

Legacy of caring: Sisters of the Good Shepherd leaving Baltimore

HALETHORPE - A young girl arrived at Good Shepherd Services in Halethorpe a few years ago completely broken in spirit. Emotionally shattered after accidentally smothering an infant to death when she fell asleep babysitting, the 13-year-old wanted to die.

"She tried every way she could think of to kill herself," said Sister Gayle Lwanga Crumbley, a Sister of the Good Shepherd who has served in pastoral ministry for two years at the residential treatment facility for adolescent girls with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties. "She was so remorseful about that terrible accident."

Through intensive counseling, the staff at Good Shepherd Services was able to break through and offer healing, Sister Gayle said.

"It's an example of how we have helped give our residents hope again," Sister Gayle said. "She wanted to live again."

After serving in Baltimore for 153 years and touching the lives of countless young people who could often not find help elsewhere, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd are leaving the Archdiocese of Baltimore and have closed their treatment facility. Financial pressures made continued operation of the facility impossible.

Nearly 50 Good Shepherd residents, ages 13-21, have been transferred to other centers, discharged to family members, sent to group homes or foster homes, or placed elsewhere by referring agencies.

Thirteen of the 28 Good Shepherd Sisters who had been stationed in Baltimore have already moved to other locations. Others will begin new ministries outside Maryland in the coming weeks.

In total, 19 of the Baltimore sisters will live in Danville, Pa., at a Catholic continuum

of care center sponsored by the Sisters of Ss. Cyril and Methodious.

Sister Mary Carol McClenon, local leader of the Good Shepherd Sisters who recently served as mission integration coordinator for Good Shepherd Services, said the 70-acre Halethorpe campus has been put up for sale and the sisters have been interviewing several bidders.

Storied history

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd arrived in Baltimore from Kentucky in 1864 to minister to girls who were living on the fringes of society.

“They worked with ‘camp followers’ – girls who followed the soldiers around,” Sister Gayle explained. “They dealt with everything that goes along with that – issues like prostitution and alcohol addiction.”

Emily MacTavish, the granddaughter of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, purchased and donated a house for their ministry at Mount and Hollins Streets in Baltimore. A second house was established at Calverton Road and Franklin Street in 1892. The two ministry locations consolidated at the Calverton Road site in the mid-1960s, before relocating to the state-of-the-art Halethorpe location in 1970.

The Good Shepherd Center, which had more than 200 employees and 100 contractors, provided residential, psychiatric/psychological, social and educational services to young women between 13 and 18, many of whom were victims of abuse and neglect.

While the vast majority of their ministry focused on adolescent girls, the sisters also worked with boys for a brief time in recent years. The sisters maintained two branches of their religious community, some who actively worked in the field and others who were contemplatives, praying for the girls who needed help and those who served them.

Sister Mary Carol noted that a special vow of zeal taken by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd helped strengthen them. The sisters enter the community realizing that their outreach is difficult and often thankless work, she said.

“My father would ask me how I would know if we were a success,” said Sister Carol, who first began working at Good Shepherd Services in the 1970s. “I would say, you know we’re a success if in five or 10 years from now these young women are not in jail or on welfare – that they’re not in prostitution or drugs; if they’re wage earners paying taxes, that’s a success.”

Sister Mary Carol called it a privilege to serve some of the most vulnerable people in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. As much as the sisters extended mercy to them, Sister Mary Carol said, the girls showed mercy back.

“Our charism is centered on the value of the human person,” she said. “That was at the center of everything we did.”

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