

Faithful Witness of Women in the Church

Catholic Sisters Offer Twenty Years of Faithful Witness at Gerard Place

By Sr. Barbara Schiavoni, GNSH

When Sisters come together to serve, the creative energy of the Holy Spirit is released. Gerard Place exemplifies the power of this collaboration. In the late 1990's, leaders of the LCWR congregations of women religious in the Diocese of Buffalo began to explore how they could serve unmet needs in the area. After a time of study, prayer, discussion and discernment, they embarked on a new project that would offer hope and opportunity to vulnerable families.

Gerard Place opened its doors in late 2000 in the former St. Gerard's Parish School in Buffalo, NY. Located in an urban area with scarce resources, Gerard Place is dedicated to improving the lives of families striving to break the cycle of poverty. Gerard Place provides safe and affordable housing for homeless single parents and their children. In addition, it prepares them for success through education, vocational training, life skills classes and counseling.

Parents who seek services are often victims of domestic violence and/or sexual abuse, or are in recovery from substance abuse. While they have varied reasons for coming to Gerard Place, they share a common goal: to give their children the opportunity for better lives.

Collaboration, welcoming and inclusion have been the DNA of Gerard Place since day one. Under the leadership of Mr. David Zapfel, President and CEO, and with the support of Sisters who have served on its board since inception, Gerard Place has grown from a stand-alone transitional housing residence to a thriving hub of educational and vocational services that embraces the surrounding community.

Gerard Place has entered into partnerships with several leading community organizations to provide opportunities for residents and neighbors to gain self-sufficiency. The Gerard Place Community Center (formerly the school gym) opened in 2018. In this renovated and repurposed space, the educational legacy of Catholic Sisters continues.

Gerard Place and its community partners provide a variety of programs including High School equivalency classes and Licensed Practical Nurse and Certified Nursing Assistant training in conjunction with Buffalo Public Schools. Partnership with the Erie County Medical Center allows for hands-on clinical training and opportunities for employment. A local caterer conducts a culinary skills program. Life skills classes such as parenting, money management, nutrition, and spirituality give residents the skills and confidence to succeed on their own. In addition, the Buffalo Promise Neighborhood Children's Academy is located on site, offering high-quality, affordable childcare and early intervention services for Gerard Place residents and families from the surrounding area.

Recent innovations include addressing the food and nutritional needs of the community. The area surrounding Gerard Place is a "food dessert." The Gerard Place Food Express Mobile

Pantry, in partnership with Feedmore WNY (Food Bank), provides thousands of pounds of food every month, serving people from the surrounding community.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the neighborhood surrounding Gerard Place was one of the areas hardest hit by Covid 19. Commenting on pantry turnout during the pandemic, David Zapfel said, "We do see more people. We see new people, too. People that never expected to be in that line are in that line. They're quick to say 'I've never been here before' and they're really happy that we're there. These are people that have been out of work for a while and have no idea when they're going back."

The Gerard Place Community Dining Room, in partnership with Friends of Night People, a local human services agency, provides a hot meal twice a week to anyone in need. A spirit of community is evident as volunteers and guests share stories and encouragement. Sr. Sheila Stone, who volunteers twice a week, shared this encounter:

Two of our regular diners, Venita and Jose, often come early and chat with me while they are waiting for the dining room to open. They are originally from Puerto Rico and Venita does not speak English. One evening they came in and headed straight for me behind the reception desk. She carried a small tray wrapped in tinfoil, still warm from the oven and said "for you." Proudly, Jose said "She made them" "Pumpkin." Though my Spanish is limited I managed a heartfelt "Gracias." They beamed with joy. The pumpkin squares were not the only thing warmed that day!

Sisters from the twelve Buffalo area LCWR congregations have been actively involved at Gerard Place since its inception. The first board members (all women religious) put in countless hours developing the program and providing operational support during the early years. As Gerard Place grew, board members shifted into advisory roles while remaining engaged with emerging needs and strategic planning. At present, Sisters volunteer as mentors and tutors, and assist in the Dining Room and Food Express. Through these ministries of presence, Sisters bring the love of Christ and restore human dignity, one person at a time.

Grey Nuns have supported and served Gerard Place from the initial planning phase to the present day. Sisters Barbara Schiavoni, Marita Campbell and Sheila Stone have served on the Board of Directors. Sr. Sheila currently serves on the LCWR Executive Committee for Gerard Place and volunteers in the Dining Room. At its annual Awards Dinner in 2019, Gerard Place honored Sr. Denise Roche as "Community Leader of the Year."

St. Marguerite d'Youville's legacy of loving service continues through the Grey Nun presence at Gerard Place. It is indeed a blessing to unite with Sisters from many congregations to witness to God's providential love for all people.

Find more about Gerard Place at www.gerardplace.org

