

Coffee & Doughnuts with Katie Allston

The Catholic Review sits with Katie Allston, Executive Director of Marian House and parishioner of St. Augustine, Elkridge.

CR: What, and where, are your Catholic roots?

Allston: My mother's parents emigrated from Ireland to the U.S, and my father was a career Army officer. I was born at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, N.C., and we attended St. Michael's Parish in Annandale, Va., when he was completing his service.

After the College of William and Mary, I spent a year in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, which brought me to Baltimore. I was quickly in love with the city and with social work. My husband, Paul Dowell, and I were married at St. Vincent de Paul Church. We attend St. Augustine in Elkridge, with our kids, Dineen, 7, and Quinn, 11.

CR: As the first layperson to direct Marian House, what do you see in the charisms of the Religious Sisters of Mercy and the School Sisters of Notre Dame that led them to open it in 1982?

Allston: Both were started by amazing and inspiring women of God, who were focused on elevating and educating the poor, and specifically women, in an effort to improve both individual lives and communities. They continue to live the call of Christ to help others and particularly focus their efforts on the most vulnerable. They see needs and respond to them.

Marian House is a direct example of something they built in response to a need; women were in need of a safe and loving environment where they could overcome the barriers in their lives. I am honored to lead a sponsored ministry and know that our success is due, in large part, to the support and prayers of the sisters in these communities.

CR: What role does faith play in your ministry to homeless women and their children?

Allston: For many of our women, it is an important piece of their recovery. The 12-step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are rooted in “a God of your understanding,” and the women often have a desire to get closer to God in their recovery process. That is an important part of the therapeutic process for each resident. On an organizational level, ecumenical prayer and reflection are often a part of events and meetings at Marian House, with prayers inspired by the Sisters of Mercy and School Sisters being common.

CR: Marian House is expanding its services to homeless women and their children with a new location at Blessed Sacrament Parish. Why is the need to minister to those combating homelessness, addiction and unemployment growing, rather than receding?

Allston: Sadly, despite our efforts over 35 years and the efforts of many others, drug addiction is alive and well in our city and state. Many of our women come from generational poverty and addiction and have experienced much trauma. In addition, low-paying jobs and a lack of a living minimum wage leave many people in our community unstably housed.

Marian House seeks to help the women who come to us get healthy, emotionally and spiritually, and then become employed. We need to grow the affordable housing capacity of Marian House because the women need support and low-rent housing for a number of years. Our original length of stay in the program was four to six months; over the course of our history, we have learned that more time is needed for many of our ladies.

CR: Favorite saint?

Allston: St. Brigid of Ireland, known, among other things, for her love of the poor.