter aspect of the operation.

Overall, there are 26 persons, including Little Sisters of the Assumption and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Religious of the Sacred Heart have also provided crucial volunteer services for years.

What is the background of the women here?

The majority are single parents, to some extent because of the way welfare is structured—it encourages separation. A large percentage have been abused, both physically and sexually. Ellen Bassuk, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has done a study of welfare mothers in Worcester, Mass., that found that 92 percent of the mothers who were homeless had been subjected to severe physical or sexual abuse at some time in their lives. But as the women here gain self-esteem, they become able to set different rules with men, so there's less abuse. It has to do with what a woman will and will not take—an important part of the empowerment agenda.

Is there a spiritual component to Project Hope?

The spiritual dimension is at the heart of our mission. Many of the women who stay with us have no specific church association, but they believe deeply in God. One, who is working today, always has her Bible open on weekends and is constantly reflecting on what she reads in Scripture.

But we've tried to define what we're doing out of deeper levels than religious tradition alone: love for one another, concerns for justice, relationships among people and the building of community. These are spiritual thrusts we can share with others of diverse traditions. For example, we work well with the men from the Islamic mosque down the street.

Speaking of sharing spirituality, do you ever get away together as a group?

The Little Sisters of the Assumption have a retreat house at Walden, near Newburgh, N.Y. We made a commitment to share it with any who share our lives, just as we share this building that used to be our convent. We feel that the buildings don't belong only to us sisters, but to all of us. The formerly homeless women on our staff might otherwise never have a chance to get away to a restful place. So we take them with us to the retreat house, and we bring others too, with their children, at least four times a year. This past time, we reflected on non-violence—how to transform the violence in our lives, both on the individual and on the group level. Over 100 people attended.

So the retreat house is not just for the staff and residents of Project Hope?

No. Last year, for instance, we sponsored a four-day Hispanic retreat for 12 couples. Some were from Project Hope, but the rest were from our other two projects in Worcester and in the East Harlem section of New York City. Retreats like these help people in their quest for God, but the quest happens right here too, sometimes through crises. There was one woman with us whose child, who had sickle cell anemia, was taken away to foster care because she herself was too ill to provide the care he needed. The full extent of her illness still has not been diagnosed. There was another whose boyfriend was murdered. These are the kinds of situations when you can help people tap into the deeper levels of their search for God. It can be through a moment of joy too, such as when a homeless mother after a long search finally finds a permanent place to live with her children.

As I walked up Magnolia Street from Dudley Street, the main thoroughfare through this part of Dorchester, I noticed several identical new houses across from Project Hope. Who built these?

Those houses were built in 1991 through what we call our Magnolia Cooperative Housing Project. This year is its fifth anniversary. The state wanted us to open other shelters for homeless families, but we said no, that we're in the business of doing away with shelters, not opening up more of them. Our first effort in developing housing was the rehabilitation of a building three blocks away, where three formerly homeless families are now living.

But we also wanted to do something new and different. We kept looking at what was then empty land across the street, where there had been old houses that burned down as a result of arson. One day, Mayor Raymond Flynn was here for a meeting. (He and Governor Dukakis used to hold some of their press conferences here at Project Hope.) We showed him the empty lots across the street and said, "We'd like to have that land to build affordable housing." He told us to contact the Department of Public Facilities in Boston the very next day, which we did, and the land was given to us for the housing we envisioned, along with a substantial grant.