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Sister Pat marks 60 years of helping the needy

By GWEN SHRIFT Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, April 6, 2014 12:15 am

Few people remain on the job 60 years after they started, with no thought of retiring.

Sister Pat Kelly, a Grey Nun of the Sacred Heart who took the veil right out of high school in 1954, is still sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry and strengthening the weak.

One of the nine surviving members of a class of 26 young women who entered the order's novitiate that year, Sister Pat, 77, is the last Grey Nun working in the social service arm of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

She is marking her diamond jubilee year the same way she has the past 30 — helping people as a case manager at Catholic Social Services in Levittown. Prior to that, she taught school in the United States and at a Grey Nuns mission in Peru.

She deals with impoverished children, undocumented immigrants ineligible for government assistance, fractured families and others, and runs a parenting group for Spanish-speaking mothers and another for grandmothers faced with raising children their own children cannot.

Mothers come to her for baby formula and diapers, for advice on getting aid through the Women, Infants and Children supplemental food program. Other clients are homeless, or out of heating oil, or facing shutoff of their utilities.

Grandmothers in their 50s raising toddlers and teenagers bring their problems to her. They get careful listening, direct help and referrals, and Sister Pat's prayers.

Recently, she listened to Anna (not her real name), who hopes to get custody of her daughter's four children, whom she called "beautiful little innocent people." For complex reasons, her daughter does not consistently take care of her kids.

Anna's 8-year-old grandson begs to stay with her to escape his chaotic home life. He and his siblings haven't had new clothes in two years. The younger children need shoes.

"I will do whatever I need to do," says Anna. "These are my grandchildren. I'll take the kids, I'll raise the kids." Her goal is to provide "a nice, safe, stable life" for them.

Sister Pat offers a willing ear for Anna to vent her feelings.

"You have your hands full," she says. "We can help with material things. We'll be another backup for you."

Sister Pat has contact information for a full roster of services at her fingertips, such as a temporary

children's shelter or places where a homeless person can get a meal or sleep.

"We're not an emergency center," she says, "but we know where the emergency centers are."

Sister Pat entered religious life straight out of Little Flower High School in Philadelphia, where she had been taught by the Grey Nuns. In turn, she taught at Catholic schools in New York and Pennsylvania.

In 1967, she volunteered for the Grey Nuns' mission in Lima, Peru, which needed teachers and pastoral workers.

"My youth! I stayed there till 1983," she says.

When she returned to the U.S., she decided to give up teaching in favor of social work. Her fluency in Spanish was a major asset, as Latino immigrants began to arrive in large numbers, filling pews once populated by people of northern European nationalities.

In her group for new mothers that meets in Bensalem, she focuses on a continuing wave of non-English-speaking arrivals from Mexico, Costa Rica and Ecuador. At her office in the Bucks County Family Service Center (formerly St. Michael's Convent), her clients are from the Bristol area, Morrisville, Langhorne and Penndel. Few are Catholic.

One of the most pressing issues on Sister Pat's beat is poverty is so foreign to so many new clients. Many have never been in a position where they needed to use a food pantry.

"A lot of people, because of the economic situation, this is something new for them. They don't know what to do, they don't know where to turn," she says. "A lot of people are telling us they never had to do this before."

Sister Pat screens prospective clients, asking for identification, proof of income and how they are surviving, whether on welfare, disability payments, Social Security or with relatives who take in family members down on their luck.

When she asks how a person seeking help is paying the rent, "sometimes, I don't get a good answer," she says.

Vigilance is needed because resources are limited. A FEMA grant this winter for rental and heating assistance lasted about a month, but while the money was there, "we could call an oil company and say, 'This person needs 100 gallons of oil.' They (companies) know us now, so they would send us an invoice, and they knew they would get their money," she says.

Her parenting programs have a perpetual need for baby supplies and formula, as well as goods for the agency's food pantry and emergency assistance for families with children evicted from their homes.

Some problems are beyond the reach of any one individual or any one agency.

Many of the mothers Sister Pat sees in Levittown are troubled. “Some of them are on drugs. Many of them don’t even know who their (children’s) fathers are,” she says. “They come in for diapers, say. ‘Where’s the father?’ ‘Oh, he’s not in the picture, he left me, I don’t know (who he is).’

“(The fathers) give them things now and then, and they seem satisfied with that. It’s sort of like, ‘That’s the way it is.’ All of a sudden, they have this baby, and the father doesn’t want anything to do with it.”

Sister Pat supplies diapers every 60 days, or a bit more often for newborns. She gives mothers the schedule of the food pantry, advocates for them with other agencies when it’s clear the women need emergency help, finds clothing and rounds up lotion and wipes.

Besides that work, she fills out reams of paperwork, takes referrals from pastors and calls clients to remind them of group meetings. In her free time, she works with several committees and coalitions devoted to peace and justice.

It’s a demanding schedule, particularly considering Sister Pat cut back her work hours about a year ago.

“I’m healthy, thank God,” she says. “It was a good change. Working part time gives you more energy to work part time.”

Anna, who is trying to get custody of her grandchildren, seems renewed by her long talk with Sister Pat.

“This is a help to me,” says Anna. “I can get some (feelings) out, you can give ideas. You’ve been a big help, all down the line.”