

Remodeled by faith
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No one expected to see signs of life coming from the faded convent in Fairview.

The Catholic school population had been in decline for a generation. The last nun had moved out decades ago. And the narrow, three-story brick building on Anderson Avenue had sunk into disrepair.

"Pathetic was the word," said the Rev. Michael Gubernat, pastor of the neighboring St. John the Baptist Church. "My ultimate plan was to tear it down – that was my vision."

But that has changed. A small group of believers -- a few nuns and a layperson -- moved into the convent several years ago after searching around North Jersey for just the right place to open a mission to the poor.

This Christmas, their work is coming to fruition.

With the help of community groups and businesses, they've transformed the decrepit convent into the Franciscan Community Development Center -- a place aimed at helping struggling people, including the immigrant families and day laborers who've emerged in this tightly packed, working-class town bordering Hudson County.

"When we walked into the convent, the ceiling was on the floor, and it was like, 'This is it, we feel God's presence here,' " Susan Colacurcio said.

Colacurcio is the one layperson living on the convent's grounds -- a frank-talking Union City native who smokes cigarettes and teaches science at Memorial High School in West New York. She had long dreamed of infusing her life with a spiritual purpose. It wasn't until she met Sister Anna Maria Not, an Italian nun, that she figured out how to do it.

Sister Anna -- raised in a remote mountain village near the Austrian border -- arrived in West New York in 2001 at the behest of her order, the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

CARMINE GALASSO / THE RECORD
Sister Anna Maria Not overseeing teens wrapping presents for the needy in the basement of St. John the Baptist Church in Fairview. Sister Anna has helped create the Franciscan Community Development Center, which helps people put food on the table and presents under the tree.

"I was quite speechless -- I thought they would send me to Africa," Sister Anna said. "Of what I knew about America, I thought it was this rich country, with no poverty."

Colacurcio struck up a friendship with Sister Anna while visiting the West New York convent. The two women bonded over St. Francis of Assisi, who gave up all worldly possessions to live with the poor. Sister Anna longed to find her calling in America.

"Sister Anna said to me she just wanted to work and touch the souls of the people who were hopeless, or who were the throwaways of our society," Colacurcio said. "I said to her: 'You know what? I think I want to help you.' "

That was six years ago.

Last week, the once-moribund asphalt area behind the convent and the church was abuzz. Some had walked off the streets seeking food. Others were dropping off donations. At one point, Sister Anna ran onto Anderson Avenue and recruited three Guatemalan day laborers to unload a Chevrolet Suburban packed with donated clothes.

"Do you need any mattresses or blankets?" she asked them after slipping them some cash for their efforts.

"No sister," they responded in Spanish, "just clothes."

Spirit of St. Francis

The center, which operates out of the convent and St. John's old bingo room, is a work in progress. It aims to provide "one-stop shopping" for the needy – regardless of religion or race -- offering such items as food, clothes, baby strollers, blankets and mattresses.

It also aims to help poor families have a better Christmas. On Christmas Eve, groups of mostly Latino men streamed through the center, picking up toys for their children.

A generation ago, Fairview was a mostly white community whose residents were of Italian, Irish and German stock.

But its location near the immigrant gateway of Hudson County and its supply of rent-stabilized apartments has attracted newcomers from an array of Central and South American nations, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Columbia and Ecuador.

The convent's revitalization strikes some people as a blessing. Not only has it come during a time of economic and demographic change, it has also happened as the Roman Catholic Church and other denominations are considering reducing their presence in urban neighborhoods.

"Suddenly, the center is popping up in peoples' discussion," said Gubernat, the church pastor. "People realize there's something going on here."

Indeed, the energy is drawing suburban Catholics like Jim and Joan Dade of Paramus, who haul items to the center and persuade people holding household sales to donate some of their goods.

"Susan and the sisters are slowly working a miracle down here," Joan said. "We were immediately drawn to what they're doing."

Sister Anna, a soft-spoken but steely 61-year-old, said "the miracle" is the spirit of St. Francis at work.

Francis of Assisi, born in the late 12th century and the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, was a frivolous young man until experiencing a religious awakening. He accepted total poverty – even renouncing the clothes he was wearing -- as a way of emulating Jesus Christ. His example attracted followers, who worked as itinerant missionaries, rejecting attachment to place or possessions. The Franciscans were accepted as a Catholic order in 1210 by the Pope Innocent III.

"The Franciscan spirit is a spirit of simplicity," Sister Anna said. "It's a spirit of living in harmony, with all the creatures, and not making any difference between the big ones and small ones."

A community effort

As Christmas approached, there was no shortage of "small ones" gravitating to the center. A Guatemalan woman, who has five children, came for food. An Albanian mom with two children at her side sought clothes for her husband, whom she said needs them for his job "cleaning."

The needy weren't limited to recent immigrants.

A 21-year-old Fairview woman, five months pregnant, came seeking food and was loaded up with a turkey. Before leaving, Mary Garrabrant haltingly asked Sister Anna if she could get a gift for her 3-year-old, who was in foster care.

"I don't want to take anything from anyone," Garrabrant said. "But last time I saw him he didn't remember me."

Sister Anna ushered her into a room and gave her a miniature sofa with Winnie the Pooh characters on it.

Although they started with little seed money, Colacurcio and Sister Anna have cobbled together a formidable support network that can provide for an array of needs.

Large non-profit organizations such as the United Way donated goods and networking assistance, while the Bergen County Division of Community Development provided a start-up grant. Construction contractors donated labor and supplies and local businesses gave away clothes and other merchandise.

The Bergen County Probation Department even assigned people sentenced to community service to work at the center.

"Ninety percent of the center was built by people on probation," Colacurcio said.

Last week, the Cadbury Schweppes Co. got in on the act. The company's Carlstadt facility donated 90 sets of the Leap Pad reading game. After realizing each game needed four batteries, Joan Dade put out an Internet request seeking help. The owner of a North Bergen limousine company stepped forward to donate 360 AA batteries.

On Monday, a Guatemalan man jubilantly picked up two sets of Leap Pad for his daughters, ages 3 and 4.

"They've seen it on television," he said through a translator. "But they're not expecting it."

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