

The House of Mercy at 25, the last refuge

Mark Hare · October 14, 2010

Tragedy is part of life at the House of Mercy. John Klofas, a professor of criminal justice at Rochester Institute of Technology and a longtime supporter of the program, remembers his first visit to the house, when it was on Central Park, in the late 1980s.

"I saw this rack of suits," he says. And Sister Grace Miller, the founder of the House of Mercy, "told me, 'these are for our men.'" They were burial suits.

The House of Mercy moved to its current Hudson Avenue location in 1994, and all the walls in Miller's office today are covered three- and four-deep with the funeral programs — hundreds of them — of people who've been part of that community. "Two or three funerals a week," she says.

The people who find their way to the House of Mercy are at the fringe of society and, often, nearly out of hope. In 1985, when Miller started the house, "all we had was a desk." It didn't take long for word to spread, and soon the homeless arrived looking for shelter, mothers arrived asking for food and clothing for their children, the sick came looking for medical and dental care.

"I was surprised at how many young people — in their 20s or 30s — had no teeth," Miller says. She had worked in the 1960s for FIGHT, the city's former civil rights organization, and she had taught in poverty-plagued city schools, but she was still stunned to see how many had so little.

She started her project with \$20,000 from her religious community, the Sisters of Mercy, and she followed the lead of founder Mother Catherine McAuley, who opened the first House of Mercy in Dublin in 1827.

In its first month, 400 people came looking for help. Miller didn't know then what the house would become. She would take homeless people to other shelters, only to see them turned away for lack of space. "I knew there needed to be a place that would take them 24 hours a day and not make them leave

at 6 a.m.," she says. She wanted to open a shelter that would help people get what they need and not set artificial limits on their support. "There was a young man who stayed here for more than a year," Miller says, "and people said we shouldn't let him stay that long." But finally, he straightened himself out and found a job and an apartment. "He thanked us and said he saw so much giving here that he realized how selfish he had been."

By the time the House of Mercy moved to Hudson Avenue, more than 3,000 people visited every month. That's grown to more than 4,000 today. The House of Mercy, celebrating its 25th anniversary this month, is the shelter in the storm for people with no place else to go.

The house takes no government money, receives no assistance from the United Way and relies on private donors. Miller refuses to take any money that would stop her advocacy work for the poor — including regular appearances at meetings of the Monroe County Legislature where she and her friend speak and demonstrate. She is not genteel when it comes to speaking out. "I can't say to people in power, 'Won't you please give people what they need?'" she says.

She survived a threat to shut down the house in the 1990s because she took in large numbers of the homeless on cold winter nights. "We won't turn anyone away," she says, always true to her word. Four years ago, she went toe-to-toe with county officials who had proposed cuts in funds allowed for burial costs for the indigent, a change that she says was an assault on the dignity of the poor.



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I certainly do not want to fault the good work of other shelters and agencies, but they typically operate with regulations that would preclude services to many of the people who find their way to the House of Mercy. "You may be using (drugs)," Miller says, "but that doesn't mean you should die in the snow."

"It's the cork in the bottom of the bowl," Klofas says of the house. "It stops people from falling through the hole and right out of this community."

Miller has made her share of enemies over the years, but her love for the poor is beyond reproach. Mention her name to city or county officials who have been picketed by Miller and those she works to help, and you'll get an earful.

But times have changed, at least a little. Kelly Reed, the county's current commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services, started to visit the house once a month about a year ago, always coming with an assistant or other staff member who could help people find the medical or mental health services, job training, or public assistance benefits they are entitled to.

"It has been," Reed says, "the most moving experience of my life." She recalls meeting a man who could not read. He attempted to apply for public assistance and received two letters — one giving him an appointment with an examiner, a second an appointment for a drug test. "He had someone read both letters to him and then he made symbols on his calendar to remind him where to go. He got confused," Reed says. He arrived for his drug test when he was expected at his other appointment. "We sanctioned him," she says, making him ineligible for 45 days. "That's what we do. I lifted the sanction. It was absolutely clear it was not his fault."

Reed says her eyes have been opened, too, by men and women she's met at the house who have faced up to drug and other health problems, turned their lives around and shown themselves to be leaders. They are not so different from anyone else. "They are," Reed says, "a couple of decisions away from you and me."

Miller "does the dirty work others can't or won't do," says former Monroe County Executive Thomas Frey, who grew up in Corning and attended elementary school and Corning Free Academy with Miller and her late brother, Father Neil Miller. Frey is a member of an ad hoc group that is working to identify long-

term funding sources for the house — money that would not come with strings that would compromise her work.

Especially on cold winter nights, there are not enough beds for those who seek shelter. "But if you're sitting in a chair with a cup of hot coffee, it can take you a long way," says Charles "CW" Earlsey, the longtime house manager who knows just how dangerous the streets can be. He was shot outside the house in 2003 and suffered permanent injuries to his left leg.

He is right. When there is nowhere else to go, the House of Mercy's doors are always open. In life, and, too often, in death.



Mom Dilemma #36:
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

YES, at least she's dressed!

NO, I have some rules!

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