

A stitch in time to serve

The most fascinating stories are about folks who make things happen with little money or material and against all odds. One such group is the Oblate Sisters of Providence, who are celebrating 180 years of service to God this year with a banquet on Sept. 18. At the highly anticipated fundraising event, aprons signed and designed by celebrities will be auctioned to raise money to build an addition to the motherhouse on Gun Road. CNN anchor and special correspondent, Soledad O'Brien will be the keynote speaker.

The story going around is that in the 1960s the Oblate Sisters made and sold a million aprons to raise money to build their current motherhouse. At that time the need was to replace the building where young novices to the order were trained. The motherhouse at that time was still at 501 E. Chase St., where St. Frances Academy remains (and where the aforementioned banquet will be held next week).

The novitiate had been in part of a mansion that sat on the former, Manning Estate. The Manning Mansion burned to the ground on June 27, 1945, ironically on the feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Imagine the determination and organization it took to plan and execute the effort to raise funds by manufacturing, marketing and selling 1,000,000 aprons. (baby sets - comprised of three wash cloths and pillow cases were later added to the product line). Reportedly, Sister Mary Good Counsel once said, somewhat in jest, to the superior of the Oblates at the time, Mother William, "If you give me permission to make a million aprons, I'll give you (back) a million dollars."

Think about the symbolism of an apron, it's an item of clothing worn while one is performing some service. It was a perfect fundraising campaign involving the nearly 300 Oblate Sisters, their families and friends. It took nearly a decade to raise the million dollars.

The apron project has been resurrected. Oblate Sisters and their friends have once again begun to hand make aprons to be sold at the banquet on Sept.18. Aprons made by celebrities, many secured by O'Brien, will be auctioned that evening.

Others will be sold, some in silent auction fashion, and some will be sold as priced beforehand.

It promises to be a delightful evening celebrating 180 years of service given by the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Rightfully, the catered affair will be held in the gymnasium of the community center of St. Frances Academy. It took 60 years for the construction funds to be raised for the place where the special dinner will be held. Architectural drawings dating to 1940 are featured in a showcase at the Eager Street end of the community center building.

Barry Simms, investigative newsman at WBAL TV-11 will be the emcee for the evening, Dr. Curtis Turner, principal of St. Frances Academy, will offer the opening prayer. Oblate Sister of Providence Alexis Fisher, superior general of the Oblates, will extend greetings. Dan Rodricks, longtime columnist for The Baltimore Sun and host of Midday, a talk show on WYPR radio, will be the auctioneer for the evening. Catherine Neale Thomas will sing, accompanied by Jerome Davenport. Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Alice Chineworth will introduce O'Brien. She is a longtime friend of Soledad O'Brien's family. O'Brien's mother attended St. Frances Academy. So the evening will be a wonderful tribute to the Sisters of which approximately 35 in number will be in attendance that night.

We expect to have aprons there designed by O'Brien, herself, Drs. Camille Cosby and Bill Cosby, filmmaker John Waters, Congressman Elijah Cummings, Mayor Sheila Dixon and others. They will go to the highest bidders. Tickets are going fast. Call Sister Helene Therese at 410-242-8500.

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