

# New York Dominican community lavishes care on the terminally ill

HAWTHORNE, N.Y. – “If you have to be terminal, this is the place to come,” said Harriet Boyle, as the sun poured into her room through huge windows.

Sitting in a bed with floral sheets and a patterned comforter, the grandmother with the carefully applied makeup put down her large-print book and described life at Rosary Hill Home, a free palliative care facility run by the Dominican Sisters Congregation of St. Rose of Lima in Hawthorne, north of New York City.

“It’s the most unusual place I’ve ever been. You’re not conscious of people being ill here. We all have cancer and we’re all terminal, but it’s serene and there are lots of moments of fun and laughter,” she said.

“The care is done with love and not for a paycheck. The women who care for you gave up their lives for this work and it’s their vocation,” Boyle said in an interview with Catholic News Service.

The caregivers also are known as the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne. Their congregation was founded at the turn of the last century by Rose Hawthorne, a daughter of New England novelist Nathaniel, author of “The Scarlet Letter.”

Mother Mary Alphonsa, as Rose Hawthorne was known, wanted to treat patients as family, “and put them up in our very best bedroom and give them comfort in what time they had left. In dressing their wounds, she was dressing the wounds of Our Lord,” according to Superior General Mother Mary Francis.

Present-day sisters still provide direct care for the residents, without charge, and do not accept government funds or insurance reimbursements. They do not have a development office.

“It’s a modern day miracle,” Mother Mary Francis said. “Part of the whole charism is to trust in Divine Providence. We are not allowed by our constitutions to fundraise. Mother Alphonsa felt if she was doing God’s work, God would provide.”

The reliance on divine providence extends to both human and material resources. At its peak, the congregation had some 125 active sisters and now deploys 55 sisters and novices in service to approximately 100 patients in Hawthorne, Philadelphia, Atlanta and Kisumu, Kenya, according to Mother Mary Francis. Retired sisters help through a ministry of prayer and presence.

“It has always been a small community, reliant on faith and trust,” she said. Similarly, it takes great faith to manage a modern health facility without asking anyone for money. Mother Mary Francis said most of the budget comes from bequests and regular donations, large and small.

“We do the best we can and trust the rest to the Lord,” Mother Mary Francis said. “We only take people who are unable to afford care, but we also don’t ask to see bank statements. If somebody slips in and they shouldn’t, God had a reason. Sometimes there are other kinds of poverty beyond financial,” she said.

Mother Mary Francis said patients range in age from about 50 to 101 and the average stay is three to four months. The oldest patient has been a resident for more than 10 years.

Sister Alma Marie, the congregation’s director of vocations, said some of the patients were formerly middle-class people who were impoverished by medical costs.

The actual care has changed somewhat since the foundress’s time, but the guiding spirit has not. Sisters work in small teams and are responsible for the total care of two or three patients. Visitors are welcome until 9 p.m. and retired sisters maintain an overnight vigil with residents who are near death.

The sisters live in a convent adjacent to the home and worship together four times a day in the Rosary Hill chapel. Daily Mass and prayers from the chapel are available in each room on a video feed. Sister Alma Marie said, “The residents can hear us pray. They feel our love for each other and for all of them. They may not know it, but it is the love of God that animates our lives.”

She said, “Many come here with the fear of dying, of being alone. When we care for

them, we can see the transformation. We help them live the life that God has given them to the fullest. We celebrate life.”

“This is a precious time with families,” said Mother Mary Francis. “Illness sometimes brings out the worst tensions in a family.” She said the sisters witness reconciliation and acts of forgiveness and attribute them to the presence of God and the Blessed Mother. “He resides in our chapel and Our Lady walks the halls,” she said.

At any given time, there are 30 to 35 patients at Rosary Hill, said Mother Mary Francis. “The smallness of it all enables us to provide homelike care. We try to maintain a family atmosphere, with flowered sheets, colored afghans, entertainment, holiday dinners. We encourage the patients to dress each day,” she said.

A staff member’s gentle dog greets residents and visitors. Patients enjoy the nine-acre property and one man grows fresh vegetables in a verdant garden near an expansive terrace that is used for cookouts.

Christmas is an especially festive time at Rosary Hill. Each room has a decorated tree and a Nativity set. Local groups are eager to entertain the residents and provide gifts. But the intimacy of serving those who are close to death is displayed late on Christmas Eve, when all the visitors have left, the home is quiet and the lights are low, Mother Mary Francis said. “The sisters process from the chapel, carrying lit candles. We go to each room and around each bed, singing carols. It’s just the patients and us. And then our Christmas begins.”

Boyle, the patient from a fourth-generation family of parishioners at the oldest Catholic church on the Hudson River, said before she came to Rosary Hill, she was treated at a prominent facility in New York. “I always wanted to go home with my family when they visited. I don’t feel that way here. I’m already home and my family is content to see me here, because they know I’m happy,” she said.