

Caroline Center gives thanks for 22 years of leadership from SSND Sister Pat

April 7 is graduation day at Caroline Center, a job training and education center for women in Baltimore City that is sponsored by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Students will go off, armed with training as nursing assistants and pharmacy technicians.

And their executive director will say goodbye after 22 years.

School Sister of Notre Dame Patricia McLaughlin will be honored at a reception that evening at her alma mater, Notre Dame of Maryland University.

“Being a part of Caroline Center has been an absolute privilege,” she said. “I have been here long enough to see the difference 15 short weeks of love and support and strategic career education can make in the life of a woman. But then to see how they carry what they have learned here into their homes, their workplaces, their neighborhoods, gives me hope for what our city can become.”

Sister Kathleen Feeley, a fellow SSND, can attest to Sister Pat’s work.

While she was raising funds and renovating the 1908 building on the Institute of Notre Dame campus that would become the Caroline Center, Sister Kathleen decided she wasn’t the right person to run it.

“I realized all of a sudden,” she said, “who is going to run this program?”

She chose Sister Pat, who had the creativity and experience necessary, after serving on the order’s provincial council and as director of My Sister’s Place, a Catholic Charities of Baltimore program for homeless and impoverished women and their children.

Sister Pat, who grew up in St. William of York Parish in Ten Hills, attended Notre

Dame Preparatory School and professed as an SSND in 1965, joined Caroline Center as associate director in 1994 and two years later succeeded Sister Kathleen as executive director.

“From day one she was in charge of the program, and that’s why it was so successful,” Sister Kathleen said. “She was so good.”

Over the years, Sister Pat has seen the program grow and adapt – with a single mission.

“The kernel of the education has not changed,” she said. “We have always looked for where the jobs are, with good pay and room for advancement.”

Sister Pat has always been an advocate for Caroline Center students. She’s developed partnerships with hospitals, pharmacies and other businesses to hire graduates. She’s brought in services, changed the program, and encouraged her students’ success.

“The stories and lives of the women who have been a part of the program have been an inspiration to me every single day,” she said. “They embody the mission in a way we could never imagine when we started in 1996. Their successes make my heart sing and their struggles bring me to my knees.”

Colene Mathews, 42, a parishioner of St. Jude Shrine, is among those grateful for the opportunities offered by the Caroline Center.

A 2015 graduate who worked at the School Sisters’ Maria Health Care Center caring for aging sisters, she is now enrolled in Johns Hopkins Hospital’s SOARING program, which trains certified nursing assistants for advanced direct patient care. She hopes to become an RN.

“It is such a rewarding program. It helps you in so many ways, spiritually, financially and in growth,” said Matthews, who plans to attend the April 7 reception for Sister Pat. “She has really helped the school a lot and I’m going to miss her.”

Matthews is among 3,000 graduates of the Caroline Center, where interest in the mission is helped by word of mouth. The April class attracted 636 applications – for

90 seats.

Two years ago, on the center's 20th anniversary, Caroline Center responded to unrest following Freddie Gray's death by opening a new center for nursing assistants training at St. Agnes Hospital.

"It's a wonderful setting," Sister Pat said.

What's next for Caroline Center? Sister Pat said that new training programs might be added. A new strategic plan is needed, after a new director is selected in the coming year.

"I'm sure we're going to find the right person," Sister Kathleen said. "The blessing (Caroline Center) has had from the beginning will last, I'm sure."

Sister Pat is still deciding on her next steps. She continues to sit on several boards and plans to consider how best she can service the SSNDs and the community.

"I still have lots of energy," she said.

For more information about the April 7 reception for Sister Patricia McLaughlin, visit www.caroline-center.org